

## CHAPTER III

### MARJORIE FERRAR AT HOME

FRANCIS WILMOT went on his way to Chelsea. He had a rendezvous with Life. Over head and ears in love, and old-fashioned to the point of marriage, he spent his days at the tail of a petticoat as often absent as not. His simple fervour had wrung from Marjorie Ferrar confession of her engagement. She had put it bluntly: She was in debt, she wanted shekels and she could not live in the backwoods.

He had promptly offered her all his shekels. She had refused them with the words:

“My poor dear, I’m not so far gone as that.”

Often on the point of saying ‘Wait until I’m married,’ the look on his face had always deterred her. He was primitive; would never understand her ideal: Perfection, as wife, mistress, and mother, all at once. She kept him only by dangling the hope that she would throw MacGown over; taking care to have him present when MacGown was absent, and absent when MacGown was present. She had failed to keep them apart on two occasions, painful and productive of more lying than she was at all accustomed to. For she was really taken with this young man; he was a new flavour. She ‘loved’ his dark ‘slinky’ eyes, his grace, the way his ‘back-chat’ grew, dark and fine, on his slim comely neck. She ‘loved’ his voice and his old-fashioned way of talking. And, rather oddly, she ‘loved’ his loyalty. Twice she had urged him to find out

whether Fleur wasn't going to 'climb down' and 'pay up.' Twice he had refused, saying: "They were mighty nice to me; and I'd never tell you what they said, even if I did go and find out."

She was painting his portrait, so that a prepared canvas with a little paint on it chaperoned their almost daily interviews, which took place between three and four when the light had already failed. It was an hour devoted by MacGown to duty in the House. A low and open collar suited Francis Wilmot's looks. She liked him to sit lissom on a divan with his eyes following her; she liked to come close to him, and see the tremor of his fingers touching her skirt or sleeve, the glow in his eyes, the change in his face when she moved away. His faith in her was inconvenient. P's and Q's were letters she despised. And yet, to have to mind them before him gave her a sort of pleasure, made her feel good. One did not shock children!

That day, since she expected MacGown at five, she had become uneasy, before the young man came in, saying:

"I met Michael Mont; his cuff was bloody. Guess whose blood!"

"Not Alec's?"

Francis Wilmot dropped her hands.

"Don't call that man 'Alec' to me."

"My dear child, you're too sensitive. I thought they'd have a row—I read their speeches. Hadn't Michael a black eye? No? Tt—tt! Al—er—"that man' will be awfully upset. Was the blood fresh?"

"Yes," said Francis Wilmot, grimly.

"Then he won't come. Sit down, and let's do some serious work for once."

But throwing himself on his knees, he clasped his hands behind her waist.

"Marjorie, Marjorie!"

Disciple of Joy, in the forefront of modern mockery, she was yet conscious of pity, for him and for herself. It was hard not to be able to tell him to run out, get licence and ring, or whatever he set store by, and have done with it ! Not even that she was ready to have done with it without ring or licence ! For one must keep one's head. She had watched one lover growing tired, kept her head, and dismissed him before he knew it ; grown tired of another, kept her head, and gone on till he was tired too. She had watched favourites she had backed go down, kept her head and backed one that didn't ; had seen cards turn against her, and left off playing before her pile was gone. Time and again she had earned the good mark of Modernity.

So she kissed the top of his head, unclasped his hands, and told him to be good ; and, in murmuring it, felt that she had passed her prime.

"Amuse me while I paint," she said. "I feel rotten."

And Francis Wilmot, like a dark ghost, amused her.

Some believe that a nose from which blood has been drawn by a blow swells less in the first hour that it does later. This was why Sir Alexander MacGown arrived at half-past four to say that he could not come at five. He had driven straight from the House with a little bag of ice held to it. Having been led to understand that the young American was 'now in Paris,' he stood stock still, staring at one whose tie was off and whose collar was unbuttoned. Francis Wilmot rose from the divan, no less silent. Marjorie Ferrar put a touch on the canvas.

"Come and look, Alec ; it's only just begun."

"No, thanks," said MacGown.

Crumpling his tie into his pocket, Francis Wilmot bowed and moved towards the door.

"Won't you stay for tea, Mr. Wilmot ?"

"I believe not, thank you."

When he was gone Marjorie Ferrar fixed her eyes on the nose of her betrothed. Strong and hard, it was, as yet, little differentiated from the normal.

"Now," said MacGown, "why did you lie about that young blighter? You said he was in Paris. Are you playing fast and loose with me, Marjorie?"

"Of course! Why not?"

MacGown advanced to within reach of her.

"Put down that brush."

Marjorie Ferrar raised it; and suddenly it hit the wall opposite.

"You'll stop that picture, and you'll not see that fellow again; he's in love with you."

He had taken her wrists.

Her face, quite as angry as his own, reined back.

"Let go! I don't know if you call yourself a gentleman?"

"No, a plain man."

"Strong and silent—out of a dull novel. Sit down, and don't be unpleasant."

The duel of their eyes, brown and burning, blue and icy, endured for quite a minute. Then he did let go.

"Pick up that brush and give it to me."

"I'm damned if I will!"

"Then our engagement is off. If you're old-fashioned, I'm not. You want a young woman who'll give you a whip for a wedding-present."

MacGown put his hands up to his head.

"I want you too badly to be sane."

"Then pick up the brush."

MacGown picked it up.

"What have you done to your nose?"

MacGown put his hand to it.

"Ran it against a door."

Marjorie Ferrar laughed. "Poor door!"

MacGown gazed at her in genuine astonishment.

"You're the hardest woman I ever came across; and why I love you, I don't know."

"It hasn't improved your looks or your temper, my dear. You were rash to come here to-day."

MacGown uttered a sort of groan. "I can't keep away, and you know it."

Marjorie Ferrar turned the canvas face to the wall, and leaned there beside it.

"I don't know what you think of the prospects of our happiness, Alec; but I think they're pretty poor. Will you have a whisky and soda? It's in that cupboard. Tea, then? Nothing? We'd better understand each other. If I marry you, which is very doubtful, I'm not going into purdah. I shall see what friends I choose. And until I marry you, I shall also see them. If you don't like it, you can leave it."

She watched his clenching hands, and her wrists tingled. To be perfect wife to him would 'take a bit of doing!' If only she knew of a real 'good thing' instead, and had a 'shirt to put on it!' If only Francis Wilmot had money and did not live where the cotton came from, and darkies crooned in the fields; where rivers ran red, Florida moss festooned the swamps and the sun shone; where grapefruit grew—or didn't?—and mocking-birds sang sweeter than the nightingale. South Carolina, described to her with such enthusiasm by Francis Wilmot! A world that was not her world stared straight into the eyes of Marjorie Ferrar. South Carolina! Impossible! It was like being asked to be ancient!

MacGown came up to her. "I'm sorry," he said. "Forgive me, Marjorie."

On her shrugging shoulders he put his hands, kissed her lips, and went away.

And she sat down in her favourite chair, listless, swinging her foot. The sand had run out of her dolly—life was a bore! It was like driving tandem, when the leader would keep turning round; or the croquet party in 'Alice in Wonderland,' read in the buttercup-fields at High Marshes not twenty years ago that felt like twenty centuries!

What did she want? Just a rest from men and bills? or that fluffy something called 'real love'? Whatever it was, she hadn't got it! And so! Dress, and go out, and dance; and later dress again, and go out and dine; and the dresses not paid for!

Well, nothing like an egg-nog for 'the hump'!

Ringing for the ingredients, she made one with plenty of brandy, capped it with nutmeg, and drank it down.