

## CHAPTER V

### PROGRESS OF THE CASE

WHEN Soames said "Leave it to me," he meant it, of course; but it was really very trying that whenever anything went wrong, he, and not somebody else, had to set it right!

To look more closely into the matter he was staying with his sister Winifred Dartie in Green Street. Finding his nephew Val at dinner there the first night, he took the opportunity of asking him whether he knew anything of Lord Charles Ferrar.

"What do you want to know, Uncle Soames?"

"Anything unsatisfactory. I'm told his father doesn't speak to him."

"Well," said Val, "it's generally thought he'll win the Lincolnshire with a horse that didn't win the Cambridge-shire."

"I don't see the connection."

Val Dartie looked at him through his lashes. He was not going to enter for the slander stakes. "Well, he's got to bring off a *coup* soon, or go under."

"Is that all?"

"Except that he's one of those chaps who are pleasant to you when you can be of use, and unpleasant when you can't."

"So I gathered from his looks," said Soames. "Have you had any business dealings with him?"

"Yes; I sold him a yearling by Torpedo out of Banshee."

"Did he pay you?"

"Yes," said Val, with a grin; "and she turned out no good."

"H'm! I suppose he was unpleasant afterwards? That all you know?"

Val nodded. He knew more, if gossip can be called 'more'; but what was puffed so freely with the smoke of racing-men's cigars was hardly suited to the ears of lawyers.

For so old a man of the world Soames was singularly unaware how in that desirable sphere, called Society, every one is slandered daily, and no bones broken; slanderers and slandered dining and playing cards together with the utmost good feeling and the intention of re-slandering each other the moment they are round the corner. Such genial and hair-raising reports reach no outside ears, and Soames really did not know where to begin investigation.

"Can you ask this Mr. Curfew to tea?" he said to Fleur.

"What for, Father?"

"So that I can pump him."

"I thought there were detectives for all that sort of thing."

Soames went a special colour. Since his employment of Mr. Polteed, who had caught him visiting his own wife's bedroom in Paris, at the beginning of the century, the word detective produced a pain in his diaphragm. He dropped the subject. And yet, without detectives, what was he to do?

One night, Winifred having gone to the theatre, he sat down with a cigar, to think. He had been provided by Michael with a list of 'advanced' books and plays which 'modern' people were reading, attending and discussing.

He had even been supplied with one of the books : "Canthar," by Perceval Calvin. He fetched it from his bedroom, and, turning up a lamp, opened the volume. After reading the first few pages, in which he could see nothing, he turned to the end and read backwards. In this way he could skip better, and each erotic passage, to which he very soon came, led him insensibly on to the one before it. He had reached the middle of the novel, before he had resort in wonder to the title-pages. How was it that the publisher and author were at large ? Ah ! The imprint was of a foreign nature. Soames breathed more freely. Though sixty-nine, and neither Judge, juryman, nor otherwise professionally compelled to be shocked, he was shaken. If women were reading this sort of thing, then there really was no distinction between men and women nowadays. He took up the book again, and read steadily on to the beginning. The erotic passages alone interested him. The rest seemed rambling, disconnected stuff. He rested again. What was this novel written for ? To make money, of course. But was there another purpose ? Was the author one of these 'artist' fellows who thought that to give you 'life'—wasn't that the phrase ?—they must put down every visit to a bedroom, and some besides ? 'Art for Art's sake,' 'realism'—what did they call it ? In Soames' comparatively bleak experience 'life' did not consist wholly of visiting bedrooms, so that he was unable to admit that this book was life, the whole of life, and nothing but life. "Calvin's a crank, sir," Michael had said, when he handed him the novel. "He thinks people can't become continent except through being excessively incontinent ; so he shows his hero and heroine arriving gradually at continence." 'At Bedlam,' thought Soames. They would see what a British Jury had to say to that, anyway. But how elicit a confession that this

woman and her set had read it with gusto ? And then an idea occurred to him, so brilliant that he had to ponder deeply before he could feel any confidence in it. These 'advanced' young people had any amount of conceit ; every one who didn't share their views was a 'dud,' or a 'grundy.' Suppose the book were attacked in the Press, wouldn't it draw their fire ? And if their fire could be drawn in print, could it not be used afterwards as evidence of their views on morality ? H'm ! This would want very nice handling. And first of all, how was he to prove that Marjorie Ferrar had read this book ? Thus casting about him, Soames was rewarded by another brilliant thought : Young Butterfield—who had helped him to prove the guilt of Elderson in that matter of the P.P.R.S. and owed his place at Danby & Winter's, the publishers, to Soames' recommendation ! Why not make use of him ? Michael always said the young man was grateful. And obscuring the title of the book against his flank, in case he should meet a servant, Soames sought his own bedroom :

His last thought that night was almost diagnostic.

'In my young days we read that sort of book if we could get hold of it, and didn't say so ; now, it seems, they make a splash of reading it, and pretend it does them good !'

Next morning from 'The Connoisseurs' he telephoned to Danby & Winter's, and asked to speak to Mr. Butterfield.

"Yes ?"

"Mr. Forsyte speaking. Do you remember me ?"

"Yes, indeed, sir."

"Can you step round to the Connoisseurs' Club this morning some time ?"

"Certainly, sir. Will twelve-thirty suit you ?"

Secretive and fastidious in matters connected with sex, Soames very much disliked having to speak to a young man about an 'immoral' book. He saw no other way of it, however, and, on his visitor's arrival, shook hands and began at once.

"This is confidential, Mr. Butterfield."

Butterfield, whose dog-like eyes had glowed over the handshake, answered :

"Yes, sir. I've not forgotten what you did for me, sir."

Soames held out the book.

"Do you know that novel ?"

Butterfield smiled slightly.

"Yes, sir. It's printed in Brussels. They're paying five pounds a copy for it."

"Have you read it ?"

The young man shook his head. "It's not come my way, sir."

Soames was relieved. "Well, don't! But just attend a moment. Can you buy ten copies of it, at my expense, and post them to ten people whose names I'll give you? They're all more or less connected with literature. You can put in slips to say the copies are complimentary, or whatever you call it. But mention no names."

The young man Butterfield said deprecatingly :

"The price is rising all the time, sir. It'll cost you well on sixty pounds."

"Never mind that."

"You wish the book boomed, sir ?"

"Good Gad—no! I have my reasons, but we needn't go into them."

"I see, sir. And you want the copies to come—as if—as if from heaven ?"

"That's it," said Soames. "I take it that publishers often send doubtful books to people they think will sup-

port them. There's just one other thing. Can you call a week later on one of the people to whom you've sent the books, and offer to sell another copy as if you were an agent for it? I want to make quite sure it's already reached that person, and been read. You won't give your name, of course. Will you do this for me?"

The eyes of the young man Butterfield again glowed:

"Yes, sir. I owe you a great deal, sir."

Soames averted his eyes; he disliked all expression of gratitude.

"Here's the list of names, then, with their addresses. I've underlined the one you call on. I'll write you a cheque to go on with; and you can let me know later if there's anything more to pay."

He sat down, while the young man Butterfield scrutinised the list.

"I see it's a lady, sir, that I'm to call on."

"Yes; does that make any difference to you?"

"Not at all, sir. Advanced literature is written for ladies nowadays."

"H'm!" said Soames. "I hope you're doing well?"

"Splendidly, sir. I was very sorry that Mr. Mont left us; we've been doing better ever since."

Soames lifted an eyebrow. The statement confirmed many an old suspicion. When the young man had gone, he took up "Canthar." Was he capable of writing an attack on it in the Press, over the signature 'Pater-familias'? He was not. The job required some one used to that sort of thing. Besides, a real signature would be needed to draw fire. It would not do to ask Michael to suggest one; but Old Mont might know some fogey at the 'Parthenæum' who carried metal. Sending for a bit of brown paper, he disguised the cover with it, put the volume in his overcoat pocket, and set out for 'Snooks.'

He found Sir Lawrence about to lunch, and they sat down together. Making sure that the waiter was not looking over his shoulder, Soames, who had brought the book in with him, pushed it over, and said :

“ Have you read that ? ”

Sir Lawrence whinnied.

“ My dear Forsyte, why this morbid curiosity ? Everybody’s reading it. They say the thing’s unspeakable.”

“ Then you haven’t ? ” said Soames, keeping him to the point.

“ Not yet, but if you’ll lend it me, I will. I’m tired of people who’ve enjoyed it asking me if I’ve read ‘that most disgusting book.’ It’s not fair, Forsyte. Did *you* enjoy it ? ”

“ I skimmed it,” said Soames, looking round his nose. “ I had a reason. When you’ve read it, I’ll tell you.”

Sir Lawrence brought it back to him at ‘the Connoisseurs’ two days later.

“ Here you are, my dear Forsyte,” he said. “ I never was more glad to get rid of a book ! I’ve been in a continual stew for fear of being overseen with it ! Perceval Calvin—*quel sale Monsieur !* ”

“ Exactly ! ” said Soames. “ Now, I want to get that book attacked.”

“ You ! Is Saul also among the prophets ? Why this sudden zest ? ”

“ It’s rather roundabout,” said Soames, sitting on the book. He detailed the reason, and ended with :

“ Don’t say anything to Michael, or Fleur.”

Sir Lawrence listened with his twisting smile.

“ I see,” he said, “ I see. Very cunning, Forsyte. You want me to get some one whose name will act like a red rag. It mustn’t be a novelist, or they’ll say he’s jealous—which he probably is: the book’s selling like hot cakes

—I believe that's the expression. Ah! I think—I rather think, Forsyte, that I have the woman."

"Woman!" said Soames. "They won't pay any attention to that."

Sir Lawrence cocked his loose eyebrow. "I believe you're right—the only women they pay attention to nowadays are those who go one better than themselves. Shall I do it myself, and sign 'Outraged Parent'?"

"I believe it wants a real name."

"Again right, Forsyte; it does. I'll drop into the 'Parthenæum,' and see if any one's alive."

Two days later Soames received a note.

"Snooks' Club,

"Friday.

"MY DEAR FORSYTE,

"I've got the man—the Editor of 'The Protagonist'; and he'll do it under his own name. What's more, I've put him on to the right line. We had a spirited argument. He wanted to treat it *de haut en bas* as the work of a dirty child. I said: 'No. This thing is symptomatic. Treat it seriously; show that it represents a school of thought, a deliberate literary attitude; and make it a plea for censorship.' Without the word censorship, Forsyte, they will never rise. So he's leaving his wife and taking it into the country for the week-end. I admire your conduct of the defence, my dear Forsyte; it's very subtle. But if you'll forgive me for saying so, it's more important to prevent the case coming into Court than to get a verdict if it does.

"Sincerely yours,

"LAWRENCE MONT."

With which sentiment Soames so entirely agreed, that he went down to Mapledurham, and spent the next two afternoons going round and round with a man he didn't like, hitting a ball, to quiet his mind.