

## CHAPTER VIII

### COLLECTING EVIDENCE

THE Editor of "The Protagonist" had so evidently enjoyed himself that he caused a number of other people to do the same.

"There's no more popular sight in the East, Forsyte," said Sir Lawrence, "than a boy being spanked; and the only difference between East and West is that in the East the boy at once offers himself again at so much a spank. I don't see Mr. Perceval Calvin doing that."

"If he defends himself," said Soames, gloomily, "other people won't."

They waited, reading daily denunciations signed: 'A Mother of Three'; 'Roger: Northampton'; 'Victorian'; 'Alys St. Maurice'; 'Plus Fours'; 'Arthur Whiffkin'; 'Sportsman if not Gentleman'; and 'Pro Patria'; which practically all contained the words: 'I cannot say that I have read the book through, but I have read enough to——'

It was five days before the defence fired a shot. But first came a letter above the signature: 'Swishing Block,' which, after commenting on the fact that a whole school of so-called literature had been indicted by the Editor of "The Protagonist" in his able letter of the 14th inst., noted with satisfaction that the said school had grace enough to take its swishing without a murmur. Not even an anonymous squeak had been heard from the whole apostolic body.

"Forsyte," said Sir Lawrence, handing it to Soames, "that's my very own mite, and if it doesn't draw them—nothing will!"

But it did. The next issue of the interested journal in which the correspondence was appearing contained a letter from the greater novelist L. S. D. which restored every one to his place. This book might or might not be Art, he hadn't read it; but the Editor of "The Protagonist" wrote like a pedagogue, and there was an end of him. As to the claim that literature must always wear a flannel petticoat, it was 'piffle,' and that was that. From under the skirts of this letter the defence, to what of exultation Soames ever permitted himself, moved out in force. Among the defenders were as many as four of the selected ten associates to whom young Butterfield had purveyed copies. They wrote over their own names that "Canthar" was distinctly LITERATURE; they were sorry for people who thought in these days that LITERATURE had any business with morals. The work must be approached æsthetically or not at all. ART was ART, and morality was morality, and never the twain could, would, or should meet. It was monstrous that a work of this sort should have to appear with a foreign imprint. When would England recognise genius when she saw it?

Soames cut the letters out one after the other, and pasted them in a book. He had got what he wanted, and the rest of the discussion interested him no more. He had received, too, a communication from young Butterfield.

"SIR,

"I called on the lady last Monday, and was fortunately able to see her in person. She seemed rather annoyed when I offered her the book. 'That book,' she said: 'I

read it weeks ago.' 'It's exciting a great deal of interest, Madam,' I said. 'I know,' she said. 'Then you won't take a copy; the price is rising steadily, it'll be very valuable in time?' 'I've got one,' she said. That's what you told me to find out, sir; so I didn't pursue the matter. I hope I have done what you wanted. But if there is anything more, I shall be most happy. I consider that I owe my present position entirely to you."

Soames didn't know about that, but as to his future position—he might have to put the young man into the box. The question of a play remained. He consulted Michael.

"Does that young woman still act in the advanced theatre place you gave me the name of?"

Michael winced. "I don't know, sir; but I could find out."

Inquiry revealed that she was cast for the part of Olivia in Bertie Curfew's *matinée* of "The Plain Dealer."

"'The Plain Dealer'?" said Soames. "Is that an advanced play?"

"Yes, sir, two hundred and fifty years old."

"Ah!" said Soames; "they were a coarse lot in those days. How is it she goes on there if she and the young man have split?"

"Oh! well, they're very cool hands. I do hope you're going to keep things out of Court, sir?"

"I can't tell. When's this performance?"

"January the seventh."

Soames went to his Club library and took down "Wycherley." He was disappointed with the early portions of "The Plain Dealer," but it improved as it went on, and he spent some time making a list of what George Forsyte would have called the 'nubbly bits.' He understood that at that theatre they did not bowdlerise. Excellent! There

were passages that should raise hair on any British Jury. Between "Canthar" and this play, he felt as if he had a complete answer to any claim by the young woman and her set to having 'morals about them.' Old professional instincts were rising within him. He had retained Sir James Foskisson, K.C., not because he admired him personally, but because if he didn't, the other side might. As junior he was employing very young Nicholas Forsyte; he had no great opinion of him, but it was as well to keep the matter in the family, especially if it wasn't to come into Court.

A conversation with Fleur that evening contributed to his intention that it should not.

"What's happened to that young American?" he said.

Fleur smiled acidly. "Francis Wilmot? Oh! he's 'fallen for' Marjorie Ferrar."

"'Fallen for her'?" said Soames. "What an expression!"

"Yes, dear; it's American."

"'For' her? It means nothing, so far as I can see."

"Let's hope not, for his sake! She's going to marry Sir Alexander MacGown, I'm told."

"Oh!"

"Did Michael tell you that he hit him on the nose?"

"Which—who?" said Soames testily. "Whose nose?"

"MacGown's, dear; and it bled like anything."

"Why on earth did he do that?"

"Didn't you read his speech about Michael?"

"Oh!" said Soames. "Parliamentary fuss—that's nothing. They're always behaving like children, there. And so she's going to marry him. Has he been putting her up to all this?"

"No; *she's* been putting him."

Soames discounted the information with a sniff; he

scented the hostility of woman for woman. Still, chicken and egg—political feeling and social feeling, who could say which first prompted which? In any case, this made a difference. Going to be married—was she? He debated the matter for some time, and then decided that he would go and see Settlewhite and Stark. If they had been a firm of poor repute or the kind always employed in ‘causes célèbres,’ he wouldn’t have dreamed of it; but, as a fact, they stood high, were solid family people, with an aristocratic connection and all that.

He did not write, but took his hat and went over from ‘The Connoisseurs’ to their offices in King Street, St. James’s. The journey recalled old days—to how many such negotiatory meetings had he not gone or caused his adversaries to come! He had never cared to take things into Court if they could be settled out of it. And always he had approached negotiation with the impersonality of one passionless about to meet another of the same kidney—two calculating machines, making their livings out of human nature. He did not feel like that to-day; and, aware of this handicap, stopped to stare into the print and picture shop next door. Ah! There were those first proofs of the Roussel engravings of the Prince Consort Exhibition of ’51, that Old Mont had spoken of—he had an eye for an engraving, Old Mont. Ah! and there was a Fred Walker, quite a good one! Mason, and Walker—they weren’t done for yet by any means. And the sensation that a man feels hearing a blackbird sing on a tree just coming into blossom, stirred beneath Soames, ribs. Long—long since he had bought a picture! Let him but get this confounded case out of the way, and he could enjoy himself again. Riving his glance from the window, he took a long breath, and walked into Settlewhite and Stark’s.

The chief partner's room was on the first floor, and the chief partner standing where chief partners stand.

"How do you do, Mr. Forsyte? I've not met you since 'Bobbin against the L. & S. W.' That must have been 1900!"

"1899," said Soames. "You were for the Company."

Mr. Settlewhite pointed to a chair.

Soames sat down and glanced up at the figure before the fire. H'm! A long-lipped, long-eyelashed, long-chinned face; a man of his own calibre, education, and probity! He would not beat about the bush.

"This action," he said, "is a very petty business. What can we do about it?"

Mr. Settlewhite frowned.

"That depends, Mr. Forsyte, on what you have to propose? My client has been very grossly libelled."

Soames smiled sourly.

"She began it. And what is she relying on—private letters to personal friends of my daughter's, written in very natural anger! I'm surprised that a firm of your standing——"

Mr. Settlewhite smiled.

"Don't trouble to compliment my firm! I'm surprised myself that you're acting for your daughter. You can hardly see all round the matter. Have you come to offer an apology?"

"That!" said Soames. "I should have thought it was for your client to apologise."

"If such is your view, I'm afraid it's no use continuing this discussion."

Soames regarded him fixedly.

"How do you think you're going to prove damage? She belongs to the fast set."

Mr. Settlewhite continued to smile.

"I understand she's going to marry Sir Alexander Mac-Gown," said Soames.

Mr. Settlewhite's lips tightened.

"Really, Mr. Forsyte, if you have come to offer an apology and a substantial sum in settlement, we can talk. Otherwise——"

"As a sensible man," said Soames, "you know that these Society scandals are always dead sea fruit—nothing but costs and vexation, and a feast for all the gossips about town. I'm prepared to offer you a thousand pounds to settle the whole thing, but an apology I can't look at. A mutual expression of regret—perhaps; but an apology's out of the question."

"Fifteen hundred I might accept—the insults have had wide currency. But an apology is essential."

Soames sat silent, chewing the injustice of it all. Fifteen hundred! Monstrous! Still he would pay even that to keep Fleur out of Court. But humble-pie! She wouldn't eat it, and he couldn't make her, and he didn't know that he wanted to. He got up.

"Look here, Mr. Settlewhite, if you take this into Court, you will find yourself up against more than you think. But the whole thing is so offensive to me, that I'm prepared to meet you over the money, though I tell you frankly I don't believe a Jury would award a penny piece. As to an apology, a 'formula' could be found, perhaps"—why the deuce was the fellow smiling?—"something like this: 'We regret that we have said hasty things about each other,' to be signed by both parties."

Mr. Settlewhite caressed his chin.

"Well, I'll put your proposition before my client. I join with you in wishing to see the matter settled, not because I'm afraid of the result"—"Oh, no!" thought

Soames—"but because these cases, as you say, are not edifying." He held out his hand.

Soames gave it a cold touch.

"You understand that this is entirely 'without prejudice,'" he said, and went out. 'She'll take it!' he thought. Fifteen hundred pounds of his money thrown away on that baggage, just because for once she had been labelled what she was; and all his trouble to get evidence wasted! For a moment he resented his devotion to Fleur. Really it was fatuous to be so fond as that! Then his heart rebounded. Thank God! He had settled it.

Christmas was at hand. It did not alarm him, therefore, that he received no answering communication. Fleur and Michael were at Lippinghall with the ninth and eleventh baronets. He and Annette had Winifred and the Cardigans down at 'The Shelter.' Not till the 6th of January did he receive a letter from Messrs. Settlewhite and Stark.

"DEAR SIR,

"In reference to your call of the 17th ultimo, your proposition was duly placed before our client, and we are instructed to say that she will accept the sum of £1,500—fifteen hundred pounds—and an apology, duly signed by your client, copy of which we enclose.

"We are, dear Sir,

"Faithfully yours,

"SETTLEWHITE AND STARK."

Soames turned to the enclosure. It ran thus:

I, Mrs. Michael Mont, withdraw the words concerning Miss Marjorie Ferrar contained in my letters to Mrs. Ralph Ppyrrryn and Mrs. Edward Maltese of October

4th last, and hereby tender a full and free apology for having written them.

“(Signed)”

Pushing back the breakfast-table, so violently that it groaned, Soames got up.

“What is it, Soames?” said Annette. “Have you broken your plate again? You should not bite so hard.”

“Read that!”

Annette read.

“You would give that woman fifteen hundred pounds? I think you are mad, Soames. I would not give her fifteen hundred pence! Pay this woman, and she tells her friends. That is fifteen hundred apologies in all their minds. Really, Soames—I am surprised. A man of business, a clever man! Do you not know the world better than that? With every pound you pay, Fleur eats her words!”

Soames flushed. It was so French, and yet somehow it was so true. He walked to the window. The French—they had no sense of compromise, and every sense of money!

“Well,” he said, “that ends it anyway. She won’t sign. And I shall withdraw my offer.”

“I should hope so. Fleur has a good head. She will look very pretty in Court. I think that woman will be sorry she ever lived! Why don’t you have her what you call shadowed? It is no good to be delicate with women like that.”

In a weak moment he had told Annette about the book and the play; for, unable to speak of them to Fleur and Michael, he had really had to tell some one; indeed, he had shown her “Canthar,” with the words: “I don’t advise you to read it; it’s very French.”

Annette had returned it to him two days later, saying: “It is not French at all; it is disgusting. You English are

so coarse. It has no wit. It is only nasty. A serious nasty book—that is the limit. You are so old-fashioned, Soames. Why do you say this book is French ? ”

Soames, who really didn't know why, had muttered :

“ Well, they can't get it printed in England.” And with the words : “ Bruxelles, Bruxelles, you call Bruxelles——” buzzing about his ears, had left the room. He had never known any people so touchy as the French !

Her remark about ‘ shadowing,’ however, was not easily forgotten. Why be squeamish, when all depended on frightening this woman ? And on arriving in London he visited an office that was not Mr. Polteed's, and gave instructions for the shadowing of Marjorie Ferrar's past, present, and future.

His answer to Settlewhite and Stark, too, was brief, determined, and written on the paper of his own firm.

“ Jan. 6th, 1925.

“ DEAR SIRs,

“ I have your letter of yesterday's date, and note that your client has rejected my proposition, which, as you know, was made entirely without prejudice, and is now withdrawn in toto.

“ Yours faithfully,

“ SOAMES FORSYTE.”

If he did not mistake, they would be sorry. And he gazed at the words ‘ in toto ’ ; somehow they looked funny. In toto ! And now for “ The Plain Dealer ” !

The theatre of the ‘ Ne Plus Ultra ’ Play-producing Society had a dingy exterior, a death-mask of Congreve in the hall, a peculiar smell, and an apron stage. There was no music. They hit something three times before the curtain went up. There were no footlights. The scenery was

peculiar—Soames could not take his eyes off it till, in the first Entr'acte, its principle was revealed to him by the conversation of two people sitting just behind.

“The point of the scenery here is that no one need look at it, you see. They go farther than anything yet done.”

“They've gone farther in Moscow.”

“I believe not. Curfew went over there. He came back raving about the way they speak their lines.”

“Does he know Russian?”

“No. You don't need to. It's the timbre. I think he's doing pretty well here with that. You couldn't give a play like this if you took the words in.”

Soames, who had been trying to take the words in—it was, indeed, what he had come for—squinted round at the speakers. They were pale and young and went on with a strange unconcern.

“Curfew's doing great work. He's shaking them up.”

“I see they've got Marjorie Ferrar as Olivia.”

“Don't know why he keeps on an amateur like that.”

“Box office, dear boy; she brings the smart people. She's painful, I think.”

“She did one good thing—the dumb girl in that Russian play. But she can't speak for nuts; you're following the sense of her words all the time. She doesn't rhythmatisise you a little bit.”

“She's got looks.”

“M'yes.”

At this moment the curtain went up again. Since Marjorie Ferrar had not yet appeared, Soames was obliged to keep awake; indeed, whether because she couldn't 'speak for nuts,' or merely from duty, he was always awake while she was on the stage, and whenever she had anything outrageous to say he noted it carefully; otherwise he passed an excellent afternoon, and went away much

rested. In his cab he mentally rehearsed Sir James Foskisson in the part of cross-examiner :

“ I think, madam, you played Olivia in a production of “ The Plain Dealer ” by the ‘ Ne Plus Ultra ’ Play-Producing Society ? . . . Would it be correct to say that the part was that of a modest woman ? . . . Precisely. And did it contain the following lines ? (Quotation of nubbly bits.) . . . Did that convey anything to your mind, madam ? . . . I suppose that you would not say it was an immoral passage ? . . . No ? Nor calculated to offend the ears and debase the morals of a decent-minded audience ? . . . No. In fact, you don’t take the same view of morality that I, or, I venture to think, the Jury do ? . . . No. The dark scene—you did not remonstrate with the producer for not omitting that scene ? . . . Quite. Mr. Curfew, I think, was the producer ? Yes. Are you on such terms with that gentleman as would have made a remonstrance easy ? . . . Ah ! Now, madam, I put it to you that throughout 1923 you were seeing this gentleman nearly every day. . . . Well, say three or four times a week. And yet you say that you were not on such terms as would have made it possible for you to represent to him that no modest young woman should be asked to play a scene like that. . . . Indeed ! The Jury will form their own opinion of your answer. You are not a professional actress, dependent for your living on doing what you are told to do ? . . . No. And yet you have the face to come here and ask for substantial damages because of the allegation in a private letter that you haven’t a moral about you ? . . . Have you ? . . . ”

And so on, and so on. Oh ! no. Damages ! She wouldn’t get a farthing.