

CHAPTER IX

VOLTE FACE

KEEPING Sir Alexander MacGown and Francis Wilmot in the air, fulfilling her week-end and other engagements, playing much bridge in the hope of making her daily expenses, getting a day's hunting when she could, and rehearsing the part of Olivia, Marjorie Ferrar had almost forgotten the action, when the offer of fifteen hundred pounds and the formula were put before her by Messrs. Settlewhite and Stark. She almost jumped at it. The money would wipe out her more pressing debts; she would be able to breathe, and reconsider her future.

She received their letter on the Friday before Christmas, just as she was about to go down to her father's, near Newmarket, and wrote hastily to say she would call at their office on her way home on Monday. The following evening she consulted her father. Lord Charles was of opinion that if this attorney fellow would go as far as fifteen hundred, he must be dead keen on settling, and she had only to press for the apology to get it. Anyway she should let them stew in their juice for a bit. On Monday he wanted to show her his yearlings. She did not, therefore, return to Town till the 23rd, and found the office closed for Christmas. It had never occurred to her that solicitors had holidays. On Christmas Eve she herself went away for ten days; so that it was January the 4th before she was again able to call. Mr. Settle-

white was still in the South of France, but Mr. Stark would see her. Mr. Stark knew little about the matter, but thought Lord Charles' advice probably sound; he proposed to write accepting the fifteen hundred pounds if a formal apology were tendered; they could fall back on the formula if necessary, but it was always wise to get as much as you could. With some misgiving Marjorie Ferrar agreed.

Returning from the *matinée* on January 7th, tired and elated by applause, by Bertie Curfew's words: "You did quite well, darling," and almost the old look on his face, she got into a hot bath, and was just out when her maid announced Mr. Wilmot.

"Keep him, Fanny; say I'll be with him in twenty minutes."

Feverish and soft, as if approaching a crisis, she dressed hastily, put essence of orange-blossom on her neck and hands, and went to the studio. She entered without noise. The young man, back to the door, in the centre of the room, evidently did not hear her. Approaching within a few feet, she waited for the effect on him of orange-blossom. He was standing like some Eastern donkey, that with drooped ears patiently awaits the fresh burdening of a sore back. And suddenly he spoke: "I'm all in."

"Francis!"

The young man turned.

"Oh! Marjorie!" he said, "I never heard." And taking her hands, he buried his face in them.

She was hampered at that moment. To convert his mouth from despairing kissing of her hands to triumphal flame upon her lips would have been so easy if he had been modern, if his old-fashioned love had not complimented her so subtly; if, too, she were not feeling for him

something more—or was it less ?—than passion. Was she to know at last the sensations of the simple—a young girl's idyll—something she had missed ? She led him to the divan, sat down by his side, and looked into his eyes. Fabled sweetness, as of a Spring morning—Francis and she, children in the wood, with the world well lost ! She surrendered to the innocence of it ; deliberately grasped something delicious, new. Poor boy ! How delightful to feel him happy at last—to promise marriage and mean to perform it ! When ? Oh ! when he liked—— Soon, quite soon ; the sooner the better ! Almost unconscious that she was ' playing ' a young girl, she was carried away by his amazement and his joy. He was on fire, on air ; yet he remained delicate—he was wonderful ! For an hour they sat—a fragrant hour for memory to sniff—before she remembered that she was dining out at half past eight. She put her lips to his, and closed her eyes. And thought ran riot. Should she spoil it, and make sure of him in modern fashion ? What was his image of her but a phlizz, but a fraud ? She saw his eyes grow troubled, felt his hands grow fevered. Something seemed drowning before her eyes. She stood up.

“ Now, my darling, you must fly ! ”

When he had flown, she threw off her dress and brushed out her hair that in the mirror seemed to have more gold than red. . . . Some letters on her dressing-table caught her eye. The first was a bill, the second a bill ; the third ran thus :

“ DEAR MADAM,

“ We regret to say that Cuthcott Kingson & Forsyte have refused to give the apology we asked for, and withdrawn their verbal offer in toto. We presume, therefore, that the action must go forward. We have every hope,

however, that they may reconsider the matter before it comes into Court.

“Your obedient servants,
“SETTLEWHITE & STARK.”

She dropped it and sat very still, staring at a little hard line on the right side of her mouth and a little hard line on the left. . . .

Francis Wilmot, flying, thought of steamship-lines and staterooms, of registrars and rings. An hour ago he had despaired; now it seemed he had always known she was “too fine not to give up this fellow whom she didn’t love.” He would make her the queen of South Carolina—he surely would! But if she didn’t like it out there, he would sell the ‘old home,’ and they would go and live where she wished—in Venice; he had heard her say Venice was wonderful; or New York, or Sicily; with her he wouldn’t care! And London in the cold dry wind seemed beautiful, no longer a grey maze of unreality and shadows, but a city where you could buy rings and steamship passages. The wind cut him like a knife and he did not feel it. That poor devil Mac Gown! He hated the sight, the thought of him, and yet felt sorry, thinking of him with the cup dashed from his lips. And all the days, weeks, months himself had spent circling round the flame, his wings scorched and drooping, seemed now but the natural progress of the soul towards Paradise. Twenty-four—his age and hers; an eternity of bliss before them! He pictured her on the porch at home. Horses! A better car than the old Ford! The darkies would adore her—kind of grand, and so white! To walk with her among the azaleas in the Spring, that he could smell already; no—it was his hands where he had touched her! He shivered, and resumed his flight under the bare trees,

well-nigh alone in the East wind ; the stars of a bitter night shining.

A card was handed to him as he entered his hotel.

“ Mr. Wilmot, a gentleman to see you.”

Sir Alexander was seated in a corner of the Lounge, with a crush hat in his hand. He rose and came towards Francis Wilmot, grim and square.

“ I’ve been meaning to call on you for some time, Mr. Wilmot.”

“ Yes, sir. May I offer you a cocktail, or a glass of sherry ? ”

“ No, thank you. You are aware of my engagement to Miss Ferrar ? ”

“ I was, sir.”

This red aggressive face, with its stiff moustache and burning eyes, revived his hatred ; so that he no longer felt sorry.

“ You know that I very much object to your constant visits to that young lady. In this country it is not the part of a gentleman to pursue an engaged young woman.”

“ That,” said Francis Wilmot, coolly, “ is for Miss Ferrar herself to say.”

MacGown’s face grew even redder.

“ If you hadn’t been an American, I should have warned you to keep clear a long time ago.”

Francis Wilmot bowed.

“ Well ! Are you going to ? ”

“ Permit me to decline an answer.”

MacGown thrust forward his face.

“ I’ve told you,” he said. “ If you trespass any more, look out for yourself.”

“ Thank you ; I will,” said Francis Wilmot, softly.

MacGown stood for a moment swaying slightly. Was

he going to hit out ? Francis Wilmot put his hands into his trouser pockets.

“ You’ve had your warning,” said MacGown, and turned on his heel.

“ Good night ! ” said Francis Wilmot to that square receding back. He had been gentle, he had been polite, but he hated the fellow, yes, indeed !. Save for the triumphal glow within him, there might have been a fuss !