

PART III

CHAPTER I

'CIRCUSES'

IN his early boyhood Soames had been given to the circus. He had outgrown it; 'Circuses' were now to him little short of an abomination. Jubilees and Pageants, that recurrent decimal, the Lord Mayor, Earl's Court, Olympia, Wembley—he disliked them all. He could not stand a lot of people with their mouths open. Dressing up was to him a symptom of weak-mindedness, and the collective excitement of a crowd an extravagance that offended his reticent individualism. Though not deeply versed in history, he had an idea, too, that nations who went in for 'circuses' were decadent. Queen Victoria's funeral, indeed, had impressed him—there had been a feeling in the air that day; but ever since, things had gone from bad to worse. They made everything into a 'circus' now! A man couldn't commit a murder without the whole paper-reading population—himself included—looking over each other's shoulders; and as to these football-matches, and rodeos—they interfered with the traffic and the normal course of conversation; people were so crazy about them!

Of course, 'circuses' had their use. They kept the people quiet. Violence by proxy, for instance, was obviously a political principle of some value. It was difficult to gape and shed blood at the same time; the more people stood

in rows by day to see others being hurt, the less trouble would they take to hurt others themselves, and the sounder Soames could sleep by night. Still, sensation-hunting had become a disease, in his opinion, and no one was being inoculated for it, so far as he could see!

As the weeks went on and the cases before it in the List went off, the 'circus' they were proposing to make of his daughter appeared to him more and more monstrous. He had an instinctive distrust of Scotchmen—they called themselves Scotsmen nowadays, as if it helped their character—they never let go, and he could not approve in other people a quality native to himself. Besides, 'Scotchmen' were so—so exuberant—always either dour or else hearty—extravagant chaps! Towards the middle of March, with the case in the list for the following week, he took an extreme step and entered the Lobby of the House of Commons. He had spoken to no one of his determination to make this last effort, for it seemed to him that all—Annette, Michael, Fleur herself—had done their best to spoil the chance of settlement.

Having sent in his card, he waited a long while in that lofty purlieu. 'Lobbying,' he knew the phrase, but had never realised the waste of time involved in it. The statues consoled him somewhat. Sir Stafford Northcote—a steady chap; at old Forsyte dinner-parties in the 'eighties his character had been as much a standby as the saddle of mutton. He found even 'that fellow Gladstone' bearable in stucco, or whatever it was up there. You might dislike, but you couldn't sneeze at him, as at some of these modern chaps. He was sunk in coma before Lord Granville when at last he heard the words:

"Sir Alexander MacGown," and saw a square man with a ruddy face, stiff black hair, and clipped moustache, coming between the railings, with a card in his hand.

"Mr. Forsyte?"

"Yes. Can we go anywhere that's not quite so public?"

The 'Scotchman' nodded, and led him down a corridor to a small room.

"Well?"

Soames smoothed his hat. "This affair," he said, "can't be any more agreeable to you than it is to me."

"Are you the individual who was good enough to apply the word 'traitress' to the lady I'm engaged to?"

"That is so."

"Then I don't see how you have the impudence to come and speak to me."

Soames bit his lips.

"I spoke under the provocation of hearing your *fiancée* call my daughter a snob, in her own house. Do you want this petty affair made public?"

"If you think that you and your daughter can get away with calling the lady I'm going to marry 'a snake,' 'a traitress,' 'an immoral person,' you're more mistaken than you ever were in your life. An unqualified apology that her Counsel can announce in Court is your only way out."

"That you won't get; mutual regret is another thing. As to the question of damages——"

"Damn the damages!" said MacGown violently. And there was that in Soames which applauded.

"Well," he said, "I'm sorry for you and her."

"What the devil do you mean, sir?"

"You will know by the end of next week, unless you revise your views in between. If it comes into Court, we shall justify."

The 'Scotchman' went so red that for a moment Soames was really afraid he would have an apoplectic fit.

"You'd better look out what you say in Court."

"We pay no attention to bullies in Court."

MacGown clenched his fists.

"Yes," said Soames, "it's a pity I'm not your age. Good evening!"

He passed the fellow and went out. He had noted his way in this 'rabbit warren,' and was soon back among the passionate statues. Well! He had turned the last stone and could do no more, except make that overbearing fellow and his young woman sorry they'd ever been born. He came out into the chilly mist of Westminster. 'Pride and temper! Sooner than admit themselves in the wrong, people would turn themselves into an expensive 'circus' for the gaping and the sneers, the japing and the jeers of half the town! To vindicate her 'honour,' that 'Scotchman' would have his young woman's past dragged out! And fairly faced by the question whether to drag it out or not, Soames stood still. If he didn't, she might get a verdict; if he did, and didn't convince the jury, the damages would be shockingly increased. They might run into thousands. He felt the need of definite decision. One had been drifting in the belief that the thing wouldn't come into Court! Four o'clock! Not too late, perhaps, to see Sir James Foskisson. He would telephone to very young Nicholas to arrange a conference at once, and if Michael was at South Square, he would take him down to it. . . .

In his study, Michael had been staring with lugubrious relish at Aubrey Greene's cartoon of himself in a Society paper. On one leg, like Guy—or was it Slingsby?—in the Edward Lear 'Nonsense' book, he was depicted crying in a wilderness where a sardonic smile was rising on the horizon. Out of his mouth the word 'Foggartism' wreathed like the smoke of a cigar. Above a hole in the middle distance, a meercat's body supported the upturned face and

applauding forepaws of Mr. Blythe. The thing was devastating in treatment and design—not unkind, merely killing. Michael's face had been endowed with a sort of after-dinner rapture, as if he were enjoying the sound of his own voice. Ridicule! Not even a personal friend, an artist, could see that the wilderness was at least as deserving of ridicule as the pelican! The cartoon seemed to write the word futility large across his page. It recalled to him Fleur's words at the outset: "And by the time the Tories go out you'll have your licence." She was a born realist! From the first she had foreseen for him the position of an eccentric, picturesquely beating a little private drum! A dashed good cartoon! And no one could appreciate it so deeply as its victim. But why did every one smile at Foggartism? Why? Because among a people who naturally walked, it leaped like a grasshopper; to a nation that felt its way in fog, it seemed a will-o'-the-wisp. Yes, he was a fool for his pains! And—just then, Soames arrived.

"I've been to see that Scotchman," he said. "He means to take it into Court."

"Oh! Not really, sir! I always thought you'd keep it out."

"Only an unqualified apology will do that. Fleur can't give it; she's in the right. Can you come down with me now and see Sir James Foskisson?"

They set out in a taxi for the Temple.

The chambers of very young Nicholas Forsyte were in Paper Buildings. Chinny, mild and nearly forty, he succeeded within ten minutes in presenting to them every possible doubt.

"He seems to enjoy the prospect of getting tonked," murmured Michael while they were going over to Sir James.

"A poor thing," Soames responded; "but careful. Foskisson must attend to the case himself."

After those necessary minutes during which the celebrated K.C. was regathering from very young Nicholas what it was all about, they were ushered into the presence of one with a large head garnished by small grey whiskers, and really obvious brains. Since selecting him, Soames had been keeping his eye on the great advocate; had watched him veiling his appeals to a jury with an air of scrupulous equity: very few—he was convinced—and those not on juries, could see Sir James Foskisson coming round a corner. Soames had specially remarked his success in cases concerned with morals or nationality—no one so apt at getting a co-respondent, a German, a Russian, or anybody at all bad, non-suited! At close quarters his whiskers seemed to give him an intensive respectability—difficult to imagine him dancing, gambling, or in bed. In spite of his practice, too, he enjoyed the reputation of being thorough; he might be relied on to know more than half the facts of any case by the time he went into Court, and to pick up the rest as he went along—or at least not to show that he hadn't. Very young Nicholas, knowing all the facts, had seemed quite unable to see what line could possibly be taken. Sir James, on the other hand, appeared to know only just enough. Sliding his light eyes from Soames to Michael, he retailed them, and said: "Eminently a case for an amicable settlement."

"Indeed!" said Soames.

Something in his voice seemed to bring Sir James to attention.

"Have you attempted that?"

"I have gone to the limit."

"Excuse me, Mr. Forsyte, but what do you regard as the limit?"

"Fifteen hundred pounds, and a mutual expression of regret. They'd accept the money, but they ask for an unqualified apology."

The great lawyer rested his chin. "Have you tried the unqualified apology without the money?"

"No."

"I would almost be inclined. MacGown is a very rich man. The shadow and the substance, eh? The expressions in the letters are strong. What do you say, Mr. Mont?"

"Not so strong as those she used of my wife."

Sir James Foskisson looked at very young Nicholas.

"Let me see," he said, "those were——?"

"Lion-huntress, and snob," said Michael, curtly.

Sir James wagged his head precisely as if it were a pair of scales.

"Immoral, snake, traitress, without charm—you think those weaker?"

"They don't make you snigger, sir, the others do. In Society it's the snigger that counts."

Sir James smiled.

"The jury won't be in Society, Mr. Mont."

"My wife doesn't feel like making an apology, anyway, unless there's an expression of regret on the other side; and I don't see why she should."

Sir James Foskisson seemed to breathe more freely.

"In that case," he said, "we have to consider whether to use the detective's evidence or not. If we do, we shall need to subpoena the hall porter and the servants at Mr. —er—Curfew's flat."

"Exactly," said Soames; "that's what we're here to decide." It was as if he had said: 'The conference is now opened.'

Sir James perused the detective's evidence for five silent minutes.

"If this is confirmed, even partially," he said, at last, "we win."

Michael had gone to the window. The trees in the garden had tiny buds; some pigeons were strutting on the grass below. He heard Soames say:

"I ought to tell you that they've been shadowing my daughter. There's nothing, of course, except some visits to a young American dangerously ill of pneumonia at his hotel."

"Of which I knew and approved," said Michael, without turning round.

"Could we call him?"

"I believe he's still at Bournemouth. But he was in love with Miss Ferrar."

Sir James turned to Soames.

"If there's no question of a settlement, we'd better go for the gloves. Merely to cross-examine as to books and play and clubs, is very inconclusive."

"Have you read the dark scene in 'The Plain Dealer'?" asked Soames; "and that novel, 'Canthar'?"

"All very well, Mr. Forsyte, but impossible to say what a jury would make of impersonal evidence like that."

Michael had come back to his seat.

"I've a horror," he said, "of dragging in Miss Ferrar's private life."

"No doubt. But do you want me to win the case?"

"Not that way. Can't we go into Court, say nothing, and pay up?"

Sir James Foskisson smiled and looked at Soames. 'Really,' he seemed to say, 'why did you bring me this young man?'

Soames, however, had been pursuing his own thoughts.

"There's too much risk about that flat; if we failed there, it might be a matter of twenty thousand pounds."

Besides, they would certainly call my daughter. I want to prevent that at all costs. I thought you could turn the whole thing into an indictment of modern morality."

Sir James Foskisson moved in his chair, and the pupils of his light-blue eyes became as pin-points. He nodded almost imperceptibly three times, precisely as if he had seen the Holy Ghost.

"When shall we be reached?" he said to very young Nicholas.

"Probably next Thursday—Mr. Justice Branc."

"Very well. I'll see you again on Monday. Good evening." And he sank back into an immobility, which neither Soames nor Michael felt equal to disturbing.

They went away silent—very young Nicholas tarrying in conversation with Sir James' devil.

Turning at the Temple station, Michael murmured:

"It was just as if he'd said: 'Some stunt!' wasn't it? I'm looking in at 'The Outpost,' sir. If you're going back to Fleur, will you tell her?"

Soames nodded. There it was! He had to do everything that was painful.