

CHAPTER III

SOAMES DRIVES HOME

SOAMES in the meantime was seated with one of those parties in her 'parlour.' She had listened in silence, but with a stubborn and resentful face. What did he know of the loneliness and frustration she had been feeling? Could he tell that the thrown stone had starred her mirrored image of herself; that the words 'snob,' and 'lion-huntress,' had entered her very soul? He could not understand the spiritual injury she had received, the sudden deprivation of that self-importance, and hope of rising, necessary to all. Concerned by the expression on her face, preoccupied with the practical aspects of the 'circus' before them, and desperately involved in thoughts of how to keep her out of it as much as possible, Soames was reduced to the closeness of a fish.

"You'll be sitting in front, next to me," he said. "I shouldn't wear anything too bright. Would you like your mother there, too?"

Fleur shrugged her shoulders.

"Just so," said Soames. "But if she wants to come, she'd better, perhaps. Brane is not a joking judge, thank goodness. Have you ever been in a Court?"

"No."

"The great thing is to keep still, and pay no attention to anything. They'll all be behind you, except the jury—and there's nothing in them really. If you look at them, don't smile!"

"Why? Aren't they safe, Dad?"

Soames put the levity aside.

"I should wear a small hat. Michael must sit on your left. Have you got over that—er—not telling each other things?"

"Yes."

"I shouldn't begin it again. He's very fond of you."

Fleur nodded.

"Is there anything you want to tell *me*? You know I—I worry about you."

Fleur got up and sat on the arm of his chair; he had at once a feeling of assuagement.

"I really don't care now. The harm's done. I only hope *she'll* have a bad time."

Soames, who had the same hope, was somewhat shocked by its expression.

He took leave of her soon after and got into his car for the dark drive back to Mapledurham. The Spring evening was cold and he had the windows up. At first he thought of very little; and then of still less. He had passed a tiring afternoon, and was glad of the slight smell of stephanotis provided by Annette. The road was too familiar to rouse his thoughts, beyond wonder at the lot of people there always seemed to be in the world between six and seven. He dozed his way into the new cut, woke, and dozed again. What was this—Slough? Before going to Marlborough he had been at school there with young Nicholas and St. John Heyman, and after his time, some other young Forsytes. Nearly sixty years ago! He remembered his first day—a brand-new little boy in a brand-new little top-hat, with a playbox stored by his mother with things to eat, and blessed with the words: "There, Summy dear, that'll make you popular." He had reckoned on having command of that corruption for some weeks; but no sooner

had he produced a bit of it, than the, had taken the box, and suggested to him that it would be a good thing to eat the lot. In twenty-two minutes twenty-two boys had materially increased their weight, and he himself, in handing out the contents, had been obliged to eat less than a twenty-third. They had left him one packet of biscuits, and those had caraway seeds, for which he had constitutionally no passion whatever. Afterwards three other new boys had complained that he was a fool for having it all eaten up like that, instead of saving it for them, and he had been obliged to sit on their heads one by one. His popularity had lasted twenty-two minutes, and, so far as he knew, had never come back. He had been against Communism ever since.

Bounding a little on the cushioned seat, he remembered poignantly his own cousin St. John Heyman pushing him into a gorse-bush and holding him there for an appreciable minute. Horrid little brutes, boys! For a moment he felt quite grateful to Michael for trying to get them out of England. And yet——! He had some pleasant memories even of boys. There was his collection of butterflies—he had sold two Red Admirals in poor condition to a boy for one-and-threepence. To be a boy again—h'm—and shoot peas at passengers in a train that couldn't stop, and drink cherry brandy going home, and win a prize by reciting two hundred lines of 'The Lady of the Lake' better than 'Cherry-Tart' Burroughes—Um? What had become of 'Cherry-Tart' Burroughes, who had so much money at school that his father went bankrupt! 'Cherry-Tart' Burroughes!

The loom of Slough faded. One was in rank country now, and he ground the handle of the window to get a little fresh air. A smell of trees and grass came in. Boys out of England! They had funny accents in those great

places overseas. Well, they had funny accents here, too. The accent had been all right at Slough—if it wasn't a boy got lammed. He remembered the first time his father and mother—James and Emily—came down; very genteel (before the word was fly-blown), all whiskers and crinoline; the beastly boys had made personal remarks which had hurt him! Get 'em out of England! But in those days there had been nowhere for boys to go. He took a long breath of the wayside air. They said England was changed, spoiled, some even said 'done for.' Bosh! It still smelt the same! His great uncle 'Superior Dosset's' brother Simon had gone as a boy to Bermuda at the beginning of the last century, and had he been heard of since? Not he. Young Jon Forsyte and his mother—his own first, unfaithful, still not quite forgotten wife—had gone to the States—would they be heard of again? He hoped not. England! Some day, when he had time and the car was free, he would go and poke round on the border of Dorset and Devon where the Forsytes came from. There was nothing there—he understood, and he wouldn't care to let anybody know of his going; but the earth must be some sort of colour, and there would be a graveyard, and—ha! Maidenhead! These sprawling villas and hotels and gramophones spoiled the river. Funny that Fleur had never been very fond of the river; too slow and wet, perhaps—everything was quick and dry now, like America. But had they such a river as the Thames anywhere out of England? Not they! Nothing that ran green and clear and weedy, where you could sit in a punt and watch the cows, and those big elms, and the poplars. Nothing that was safe and quiet, where you called your soul your own and thought of Constable and Mason and Walker.

His car bumped something slightly, and came to a

stand. That fellow Riggs was alw. ys bumping something! He looked out. The chauffeur had got down and was examining his mudguard.

"What was that?" said Soames.

"I think it was a pig, sir."

"Where?"

"Shall I drive on, or see?"

Soames looked round. There seemed no Labitations in sight.

"Better see."

The chauffeur disappeared behind the car. Soames remained seated. He had never had any pigs. They said the pig was a clean animal. People didn't treat pigs properly. It was very quiet! No cars on the road; in the silence the wind was talking a little in the hedgerow. He noticed some stars.

"It *is* a pig, sir; he's breathing."

"Oh!" said Soames. If a cat had nine, how many lives had a pig? He remembered his father James' only riddle: "If a herring and a half cost three-ha'pence, what's the price of a gridiron?" When still very small, he had perceived that it was unanswerable.

"Where is he?" he said.

"In the ditch, sir."

A pig was property, but if in the ditch, nobody would notice it till after he was home. "Drive on," he said: "No! Wait!" And, opening the near door, he got out. After all, the pig was in distress. "Show me," he said, and moved in the tail-light of his car to where the chauffeur stood pointing. There, in the shallow ditch, was a dark object emitting cavernous low sounds, as of a man asleep in a Club chair.

"It must belong to one of them cottages we passed a bit back," said the chauffeur.

Soames looked at the pig.

"Anything broken?"

"No, sir; the mudguard's all right. I fancy it copped him pretty fair."

"In the pig, I meant."

The chauffeur touched the pig with his boot. It squealed, and Soames quivered. Some one would hear! Just like that fellow, drawing attention to it—no gump-tion whatever! But how, without touching, did you find out whether anything was broken in a pig? He moved a step and saw the pig's eyes; and a sort of fellow-feeling stirred in him. What if it had a broken leg! Again the chauffeur touched it with his foot. The pig uttered a lamentable noise, and, upheaving its bulk, squealing and grunting, trotted off. Soames hastily resumed his seat. "Drive on!" he said. Pigs! They never thought of anything but themselves; and cottagers were just as bad—very unpleasant about cars. And he wasn't sure they weren't right—tearing great things! The pig's eye seemed looking at him again from where his feet were resting. Should he keep some, now that he had those meadows on the other side of the river? Eat one's own bacon, cure one's own hams! After all, there was something in it—clean pigs, properly fed! That book of old Foggart said one must grow more food in England, and be independent if there were another war. He sniffed. Smell of baking—Reading, already! They still grew biscuits in England! Foreign countries growing his food—something unpleasant about living on sufferance like that! After all, English meat and English wheat—as for a potato, you couldn't get one fit to eat in Italy, or France. And now they wanted to trade with Russia again! Those Bolshevists hated England. Eat their wheat and eggs, use their tallow and skins? *Infra dig*, he called it! The car swerved and he

was jerked against the side cushions. The village church!—that fellow Riggs was always shying at something. Pretty little old affair, too, with its squat spire and its lichen—couldn't see that out of England—graves, old names, yew-trees. And that reminded him: One would have to be buried, some day. Here, perhaps. Nothing flowery! Just his name, 'Soames Forsyte,' standing out on rough stone, like that grave he had sat on at Highgate; no need to put 'Here lies'—of course he'd lie! As to a cross, he didn't know. Probably they'd put one, whatever he wished. He'd like to be in a corner, though, away from people—with an apple-tree or something, over him. The less they remembered him, the better. Except Fleur—and she would have other things to think of!

The car turned down the last low hill to the level of the river. He caught a glimpse of it flowing dark between the poplars, like the soul of England, running hidden. The car rolled into the drive, and stopped before the door. He shouldn't tell Annette yet about this case coming into Court—she wouldn't feel as he did—she had no nerves!