

CHAPTER V

THE DAY

ON the day of the case Soames rose, in Green Street, with a sort of sick impatience. Why wasn't it the day after ?

Renewed interviews with very young Nicholas and Sir James Foskisson had confirmed the idea of defence by attack on modern morality. Foskisson was evidently going to put his heart into that—perhaps he'd suffered from it ; and if he was anything like old Bobstay, who had just published his reminiscences at the age of eighty-two, that cat would lose her hair and give herself away. Yesterday afternoon Soames had taken an hour's look at Mr. Justice Brane, and been very favourably impressed ; the learned judge, though younger than himself—he had often briefed him in other times—looked old-fashioned enough now for anything.

Having cleaned his teeth, put in his plate, and brushed his hair, Soames went into the adjoining room and told Annette she would be late. She always looked terribly young and well in bed, and this, though a satisfaction to him, he could never quite forgive. When he was gone, fifteen years hence, perhaps, she would still be under sixty, and might live another twenty years.

Having roused her sufficiently to say : " You will have plenty of time to be fussy in that Court, Soames," he went back and looked out of his window. The air smelled of Spring—aggravating ! He bathed and shaved with

care—didn't want to go into the Box with a cut on his chin!—then went back to see that Annette was not putting on anything bright. He found her in pink underclothes.

"I should wear black," he said.

Annette regarded him above her hand-mirror.

"Whom do you want me to fascinate, Soames?"

"These people will bring their friends, I shouldn't wonder; anything conspicuous——"

"Don't be afraid; I shall not try to be younger than my daughter."

Soames went out again. The French! Well, she had good taste in dress.

After breakfast he went off to Fleur's. Winifred and Imogen would look after Annette—they too were going to the Court, as if there were anything to enjoy about this business!

Spruce in his silk hat, he walked across the Green Park, conning over his evidence. No buds on the trees—a late year; and the Royal Family out of town! Passing the Palace, he thought: 'They're very popular!' He supposed they liked this great Empire group in front of them, all muscle and flesh and large animals! The Albert Memorial, and this—everybody ran them down; but, after all, peace and plenty—nothing modern about them! Emerging into Westminster, he cut his way through a smell of fried fish into the Parliamentary backwater of North Street, and, between its pleasant little houses, gazed steadily at the Wren Church. Never going inside any church except St. Paul's, he derived a sort of strength from their outsides—churches were solid and stood back, and didn't seem to care what people thought of them! He felt a little better, rounding into South Square. The Dandie met him in the hall. Though he was not over-

kind of dogs, the breadth and solidity of this one always affected Soames pleurably—better than that little Chinese abortion they used to have! This dog was a character—masterful and tenacious—you would get very little out of *him* in a witness-box! Looking up from the dog, he saw Michael and Fleur coming down the stairs. After hurriedly inspecting Michael's brown suit and speckled tie, his eyes came to anchor on his daughter's face. Pale but creamy, nothing modern—thank goodness!—no rouge, salve, powder, or eye-blackening; perfectly made up for her part! In a blue dress, too, very good taste, which must have taken some finding! The desire that she should not feel nervous stilled Soames' private qualms.

"Quite a smell of Spring!" he said: "Shall we start?"

While a cab was being summoned, he tried to put her at ease.

"I had a look at Brane yesterday; he's changed a good deal from when I used to know him. I was one of the first to give him briefs."

"That's bad, isn't it, sir?" said Michael.

"How?"

"He'll be afraid of being thought grateful."

Flippant, as usual!

"Our judges," he said, "are a good lot, take them all round."

"I'm sure they are. Do you know if he ever reads, sir?"

"How d'you mean—reads?"

"Fiction. We don't, in Parliament."

"Nobody reads novels, except women," said Soames. And he felt Fleur's dress. "You'll want a fur; that's flimsy."

While she was getting the fur, he said to Michael: "How did she sleep?"

"Better than I did, sir."

"That's a comfort, anyway. Here's the cab. Keep away from that Scotchman."

"I see him every day in the House, you know."

"Ah!" said Soames; "I forgot. You make nothing of that sort of thing there, I believe." And taking his daughter's arm, he led her forth.

"I wonder if old Blythe will turn up," he heard Michael say, when they passed the office of 'The Outpost.' It was the first remark made in the cab, and, calling for no response, it was the last.

The Law Courts had their customary air, and people, in black and blue, were hurrying into them. "Beetle-trap!" muttered Michael. Soames rejected the simile with his elbow—for him they were just familiar echoing space, concealed staircases, stuffy corridors, and the square enclosures of one voice at a time.

Too early, they went slowly up the stairs. Really, it was weak-minded! Here they had come—they and the other side—to get—what? He was amazed at himself for not having insisted on Fleur's apologising. Time and again in the case of others, all this had appeared quite natural—in the case of his own daughter, it now seemed almost incredibly idiotic. He hurried her on, however, past lingering lawyers' clerks, witnesses, what not. A few low words to an usher, and they were inside, and sitting down. Very young Nicholas was already in his place, and Soames so adjusted himself that there would only be the thickness of Sir James, when he materialised, between them. Turning to confer, he lived for a cosy moment in the past again, as might some retired old cricketer taking block once more. Beyond young Nicholas he quartered the assemblage with his glance. Yes, people had got wind of it! He knew they would—with that cat

always in the public eye—quite a lot of furbelows up there at the back, and more coming. He reversed himself abruptly; the Jury were filing in—special, but a common-looking lot! Why were juries always common-looking? He had never been on one himself. He glanced at Fleur. There she sat, and what she was feeling he couldn't tell. As for young Michael, his ears looked very pointed. And just then he caught sight of Annette. She'd better not come and sit down here, after all—the more there were of them in front, the more conspicuous it would be! So he shook his head at her, and waved towards the back. Ah! She was going! She and Winifred and Imogen would take up room—all rather broad in the beam; but there were still gaps up there. And suddenly he saw the plaintiff and her lawyer and MacGown; very spry they looked, and that insolent cat was smiling! Careful not to glance in their direction, Soames saw them sit down, some six feet off. Ah! and here came Counsel—Foskisson and Bullfry together, thick as thieves. They'd soon be calling each other 'my friend' now, and cutting each other's throats! He wondered if he wouldn't have done better after all to have let the other side have Foskisson, and briefed Bullfry—an ugly-looking customer, broad, competent and leathery. He and Michael with Fleur between them, and behind—Foskisson and his junior; Settlewhite and the Scotchman with 'that cat' between them, and behind—Bullfry and his junior! Only the Judge wanted now to complete the pattern! And here he came! Soames gripped Fleur's arm and raised her with himself. Bob! Down again! One side of Branc's face seemed a little fuller than the other; Soames wondered if he had toothache, and how it would affect the proceedings.

And now came the usual 'shivaree' about such and such a case, and what would be taken next week, and so on.

Well! that was over, and the judge was turning his head this way and that, as if to see where the field was placed. Bow Bullfry was up:

“If it please Your Lordship——”

He was making the usual opening, with the usual flowery description of the plaintiff—granddaughter of a marquess, engaged to a future Prime Minister . . . or so you'd think! . . . prominent in the most brilliant circles, high-spirited, perhaps a thought too high-spirited. . . . Baggage! . . . the usual smooth and subacid description of the defendant! . . . Rich and ambitious young married lady. . . . Impudent beggar! . . . Jury would bear in mind that they were dealing in both cases with members of advanced Society, but they would bear in mind, too, that primary words had primary meanings and consequences, whatever the Society in which they were uttered. H'm! Very sketchy reference to the incident in Fleur's drawing-room—minimised, of course—ha! an allusion to himself—man of property and standing—thank you for nothing! Reading the libellous letters now! Effect of them . . . very made-up, all that! . . . Plaintiff obliged to take action. . . . Bunkum! “I shall now call Mrs. Ralph Ppynrryn.”

“How do you spell that name, Mr. Bullfry?”

“With two p's, two y's, two n's and two r's, my lord.”

“I see.”

Soames looked at the owner of the name. Good-looking woman of the flibberty-gibbet type! He listened to her evidence with close attention. Her account of the incident in Fleur's drawing-room seemed substantially correct. She had received the libellous letter two days later; had thought it her duty, as a friend, to inform Miss Ferrar. Should say, as a woman in Society, that this incident and these letters had done Miss Ferrar harm. Had talked

it over with a good many people. A public incident. Much feeling excited. Had shown her letter to Mrs. Maltese, and been shown one that she had received. Whole matter had become current gossip. H'm!

Bullfry down, and Foskisson up!

Soames adjusted himself. Now to see how the fellow shaped—the manner of a cross-examiner was so important! Well, he had seen worse—the eye, like frozen light, fixed on unoccupied space while the question was being asked, and coming round on to the witness for the answer; the mouth a little open, as if to swallow it; the tongue visible at times on the lower lip, the unoccupied hand clasping something under the gown behind.

“Now, Mrs.—er—Ppynrryn. This incident, as my friend has called it, happened at the house of Mrs. Mont, did it not? And how did you come there? As a friend. Quite so! And you have nothing against Mrs. Mont? No. And you thought it advisable and kind, madam, to show this letter to the plaintiff and to other people—in fact, to foment this little incident to the best of your ability?” Eyes round!

“If a friend of mine received such a letter about me, I should expect her to tell me that the writer was going about abusing me.”

“Even if your friend knew of the provocation and was also a friend of the letter-writer?”

“Yes.”

“Now, madam, wasn't it simply that the sensation of this little quarrel was too precious to be burked? It would have been so easy, wouldn't it, to have torn the letter up and said nothing about it? You don't mean to suggest that it made *you* think any the worse of Miss Ferrar—you knew her too well, didn't you?”

“Ye-es.”

"Exactly. As a friend of both parties you knew that these expressions were just spleen and not to be taken seriously?"

"I can't say that."

"Oh! You regarded them as serious? Am I to take it that you thought they touched the hambone? In other words, that they were true?"

"Certainly not."

"Could they do Miss Ferrar any harm if they were palpably untrue?"

"I think they could."

"Not with you—you were a friend?"

"Not with me."

"But with other people, who would never have heard of them but for you. In fact, madam, you enjoyed the whole thing. Did you?"

"Enjoyed? No."

"You regarded it as your duty to spread this letter? Don't you enjoy doing your duty?"

The dry cackle within Soames stopped at his lips.

Foskisson down, and Bullfry up!

"It is, in fact, your experience, Mrs. Pynrrryn, as well as that of most of us not so well constituted, perhaps, as my learned friend, that duty is sometimes painful."

"Yes."

"Thank you. Mrs. Edward Maltese."

During the examination of this other young woman, who seemed to be dark and solid, Soames tried to estimate the comparative effect produced by Fleur and 'that cat' on the four jurymen whose eyes seemed to stray towards beauty. He had come to no definite conclusion, when Sir James Foskisson rose to cross-examine.

"Tell me, Mrs. Maltese, which do you consider the most serious allegation among those complained of?"

"The word 'treacherous' in my letter, and the expression 'a snake of the first water' in the letter to Mrs. Ppynrryn."

"More serious than the others?"

"Yes."

"That is where you can help me, madam. The circle you move in is not exactly the plaintiff's, perhaps?"

"Not exactly."

"Intersecting, um?"

"Yes."

"Now, in which section, yours or the plaintiff's, would you say the expression 'she hasn't a moral about her' would be the more, or shall we say the less, damning?"

"I can't say."

"I only want your opinion. Do you think your section of Society as advanced as Miss Ferrar's?"

"Perhaps not."

"It's well known, isn't it, that her circle is very free and easy?"

"I suppose so."

"Still, *your* section is pretty advanced—I mean, you're not 'stuffy'?"

"Not what, Sir James?"

"Stuffy, my lord; it's an expression a good deal used in modern Society."

"What does it mean?"

"Strait-laced, my lord."

"I see. Well, he's asking you if you're stuffy?"

"No, my lord. I hope not."

"You hope not. Go on, Sir James."

"Not being stuffy, you wouldn't be exactly worried if somebody said to you: 'My dear, you haven't a moral about you'?"

"Not if it was said as charmingly as that."

"Now come, Mrs. Maltese, does such an expression, said charmingly or the reverse, convey any blame to you or to your friends?"

"If the reverse, yes."

"Am I to take it that the conception of morality in your circle is the same as in—my lord's?"

"How is the witness to answer that, Sir James?"

"Well, in your circle are you shocked when your friends are divorced, or when they go off together for a week in Paris, say, or wherever they find convenient?"

"Shocked? Well, I suppose one needn't be shocked by what one wouldn't do oneself."

"In fact, you're not shocked?"

"I don't know that I'm shocked by anything."

"That would be being stuffy, wouldn't it?"

"Perhaps."

"Well, will you tell me then—if that's the state of mind in your circle; and you said, you know, that your circle is less free and easy than the plaintiff's—how it is possible that such words as 'she hasn't a moral about her' can have done the plaintiff any harm?"

"The whole world isn't in our circles."

"No. I suggest that only a very small portion of the world is in your circles. But do you tell me that you or the plaintiff pay any——?"

"How can she tell, Sir James, what the plaintiff pays?"

"That *you*, then, pay any attention to what people outside your circle think?"

Soames moved his head twice. The fellow was doing it well. And his eye caught Fleur's face turned towards the witness; a little smile was curling her lip.

"I don't personally pay much attention even to what anybody *in* my circle thinks."

"Have you more independence of character than the plaintiff, should you say?"

"I dare say I've got as much."

"Is she notoriously independent?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, Mrs. Maltese."

Foskisson down, Bullfry up!

"I call the plaintiff, my lord."

Soames uncrossed his legs.