

CHAPTER VI

IN THE BOX

MARJORIE FERRAR stepped into the Box, not exactly nervous, and only just 'made-up.' The papers would record a black costume with chinchilla fur and a black hat. She kissed the air in front of the box, took a deep breath, and turned to Mr. Bullfry.

For the last five days she had resented more and more the way this case had taken charge of her. She had initiated it, and it had completely deprived her of initiative. She had, in fact, made the old discovery, that when the machinery of quarrel is once put in motion, much more than pressure of the starting button is required to stop its revolutions. She was feeling that it would serve Alec and the lawyers right if all went wrong.

The voice of Mr. Bullfry, carefully adjusted, soothed her. His questions were familiar, and with each answer her confidence increased, her voice sounded clear and pleasant in her ears. And she stood at ease, making her figure as boyish as she could. Her performance, she felt, was interesting to the judge, the jury, and all those people up there, whom she could dimly see. If only 'that little snob' had not been seated, expressionless, between her and her Counsel! When at length Mr. Bullfry sat down and Sir James Foskisson got up, she almost succumbed to the longing to powder her nose. Clapping the Box, she resisted it, and while he turned his papers, and hitched his gown, the first tremor of the morning passed down

her spine. At least he might look at her when he spoke!

"Have you ever been party to an action before, Miss Ferrar?"

"No."

"You quite understand, don't you, that you are on your oath?"

"Quite."

"You have told my friend that you had no animus against Mrs. Mont. Look at this marked paragraph in 'The Evening Sun' of October 3rd. Did you write that?"

Marjorie Ferrar felt exactly as if she had stepped out of a conservatory into an East wind. Did they know everything, then?

"Yes; I wrote it."

"It ends thus: 'The enterprising little lady is losing no chance of building up her *salon* on the curiosity which ever surrounds any buccaneering in politics.' Is the reference to Mrs. Mont?"

"Yes."

"Not very nice, is it—of a friend?"

"I don't see any harm in it."

"The sort of thing, in fact, you'd like written about yourself?"

"The sort of thing I should expect if I were doing the same thing."

"That's not quite an answer, but let me put it like this: The sort of thing your father would like to read about you, is it?"

"My father would never read that column."

"Then it surprises you to hear that Mrs. Mont's father did? Do you write many of these cheery little paragraphs about your friends?"

"Not many."

"Every now and then, eh? And do they remain your friends?"

"It's not easy in Society to tell who's a friend and who isn't."

"I quite agree, Miss Ferrar. You have admitted making one or two critical—that was your word, I think—remarks concerning Mrs. Mont, in her own house. Do you go to many houses and talk disparagingly of your hostess?"

"No; and in any case I don't expect to be eaves-dropped."

"I see; so long as you're not found out, it's all right, eh? Now, on this first Wednesday in October last, at Mrs. Mont's, in speaking to this gentleman, Mr. Phillip—er—Quinsey, did you use the word 'snob' of your hostess?"

"I don't think so."

"Be careful. You heard the evidence of Mrs. Ppynrryn and Mrs. Maltese. Mrs. Maltese said, you remember, that Mr. Forsyte—that is Mrs. Mont's father—said to you on that occasion: 'You called my daughter a snob in her own house, madam—be so kind as to withdraw; you are a traitress.' Is that a correct version?"

"Probably."

"Do you suggest that he invented the word 'snob'?"

"I suggest he was mistaken."

"Not a nice word, is it—'snob'? Was there any other reason why he should call you a traitress?"

"My remarks weren't meant for his ears. I don't remember exactly what I said."

"Well, we shall have Mr. Forsyte in the box to refresh your memory as to exactly what you said. But I put it to you that you called her a snob, not once but twice, during that little conversation?"

"I've told you I don't remember; he shouldn't have listened."

"Very well! So you feel quite happy about having written that paragraph and said nasty things of Mrs. Mont behind her back in her own drawing-room?"

Marjorie Ferrar grasped the Box till the blood tingled in her palms. His voice was maddening.

"Yet it seems, Miss Ferrar, that you object to others saying nasty things about you in return. Who advised you to bring this action?"

"My father first; and then my *fiancé*."

"Sir Alexander MacGown. Does he move in the same circles as you?"

"No; he moves in Parliamentary circles."

"Exactly; and he wouldn't know, would he, the canons of conduct that rule in your circle?"

"There are no circles so definite as that."

"Always willing to learn, Miss Ferrar. But tell me, do you know what Sir Alexander's Parliamentary friends think about conduct and morality?"

"I can guess. I don't suppose there's much difference."

"Are you suggesting, Miss Ferrar, that responsible public men take the same light-hearted view of conduct and morals as you?"

"Aren't you rather assuming, Sir James, that her view is light-hearted?"

"As to conduct, my lord, I submit that her answers have shown the very light-hearted view she takes of the obligations incurred by the acceptance of hospitality, for instance. I'm coming to morals now."

"I think you'd better, before drawing your conclusions. What have public men to do with it?"

"I'm suggesting, my lord, that this lady is making a great to-do about words which a public man, or any

ordinary citizen, would have a perfect right to resent, but which she, with her views, has no right whatever to resent."

"You must prove her views then. Go on!"

Marjorie Ferrar, relaxed for a moment, gathered herself again. Her views!

"Tell me, Miss Ferrar—we all know now the meaning of the word 'stuffy'—are public men 'stuffer' than you?"

"They may say they are."

"You think them hypocrites?"

"I don't think anything at all about them."

"Though you're going to marry one? You are complaining of the words: 'She hasn't a moral about her.' Have you read this novel 'Canthar'?" He was holding up a book.

"I think so."

"Don't you know?"

"I've skimmed it."

"Taken off the cream, eh? Read it sufficiently to form an opinion?"

"Yes."

"Would you agree with the view of it expressed in this letter to a journal? 'The book breaks through the British "stiffness," which condemns any frank work of art—and a good thing too!' Is it a good thing?"

"Yes. I hate Grundyism."

"'It is undoubtedly Literature.' The word is written with a large L. Should you say it was?"

"Literature—yes. Not great literature, perhaps."

"But it ought to be published?"

"I don't see why not."

"You know that it is not published in England?"

"Yes."

"But it ought to be?"

"It isn't everybody's sort of book, of course."

"Don't evade the question, please. In your opinion ought this novel 'Canthar' to be published in England? . . . Take your time, Miss Ferrar."

The brute lost nothing! Just because she had hesitated a moment trying to see where he was leading her.

"Yes. I think literature should be free."

"You wouldn't sympathise with its suppression, if it were published?"

"No."

"You wouldn't approve of the suppression of any book on the ground of mere morals?"

"I can't tell you unless I see the book. People aren't bound to read books, you know."

"And you think your opinion generally on this subject is that of public men and ordinary citizens?"

"No; I suppose it isn't."

"But your view would be shared by most of your own associates?"

"I should hope so."

"A contrary opinion would be 'stuffy,' wouldn't it?"

"If you like to call it so. It's not my word."

"What is your word, Miss Ferrar?"

"I think I generally say 'ga-ga.'"

"Do you know, I'm afraid the Court will require a little elaboration of that."

"Not for me, Sir James; I'm perfectly familiar with the word; it means 'in your dotage.'"

"The Bench is omniscient, my lord. Then any one, Miss Ferrar, who didn't share the opinion of yourself and your associates in the matter of this book would be 'ga-ga,' that is to say, in his or her dotage?"

"Æsthetically."

"Ah! I thought we should arrive at that word. You, I suppose, don't connect art with life?"

"No."

"Don't think it has any effect on life?"

"It oughtn't to."

"When a man's theme in a book is extreme incontinence, depicted with all due emphasis, that wouldn't have any practical effect on his readers, however young?"

"I can't say about other people, it wouldn't have any effect on me."

"You are emancipated, in fact."

"I don't know what you mean by that."

"Isn't what you are saying about the divorce of art from life the merest claptrap; and don't you know it?"

"I certainly don't."

"Let me put it another way: Is it possible for those who believe in current morality, to hold your view that art has no effect on life?"

"Quite possible; if they are cultured."

"Cultured! Do you believe in current morality yourself?"

"I don't know what you call current morality."

"I will tell you, Miss Ferrar. I should say, for instance, it was current morality that women should not have *liaisons* before they're married, and should not have them after."

"What about men?"

"Thank you; I was coming to men. And that men should at least not have them after."

"I shouldn't say that was *current* morality at all."

In yielding to that satiric impulse she knew at once she had made a mistake—the judge had turned his face towards her. He was speaking.

"Do I understand you to imply that in your view it is

moral for women to have *liaisons* before marriage, and for men and women to have them after ? ”

“ I think it’s current morality, my lord.”

“ I’m not asking you about current morality ; I’m asking whether in *your* view it is moral ? ”

“ I think many people think it’s all right, who don’t say it, yet.”

She was conscious of movement throughout the jury ; and of a little flump in the well of the Court. Sir Alexander had dropped his hat. The sound of a nose being loudly blown broke the stillness ; the face of Bullfry K.C. was lost to her view. She felt the blood mounting in her cheeks.

“ Answer my question, please. Do *you* say it’s all right ? ”

“ I—I think it depends.”

“ On what ? ”

“ On—on circumstances, environment, temperament ; all sorts of things.”

“ Would it be all right for *you* ? ”

Marjorie Ferrar became very still. “ I can’t answer that question, my lord.”

“ You mean—you don’t want to ? ”

“ I mean I don’t know.”

And, with a feeling as if she had withdrawn her foot from a bit of breaking ice, she saw Bullfry’s face re-emerge from his handkerchief.

“ Very well. Go on, Sir James ! ”

“ Anyway, we may take it, Miss Ferrar, that those of us who say we don’t believe in these irregularities are hypocrites in your view ? ”

“ Why can’t you be fair ? ”

He was looking at her now ; and she didn’t like him any the better for it.

"I shall prove myself fair before I've done, Miss Ferrar."

"You've got your work cut out, haven't you?"

"Believe me, madam, it will be better for you not to indulge in witticism. According to you, there is no harm in a book like 'Canthar'?"

"There ought to be none."

"You mean if we were all as æsthetically cultured—as you."—Sneering beast!—"But are we?"

"No."

"Then there is harm. But you wouldn't mind its being done. I don't propose, my lord, to read from this extremely unpleasant novel. Owing apparently to its unsavoury reputation, a copy of it now costs nearly seven pounds. And I venture to think that is in itself an answer to the plaintiff's contention that 'art' so called has no effect on life. We have gone to the considerable expense of buying copies, and I shall ask that during the luncheon interval the jury may read some dozen marked passages."

"Have you a copy for me, Sir James?"

"Yes, my lord."

"And one for Mr. Bullfry? . . . If there is any laughter, I shall have the Court cleared. Go on."

"You know the 'Ne Plus Ultra' Play-Producing Society, Miss Ferrar? It exists to produce advanced plays, I believe."

"Plays—I don't know about 'advanced.'"

"Russian plays, and the Restoration dramatists?"

"Yes."

"And you have played in them?"

"Sometimes."

"Do you remember a play called 'The Plain Dealer,' by Wycherley, given at a matinée on January 7th last—did you play in that the part of Olivia?"

"Yes."

"A nice part?"

"A very good part."

"I said 'nice.'"

"I don't like the word."

"Too suggestive of 'prunes and prisms,' Miss Ferrar? Is it the part of a modest woman?"

"No."

"Is it, towards the end, extremely immodest? I allude to the dark scene."

"I don't know about extremely."

"Anyway, you felt no hesitation about undertaking and playing the part—a little thing like that doesn't worry you?"

"I don't know why it should. If it did, I shouldn't act."

"You don't act for money?"

"No; for pleasure."

"Then, of course, you can refuse any part you like?"

"If I did, I shouldn't have any offered me."

"Don't quibble, please. You took the part of Olivia not for money but for pleasure. You enjoyed playing it?"

"Pretty well."

"I'm afraid I shall have to ask the jury, my lord, to run their eyes over the dark scene in 'The Plain Dealer.'"

"Are you saying, Sir James, that a woman who plays an immoral part is not moral—that would asperse a great many excellent reputations."

"No, my lord; I'm saying that here is a young lady so jealous of her good name in the eyes of the world, that she brings a libel action because some one has said in a private letter that she 'hasn't a moral about her.' And at the same time she is reading and approving books like this 'Canthar,' playing parts like that of Olivia in 'The Plain Dealer,' and, as I submit, living in a section of

Society that really doesn't know the meaning of the word morals, that looks upon morals, in fact, rather as we look upon measles. It's my contention, my lord, that the saying in my client's letter: 'She's hasn't a moral about her,' is rather a compliment to the plaintiff than otherwise."

"Do you mean that it was intended as a compliment?"

"No, no, my lord."

"Well, you want the jury to read that scene. You will have a busy luncheon interval, gentlemen. Go on, Sir James."

"Now, Miss Ferrar—my friend made a point of the fact that you are engaged to a wealthy and highly respected Member of Parliament. How long have you been engaged to him?"

"Six months."

"You have no secrets from him, I suppose?"

"Why should I answer that?"

"Why should she, Sir James?"

"I am quite content to leave it at her reluctance, my lord."

Sneering brute! As if everybody hadn't secrets from everybody!

"Your engagement was not made public till January, was it?"

"No."

"May I take it that you were not sure of your own mind till then?"

"If you like."

"Now, Miss Ferrar, did you bring this action because of your good name? Wasn't it because you were hard up?"

She was conscious again of blood in her cheeks.

"No."

"Were you hard up when you brought it?"

"Yes."

"Very?"

"Not worse than I have been before."

"I put it to you that you owed a great deal of money, and were hard pressed."

"If you like."

"I'm glad you've admitted that, Miss Ferrar; otherwise I should have had to prove it. And you didn't bring this action with a view to paying some of your debts?"

"No."

"Did you in early January become aware that you were not likely to get any sum in settlement of this suit?"

"I believe I was told that an offer was withdrawn."

"And do you know why?"

"Yes, because Mrs. Mont wouldn't give the apology I asked for."

"Exactly! And was it a coincidence that you thereupon made up your mind to marry Sir Alexander Mac-Gown?"

"A coincidence?"

"I mean the announcement of your engagement, you know?"

Brute!

"It had nothing to do with this case."

"Indeed! Now when you brought this action did you really care one straw whether people thought you moral or not?"

"I brought it chiefly because I was called 'a snake.'"

"Please answer my question."

"It isn't so much what *I* cared, as what my friends cared."

"But their view of morality is much what yours is—thoroughly accommodating?"

"Not my *fiancé's*."

" Ah ! no. He doesn't move in your circle, you said. But the rest of your friends. You're not ashamed of your own accommodating philosophy, are you ? "

" No."

" Then why be ashamed of it for them ? "

" How can I tell what *their* philosophy is ? "

" How can she, Sir James ? "

" As your lordship pleases. Now, Miss Ferrar ! You like to stand up for your views, I hope. Let me put your philosophy to you in a nutshell : You believe, don't you, in the full expression of your personality ; it would be your duty, wouldn't it, to break through any convention—I don't say law—but any so-called moral convention that cramped you ? "

" I never said I had a philosophy."

" Don't run away from it, please."

" I'm not in the habit of running away."

" I'm so glad of that. You believe in being the sole judge of your own conduct ? "

" Yes."

" You're not alone in that view, are you ? "

" I shouldn't think so."

" It's the view, in fact, of what may be called the forward wing of modern Society, isn't it—the wing you belong to, and are proud of belonging to ? And in that section of Society—so long as you don't break the actual law—you think and do as you like, eh ? "

" One doesn't always act up to one's principles."

" Quite so. But among your associates, even if you and they don't always act up to it, it is a principle, isn't it, to judge for yourselves and go your own ways without regard to convention ? "

" More or less."

" And, living in that circle, with that belief, you have

the effrontery to think the words : ' She hasn't a moral about her ;' entitles you to damages ? ”

Her voice rang out angrily : “ I have morals. They may not be yours, but they may be just as good, perhaps better. I'm not a hypocrite, anyway.”

Again she saw him look at her, there was a gleam in his eyes ; and she knew she had made another mistake.

“ We'll leave my morals out of the question, Miss Ferrar. But we'll go a little further into what you say are yours. In your own words, it should depend on temperament, circumstances, environment, whether you conform to morality or not ? ”

She stood silent, biting her lip.

“ Answer, please.”

She inclined her head. “ Yes.”

“ Very good ! ” He had paused, turning over his papers, and she drew back in the box. She had lost her temper—had made him lose his ; at all costs she must keep her head now ! In this moment of search for her head she took in everything—expressions, gestures, even the atmosphere—the curious dramatic emanation from a hundred and more still faces ; she noted the one lady jurymen, the judge breaking the nib of a quill, with his eyes turned away from it as if looking at something that had run across the well of the Court. Yes, and down there, the lengthening lip of Mr. Settlewhite, Michael's face turned up at her with a rueful frown, Fleur Mont's mask with red spots in the cheeks, Alec's clenched hands, and his eyes fixed on her. A sort of comic intensity about it all ! If only she were the size of Alice in ' Wonderland,' and could take them all in her hands and shake them like a pack of cards—so motionless, there, at her expense ! That sarcastic brute had finished fiddling with his papers, and she moved forward again to attention in the Box.

"Now, Miss Ferrar, his lordship put a general question to you which you did not feel able to answer. I am going to put it in a way that will be easier for you. Whether or no it was right for you to have one"—she saw Michael's hand go up to his face—"have you *in fact* had a—*liaison*?" And from some tone in his voice, from the look on his face, she could tell for certain that he knew she had.

With her back to the wall, she had not even a wall to her back. Ten, twenty, thirty seconds—judge, jury, that old fox with his hand under the tail of his gown, and his eyes averted! Why did she not spit out the indignant: No! which she had so often rehearsed? Suppose he proved it—as he had said he would prove her debts?

"Take your time, Miss Ferrar. You know what a *liaison* is, of course."

Brute! On the verge of denial, she saw Michael lean across, and heard his whisper: 'Stop this!' And then 'that little snob' looked up at her—the scrutiny was knowing and contemptuous: 'Now hear her lie!' it seemed to say. And she answered, quickly: "I consider your question insulting."

"Oh! come, Miss Ferrar, after your own words! After what——"

"Well! I shan't answer it."

A rustle, a whispering in the Court.

"You won't answer it?"

"No."

"Thank you, Miss Ferrar." Could a voice be more sarcastic?

The brute was sitting down.

Marjorie Ferrar stood defiant, with no ground under her feet. What next? Her counsel was beckoning. She descended from the Box, and, passing her adversaries,

resumed her seat next her betrothed. How red and still he was! She heard the judge say:

“I shall break for lunch now, Mr. Bullfry,” saw him rise and go out, and the jury getting up. The whispering and rustling in the Court swelled to a buzz. She stood up. Mr. Settlewhite was speaking to her.