

CHAPTER VII

' FED UP '

GUIDED by him into a room designed to shelter witnesses, Marjorie Ferrar looked at her lawyer.

"Well?"

"An unfortunate refusal, Miss Ferrar—very. I'm afraid the effect on the jury may be fatal. If we can settle it now, I should certainly say we'd better."

"It's all the same to me."

"In that case you may take it I shall settle. I'll go and see Sir Alexander and Mr. Bullfry at once."

"How do I get out quietly?"

"Down those stairs. You'll find cabs in Lincoln's Inn Fields. Excuse me," he made her a grave little bow and stalked away.

Marjorie Ferrar did not take a cab; she walked. If her last answer had been fatal, on the whole she was content. She had told no lies to speak of, had stood up to 'that sarcastic beast,' and given him sometimes as good as she had got. Alec! Well, she couldn't help it! He had insisted on her going into Court; she hoped he liked it now she'd been! Buying a newspaper, she went into a restaurant and read a description of herself, accompanied by a photograph. She ate a good lunch, and then continued her walk along Piccadilly. Passing into the Park, she sat down under a tree coming into bud, and drew the smoke of a cigarette quietly into her lungs. The Row was almost deserted. A few persons of little or no consequence occu-

pied a few chairs. A riding mistress was teaching a small boy to trot. Some sparrows and a pigeon alone seemed to take a distant interest in her. The air smelled of Spring. She sat some time with the pleasant feeling that nobody in the world knew where she was. Odd, when you thought of it—millions of people every day, leaving their houses, offices, shops, on their way to the next place, were as lost to the world as stones in a pond! Would it be nice to disappear permanently, and taste life incognita? Bertie Curfew was going to Moscow again. Would he take her as secretary, and *bonne amie*? Bertie Curfew—she had only pretended to be tired of him! The thought brought her face to face with the future. Alec! Explanations! It was hardly the word! He had a list of her debts, and had said he would pay them as a wedding-present. But—if there wasn't to be a wedding? Thank God, she had some ready money. The carefully 'laid-up' four-year-old in her father's stable had won yesterday. She had dribbled 'a pony' on at a nice price. She rose and sauntered along, distending her bust—in defiance of the boylike fashion, which, after all, was on the wane—to take in the full of a sweet wind.

Leaving the Park, she came to South Kensington station and bought another paper. It had a full account under the headlines: 'Modern Morality Attacked.' 'Miss Marjorie Ferrar in the Box.' It seemed funny to stand there reading those words among people who were reading the same without knowing her from Eve, except, perhaps, by her clothes. Continuing her progress towards Wren Street, she turned her latch-key in the door, and saw a hat. Waiting for her already! She took her time; and, pale from powder, as though she had gone through much, entered the studio.

MacGown was sitting with his head in his hands. She

felt real pity for him—too strong, too square, too vital for that attitude! He raised his face.

“Well, Alec!”

“Tell me the truth, Marjorie. I’m in torment.”

She almost envied him the depth of his feeling, however unreasonable after her warnings. But she said, ironically:

“Who was it knew me better than I knew myself?”

In the same dull voice he repeated:

“The truth, Marjorie, the truth!”

But why should she go into the confessional? Was he entitled to her past? His rights stopped at her future. It was the old business—men expecting more from women than they could give them. Inequality of the sexes. Something in that, perhaps, in the old days when women bore children, and men didn’t; but now that women knew all about sex and only bore children when they wanted to, and not always even then, why should men be freer?

And she said, slowly: “In exchange for your adventures I’ll tell you mine.”

“For God’s sake don’t mock me; I’ve had hell these last hours.”

His face showed it, and she said with feeling:

“I said you’d be taking a toss over me, Alec. Why on earth did you insist on my bringing this case? You’ve had your way, and now you don’t like it.”

“It’s true, then?”

“Yes. Why not?”

He uttered a groan, recoiling till his back was against the wall, as if afraid of being loose in the room.

“Who was he?”

“Oh! no! That I can’t possibly tell you. And how many affairs have you had?”

He paid no attention. He wouldn’t! He knew she

didn't love him ; and such things only mattered if you loved! Ah! well! His agony was a tribute to her, after all!

"You're well out of me," she said, sullenly ; and, sitting down, she lighted a cigarette. A scene! How hateful! Why didn't he go? She'd rather he'd be violent than deaf and dumb and blind like this.

"Not that American fellow?"

She could not help a laugh.

"Oh! no, poor boy!"

"How long did it last?"

"Nearly a year."

"My God!"

He had rushed to the door. If only he would open it and go! That he could feel so violently! That figure by the door was just not mad! His stuffy passions!

And then he did pull the door open and was gone.

She threw herself at full length on the divan ; not from lassitude, exactly, nor despair—from a feeling rather as if nothing mattered. How stupid and pre-war! Why couldn't he, like her, be free, be supple, take life as it came? Passions, prejudices, principles, pity—old-fashioned as the stuffy clothes worn when she was a tot. Well! Good riddance! Fancy living in the same house, sharing the same bed, with a man so full of the primitive that he could 'go off his chump' with jealousy about her! Fancy living with a man who took life so seriously, that he couldn't even see himself doing it! Life was a cigarette to be inhaled and thrown away, a dance to be danced out. On with that dance! . . . Yes, but she couldn't let him pay her debts, now, even if he wanted to. Married, she would have repaid him with her body ; as it was—no! Oh! why didn't some one die and leave her something? What a bore it all was! And she lay still, listening to the tea-time sounds of a quiet street—taxis rounding the

corner from the river ; the dog next door barking at the postman ; that one-legged man—ex-Service—who came most afternoons and played on a poor fiddle. He expected her shilling—unhappy fellow !—she'd have to get up and give it him. She went to the little side window that looked on to the street, and suddenly recoiled. Francis Wilmot in the doorway with his hand up to the bell ! Another scene ! No, really ! This was too much ! There went the bell ! No time to say ' Not at home ' ! Well, let them all come—round her past, like bees round a honey-pot !

" Mr. Francis Wilmot."

He stood there, large as the life he had nearly resigned—a little thinner, that was all.

" Well, Francis," she said, " I thought you were ' through with that fool business ' ? "

Francis Wilmot came gravely up and took her hand. " I sail to-morrow."

Sail ! Well, she could put up with that. He seemed to her just a thin, pale young man with dark hair and eyes and no juices in his system.

" I read the evening papers. I wondered if, perhaps, you'd wish to see me."

Was he mocking her ? But he wore no smile ; there was no bitterness in his voice ; and, though he was looking at her intently, she could not tell from his face whether he still had any feeling.

" You think I owe you something ? I know I treated you very badly."

He looked rather as if she'd hit him.

" For heaven's sake, Francis, don't say you've come out of chivalry. That'd be too funny."

" I don't follow you ; I just thought, perhaps, you didn't like to answer that question about a love-affair—because of me."

Marjorie Ferrar broke into hysterical laughter.

“Señor Don Punctilio! Because of you? No, no, my dear!”

Francis Wilmot drew back, and made her a little bow.

“I shouldn’t have come,” he said.

She had a sudden return of feeling for that slim unusual presence, with its grace and its dark eyes.

“I’m a free lance again now, Francis, anyway.”

A long moment went by, and then he made her another little bow. It was a clear withdrawal.

“Then for God’s sake,” she said, “go away! I’m fed up!” And she turned her back on him.

When she looked round, he *had* gone, and that surprised her. He was a new variety, or a dead one, dug up! He didn’t know the rudiments of life—old-fashioned, *d faire rire!* And, back at full length on the divan, she brooded. Well, her courage was ‘not out’! To-morrow was Bella Magussie’s ‘At Home,’ to meet—some idiot. Everybody would be there, and so would she!