

CHAPTER XI

OVER THE WINDMILL

DURING his period of indecision Michael struck no attitudes, and used practically no words; the thing was too serious. Perhaps Kit would change Fleur's mood, or she would see other disadvantages, such as her father. The complete cessation, however, of any social behaviour on her part—no invitation issued, or received, no function attended, or even discussed, during that rather terrible week, proved that the iron had really seared her spirit. She was not sulky, but she was mum and listless. And she was always watching him, with a wistful expression on her face, and now and then a resentful look, as if she had made up her mind that he was going to refuse. He could consult no one, too, for to any who had not lived through this long episode, Fleur's attitude would seem incomprehensible, even ridiculous. He could not give her away; could not even go to old Blythe, until he had decided. Complicating his mental conflict was the habitual doubt whether he was really essential to Foggartism. If only his head would swell! He had not even the comfort of feeling that a sturdy negative would impress Fleur; she thought his job a stunt, useful to make him conspicuous, but of no real importance to the country. She had the political cynicism of the woman in the street; only what threatened property or Kit would really ruffle her! He knew that his dilemma was comic. The future of England against the present of a young woman socially

snubbed ! But, after all, only Sir James Foggart and old Blythe so far seriously connected Foggartism with the future of England ; and if, now, he went off round the world, even they would lose their faith.

On the last morning of that week, Michael, still in doubt, crossed Westminster Bridge and sought the heart of the Surrey side. It was unfamiliar, and he walked with interest. Here, he remembered, the Bickets had lived ; the Bickets who had failed, and apparently were failing in Australia, too. Street after mean street ! Breeding-ground of Bickets ! Catch them early, catch them often, catch them before they were Bickets, spoiled for the land ; make them men and women of property, give them air and give them sun—the most decent folk in the world, give them a chance ! Ugly houses, ugly shops, ugly pubs ! No, that wouldn't do ! Keep Beauty out of it ; Beauty never went down in ' the House ' ! No sentiment went down ! At least, only such as was understood—' British stock,' ' Patriotism,' ' Empire,' ' Moral Fibre.' Thews and productive power—stick to the clichés ! He stood listening outside a school to the dull hum of education. The English breed with its pluck and its sense of humour and its patience, all mewed-up in mean streets !

He had a sudden longing for the country. His motorcycle ! Since taking his seat in Parliament he had not been on a machine so inclined to bump his dignity. But he would have it out now, and go for a run—it might shake him into a decision !

Fleur was not in, and no lunch ordered. So he ate some ham, and by two o'clock had started.

With spit and bluster he ran out along the road past Chiswick, Slough, and Maidenhead ; crossed the river and sputtered towards Reading. At Caversham he crossed again, and ran on to Pangbourne. By the towing path he

tipped his machine into some bushes and sat down to smoke a pipe. Quite windless! The river between the bare poplars had a grey, untroubled look; the catkins were forming on the willows. He plucked a twig, and stirred it round the bowl of his pipe before pressing in tobacco. The shaking had done him good; his mind was working freely. The war! One had no hesitations then; but then—one had no Fleur. Besides, that was a clear, a simple issue. But now, beyond this 'to stay or not to stay,' Michel seemed seeing the future of his married life. The decision that he made would affect what might last another fifty years. To put your hand to the plough, and at the first request to take it off again! You might be ploughing crooked, and by twilight; but better plough by dim light than no light; a crooked furrow than none at all! Foggartism was the best course he could see, and he must stick to it! The future of England! A blackbird, close by, chuckled. Quite so! But, as old Blythe said, one must stand up to laughter! Oh! Surely Fleur would see, in the long run that he couldn't play fast and loose; see that if she wanted him to remain in Parliament—and she did—he must hang on to the line he had taken, however it amused the blackbirds. She wouldn't like him to sink to the nonentity of a turntail. For after all she was his wife, and with his self-respect her own was bound up.

He watched the smoke from his pipe, and the low grey clouds, the white-faced Herefords grazing beyond the river, and a man fishing with a worm. He took up the twig and twirled it, admiring the yellowish-grey velvet of its budding catkins. He felt quiet in the heart, at last, but very sorry. How make up to Fleur? Beside this river, not two miles away, he had courted—queer word—if not won her! And now they had come to this snag. Well, it was up to her now, whether or no they should come to

grief on it. And it seemed to him, suddenly, that he would like to tell Old Forsyte. . . .

When he heard the splutter of Michael's motorcycle, Soames was engaged in hanging the Fred Walker he had bought at the emporium next to Messrs. Settlewhite and Stark, memorialising his freedom from the worry of that case, and soothing his itch for the British School. Fred Walker! The fellow was old-fashioned; he and Mason had been succeeded by a dozen movements. But—like old-fiddles, with the same agreeable glow—there they were, very good curiosities such as would always command a price.

Having detached a Courbet, early and about ripe, he was standing in his shirt-sleeves, with a coil of wire in his hand, when Michael entered.

"Where have you sprung from?" he said, surprised.

"I happened to be passing, sir, on my old bike. I see you've kept your word about the English School."

Soames attached the wire.

"I shan't be happy," he said, "till I've got an old Crome—best of the English landscapists."

"Awfully rare, isn't he, old Crome?"

"Yes, that's why I want him."

The smile on Michael's face, as if he were thinking: 'You mean that's why you consider him the best,' was lost on Soames giving the wire a final twist.

"I haven't seen your pictures for a long time, sir. Can I look round?"

Observing him sidelong, Soames remembered his appearance there one summer Sunday, after he had first seen Fleur in that Gallery off Cork Street. Only four years? It seemed an age! The young fellow had worn better than one had hoped; looked a good deal older, too,

less flighty ; an amiable chap, considering his upbringing, and that war ! And suddenly he perceived that Michael was engaged in observing him. Wanted something, no doubt—wouldn't have come down for nothing ! He tried to remember when anybody had come to see him without wanting something ; but could not. It was natural !

"Are you looking for a picture to go with that Fragonard ?" he said "There's a Chardin in the corner."

"No, no, sir ; you've been much too generous to us already."

Generous ! How could one be generous to one's only daughter ?

"How is Fleur ?"

"I wanted to tell you about her. She's feeling awfully restless."

Soames looked out of the window. The Spring was late !

"She oughtn't to be, with that case out of the way."

"That's just it, sir."

Soames gimleted the young man's face. "I don't follow you."

"We're being cold-shouldered."

"How ? You won."

"Yes, but you see, people resent moral superiority."

"What's that ? Who——?" Moral superiority—he resented it himself !

"Foskisson, you know ; we're tarred with his brush. I told you I was afraid of it. It's the being laughed at Fleur feels so bitterly."

"Laughed at ? Who has the impudence——?"

"To attack modern morality was a good stunt, sir, with the judge and the jury, and any one professionally pompous ; but it makes one ridiculous nowadays in Society,

you know, when everybody prides himself on lack of prejudice."

"Society!"

"Yes, sir; but it's what we live in. I don't mind, got used to it over Foggartism; but Fleur's miserable. It's natural, if you think of it—Society's her game."

"She ought to have more strength of mind," said Soames. But he was gravely perturbed. First she'd been looked on as a snob, and now there was this!

"What with that German actor hanging himself at Lippinghall," Michael went on, "and my Foggartism, and this Ferrar rumpus, our pitch is badly queered. We've had a wretched week of it since the case. Fleur feels so out of her plate, that she wants me to take her round the world."

A bomb bursting on the dove-cote down there could not have been more startling. Round the world! He heard Michael murmuring on:

"She's quite right, too. It might be the very best thing for her; but I simply can't leave my job until the long vacation. I've taken up this thing, and I must stick to it while Parliament's sitting."

Sitting! As if it were a hen, adding its precious eggs! Round the world!

But Michael ran on:

"It's only to-day I've quite decided. I should feel like a deserter, and that wouldn't be good for either of us in the long run. But she doesn't know yet."

For Soames the dove-cote was solidifying again, now that he knew Michael was not going to take her away for goodness knew how long!

"Round the world!" he said. "Why not—er—Pont-resina?"

"I think," answered Michael, slowly, like a doctor

diagnosing, "that she wants something dramatic. Round the world at twenty-three! She feels somehow that she's lost caste."

"How can she think of leaving that little chap?"

"Yes, that shows it's pretty desperate with her. I wish to goodness I *could* go."

Soames stared. The young fellow wasn't expecting him to do anything about it, was he? Round the world? A crazy notion!

"I must see her," he said. "Can you leave that thing of yours in the garage and come up with me in the car? I'll be ready in twenty minutes. You'll find tea going down-stairs."

Left alone with the Fred Walker still unhung, Soames gazed at his pictures. He saw them with an added clarity, a more penetrating glance, a sort of ache in his heart, as if—Well! A good lot they were, better than he had thought, of late! *She* had gone in for collecting people! And now she'd lost her collection! Poor little thing! All nonsense, of course—as if there were any satisfaction in people! Suppose he took her up that Chardin? It was a good Chardin. Dumetrius had done him over the price, but not too much. And, before Chardin was finished with, he would do Dumetrius. Still—if it would give her any pleasure! He unhooked the picture, and, carrying it under his arm, went down-stairs.

Beyond certain allusions to the characteristics of the eleventh baronet, and the regrettable tendencies of the police to compel slow travelling over the new cut constructed to speed up traffic, little was said in the car. They arrived in South Square about six o'clock. Fleur had not been in since lunch; and they sat down uneasily to wait for her. The Dandie, having descended to look for strange legs, had almost immediately ascended again,

and the house was very quiet. Michael was continually looking at his watch.

"Where do you think she's got to?" said Soames, at last.

"Haven't an idea, sir; that's the worst of London, it swallows people up."

He had begun to fidget; Soames, who also wanted to fidget, was thinking of saying: "Don't!" when from the window Michael cried:

"Here she is!" and went quickly to the door.

Soames sat on, with the Chardin resting against his chair.

They were a long time out there! Minute after minute passed, and still they did not come.

At last Michael reappeared. He looked exceedingly grave.

"She's in her little room up-stairs, sir. I'm afraid it's upset her awfully. Perhaps you wouldn't mind going up."

Soames grasped the Chardin.

"Let's see, that's the first door on the left, isn't it?" He mounted slowly, his mind blank, and without waiting for her to answer his mild knock, went in.

Fleur was sitting at the satinwood bureau, with her face buried on her arms. Her hair, again in its more natural 'bob,' gleamed lustrously under the light. She seemed unconscious of his entry. This sight of private life affected Soames, unaccustomed to give or receive undefended glimpses of self, and he stood, uncertain. Had he the right to surprise her, with her ears muffled like that, and her feelings all upset? He would have gone out and come in again, but he was too concerned. And, moving to her side, he put his finger on her shoulder, and said:

"Tired, my child?"

Her face came round—queer, creased, not like her face; and Soames spoke the phrase of her childhood:

"See what I've brought you!"

He raised the Chardin; she gave it just a glance, and he felt hurt. After all, it was worth some hundreds of pounds! Very pale, she had crossed her arms on her chest, as if shutting herself up. He recognised the symptom. A spiritual crisis! The sort of thing his whole life had been passed in regarding as extravagant; like a case of appendicitis that will not wait decently.

"Michael," he said, "tells me you want him to take you round the world."

"Well, he can't; so that ends it."

"If she had said: 'Yes, and why can't he?' Soames would have joined the opposition automatically. But her words roused his natural perversity. Here she was, and here was her heart's desire—and she wasn't getting it! He put the Chardin down, and took a walk over the soft carpet.

"Tell me," he said, coming to a halt, "where do you feel it exactly?"

Fleur laughed: "In my head, and my eyes, and my ears, and my heart."

"What business," muttered Soames, "have they to look down their confounded noses!" And he set off again across the room. All the modern jackanapes whom from time to time he had been unable to avoid in her house, seemed to have come sniggering round him with lifted eyebrows, like a set of ghosts. The longing to put them in their places—a shallow lot—possessed him at that moment to the exclusion of a greater sanity.

"I—I don't see how I can take you," he said, and stopped short.

What was that he was saying? Who had asked him to take her? Her eyes, widely open, were fixed on him.

"But of course not, Dad!"

Of course not! He didn't know about that!

"I shall get used to being laughed at, in time."

Soames growled.

"I don't see why you should," he said. "I suppose people do go round the world."

Fleur's pallor had gone, now.

"But not you, dear; why, it would bore you stiff! It's very sweet of you, even to think of it; but of course I couldn't let you—at your age!"

"At my age?" said Soames. "I'm not so very old."

"No, no, Dad; I'll just dree my weird."

Soames took another walk, without a sound. Dree her weird, indeed!

"I won't have it," he ejaculated; "if people can't behave to you, I—I'll show them!"

She had got up, and was breathing deeply, with her lips parted, and her cheeks very flushed. So she had stood, before her first party, holding out her frock for him to see.

"We'll go," he said, gruffly. "Don't make a fuss! That's settled."

Her arms were round his neck; his nose felt wet. What nonsense! as if——! . . .

He stood unbuttoning his braces that night in the most peculiar state of mind. Going round the world—was he? Preposterous! It had knocked that young fellow over anyway—he was to join them in August wherever they were by that time! Good Lord! It might be China! The thing was fantastic; and Fleur behaving like a kitten!

The words of a comic ditty, sung by a clergyman, in his boyhood, kept up a tattoo within him :

“ I see Jerusalem and Madagascar,
And North and South Amerikee. . . . ”

Yes! Indeed! His affairs were in apple-pie order, luckily! There was nothing to do, in Timothy's or Winifred's Trusts—the only two he had on his hands now; but how things would get on without him, he couldn't tell! As to Annette! She wouldn't be sorry, he supposed. There was no one else to care, except Winifred, a little. It was, rather, an intangible presence that troubled his thoughts, about to forsake it for months on end! Still, the cliffs of Dover would be standing, he supposed, and the river still running past his lawn, when he came back, if he ever came back! You picked up all sorts of things out there—microbes, insects, snakes—never knew what you'd run into! Pretty business, steering Fleur clear of all that. And the sightseeing he would have to do! For *she* wouldn't miss anything! Trust her! Going round among a lot of people with their mouths open—he couldn't stand that; but he would have to! H'm! A relief when that young fellow could join them. And yet—to have her to himself; he hadn't, for a long time now. But she would pick up with everybody, of course. He would have to make himself agreeable to Tom, Dick, and Harry. A look at Egypt, then to India, and across to China and Japan, and back through that great sprawling America—God's own country, didn't they call it! She had it all mapped out. Thank goodness, no question of Russia! She hadn't even proposed that—it was all to pieces now, they said! Communism! Who knew what would happen at home before they got back? It seemed to Soames as if England, too, must all go to pieces, if he left it. Well,

he'd said he would take her! And she had cried over it. Phew! He threw the window up, and in the Jaeger dressing-gown, kept there for stray occasions, leaned into the mild air. No Westminster Square did he seem to see out there, but his own river and its poplars, with the full moon behind them, a bright witness—the quiet beauty he had never put into words, the green tranquillity he had felt for thirty years, and only permitted to seep into the back of his being. He would miss it—the scents, the sighs of the river under the wind, the chuckle down at the weir, the stars. They had stars out there, of course, but not English stars. And the grass—those great places had no grass, he believed! The blossom, too, was late this year—no blossom before they left! Well, the milk was spilled! And that reminded him: The dairyman would be certain to let the cows go out of milk—he was a 'natural,' that chap! He would have to warn Annette. Women never seemed to understand that a cow didn't go on giving milk for ever, without being attended to. If he only had a man to rely on in the country, like old Gradman in Town! H'm! Old Gradman's eyes would drop out when he heard this news! Bit of old England there; and wouldn't be left long, now! It would be queer to come back and find old Gradman gone. One—Two—Three—Eleven! That clock! It had kept him awake before now; still—it was a fine old clock! That young fellow was to go on sitting under it. And was there anything in the notions that kept him sitting there, or were they just talk? Well, he was right to stick to his guns, anyway. But five months away from his young wife—great risk in that! 'Youth's a stuff'—Old Shakespeare knew the world. Well! Risk, or no risk, there it was! After all, Fleur had a good head; and young Michael had a good heart. Fleur had a good heart, too; he wouldn't

have it said that she hadn't! She would feel leaving the baby when it came to the point. She didn't realise, yet. And Soames felt within him the stir of a curious conflict, between hope that, after all, she might give it up, and apprehension lest she should. Funny—that! His habits, his comfort, his possessions . . . and here he was, flinging them all over the windmill! Absurd! And yet——!