

CHAPTER XII

ENVOI

AWAY from Fleur five months at least ! Soames' astounding conduct had indeed knocked Michael over. And yet, after all, they had come to a crisis in their life together, the more serious because concerned with workaday feelings. Perhaps out there she would become afflicted, like himself, with an enlarged prospect ; lose her idea that the world consisted of some five thousand people of advanced tastes, of whom she knew at the outside five hundred. It was she who had pushed him into Parliament, and until he was hooped therefrom as a failure, their path was surely conjoined along the crest of a large view. In the fortnight before her departure he suffered and kept smiling ; wryly thankful that she was behaving ' like a kitten,' as her father called it. Her nerves had been on edge ever since the autumn over that wretched case—what more natural than this reaction ? At least she felt for him sufficiently to be prodigal of kisses—great consolation to Michael while it lasted. Once or twice he caught her hanging with wet eyes over the eleventh baronet ; once found her with a wet face when he awoke in the morning. These indications were a priceless assurance to him that she meant to come back. For there were moments when possibilities balled into a nightmare. Absurd ! She was going with her father, that embodiment of care and prudence ! Who would have thought Old Forsyte could uproot himself like this ? He, too, was leaving a wife, though Michael

saw no signs of it. One didn't know much about Old Forsyte's feelings, except that they centred round his daughter, and that he was continually asking questions about labels and insects. He had bought himself, too, a life-saving wais-coat and one for Fleur. Michael held with him only one important conversation.

"I want you," Soames said, "to keep an eye on my wife, and see she doesn't go getting into a mess with the cows. She'll have her mother with her, but women are so funny. You'll find her first-rate with the baby. How will you be off for money?"

"Perfectly all right, sir."

"Well, if you want some for any good purpose, go to old Gradman in the City; you remember him, perhaps?"

"Yes, and I'm afraid he'll remember me."

"Never mind; he's a faithful old fellow." And Michael heard him sigh. "I'd like you to look in at Green Street, too, now and then. Your aunt-in-law may feel my being away a little. I'll let you have news of Fleur from time to time—now they've got this wireless she'll want to know about the baby. I'm taking plenty of quinine. Fleur says she's a good sailor. There's nothing like champagne for that, I'm told. And, by the way, you know best, but I shouldn't press your notions too far in Parliament; they're easily bored there, I believe. We'll meet you at Vancouver, at the end of August. She'll be tired of travelling by then. She's looking forward to Egypt and Japan, but I don't know. Seems to me it'll be all travelling."

"Have you plenty of ducks, sir? You'll want them at this time of year in the Red Sea; and I should take a helmet."

"I've got one," said Soames; "they're heavy great things," and, looking suddenly at Michael, he added:

"I shall look after her, and you'll look after yourself, I hope."

Michael understood him.

"Yes, sir. And thank you very much. I think it's most frightfully sporting of you."

"It's to be hoped it'll do her good; and that the little chap won't miss her."

"Not if I can help it."

Soames, who was seated in front of 'The White Monkey,' seemed to go into a trance. At last he stirred in his chair, and said:

"The war's left everything very unsettled. I suppose people believe in something nowadays, but *I* don't know what it is."

Michael felt a fearful interest.

"Do you mind telling me, sir, what you believe in yourself?"

"What was good enough for my fathers is good enough for me. They expect too much now; there's no interest taken in being alive."

"Interest taken in being alive!" The words were singularly comprehensive. Were they the answer to all modern doubt?

The last night, the last kiss came; and the glum journey to the Docks in Soames' car. Michael alone went to see them off! The gloomy dockside, and the grey river; the bustle with baggage, and the crowded tender. An aching business! Even for her, he almost believed—an aching business. And the long desultory minutes on the ship; the initiation of Soames into its cramped, shining, strangely odoured mysteries. The ghastly smile one had to keep on the lips, the inane jokes one had to make. And then that moment, apart, when she pressed her breast to his and gave him a clinging kiss.

“ Good-bye, Michael ; it’s not for very long.”

“ Good-bye, darling ! Take care of yourself. You shall have all the news I can send you, and don’t worry about Kit.”

His teeth were clinched, and her eyes—he saw—were wet ! And, then, once more :

“ Good-bye ! ”

“ Good-bye ! ”

Back on the tender, with the strip of grey water opening, spreading, between him and the ship’s side, and that high line of faces above the bulwark—Fleur’s face under the small fawn hat, her waving hand ; and, away to the left, seen out of the tail of his eye, Old Forsyte’s face alone—withdrawn so that they might have their parting to themselves—long, chinny, grey-moustached, very motionless ; absorbed and lonely, as might be that of some long-distance bird arrived on an unknown shore, and looking back towards the land of its departure. Smaller and smaller they grew, merged in blur, vanished.

For the whole journey back to Westminster, Michael smoked cigarette on cigarette, and read the same sentence over and over in the same journal, and the sentence was : ‘ Robbery at Highgate, Cat Burglar gets clear away.’

He went straight into the House of Commons. And all the afternoon sat listening and taking in a few words now and then, of a debate on education. What chance—what earthly chance—had his skyscraping in this place, where they still talked with calm disagreement, as if England were the England of 1906, and the verdict on him was : ‘ Amiable but very foolish young man ! ’ National unity—national movement ! No jolly fear ! The country wouldn’t have it ! One was battering at a door which everybody said must be opened, but through which nobody could pass. And a long strip of grey water kept spreading

between him and the talkers ; the face under the fawn hat confused itself with that of the Member for Washbason ; the face of Old Forsyte above the bulwark rail appeared suddenly between two Labour Leaders ; and the lines of faces faded to a blur on a grey river where gulls were fighting.

Going out, he passed a face that had more reality—MacGown's ! Grim ! It wasn't the word. No one had got any change out of that affair. *Multum ex parvo ! Parvum ex multo !* That was the modern comedy !

Going home to have a look at Kit and send Fleur a wireless, he passed four musicians playing four instruments with a sort of fury. They had able bodies in shabby clothes. 'By Jove !' thought Michael, 'I know that chap's face !—surely he was in my Company, in France !' He watched till the cheeks collapsed. Yes ! A good man, too ! But they had all been good men. By George, they had been wonders ! And here they were ! And he within an ace of abandoning them ! Though everybody had his nostrum, and one perhaps was as good as another, still one could only follow what light one had : And if the Future was unreadable, and Fate grinned, well—let it grin !

How empty the house felt ! To-morrow Kit and the dog were to go down to 'The Shelter' in the car, and it would be still emptier. From room after room he tried to retrieve some sight or scent of Fleur. Too painful ! His dressing-room, his study were the only places possible—in them he would abide.

He went to the nursery, and opened the door softly. Whiteness and dimity ; the dog on his fat silver side, the Magicoal fire burning ; the prints on the white walls so carefully selected for the moment when the eleventh baronet should begin to take notice—prints slightly comic, to avoid a moral ; the high and shining fender-guard that

even Magicoal might not be taken too seriously ; the light coming in between bright chintz. A charming room ! The nurse, in blue, was standing with her back to the door, and did not see him. And, in his little high chair, the eleventh baronet was at table ; on his face, beneath its dark chestnut curls, was a slight frown ; and in his tiny hand he held a silver spoon, with which over the bowl before him he was making spasmodic passes.

Michael heard the nurse saying :

“ Now that mother's gone, you must be a little man, Kit, and learn to use your spoon.”

Michael saw his offspring dip at the bowl and throw some of its contents into the air.

“ That's not the way at all.”

The eleventh baronet repeated the performance, and looked for applause, with a determined smile.

“ Naughty ! ”

“ A—a ! ” said the eleventh baronet, plopping the spoon. The contents spurted wastefully.

“ Oh ! you spoiled boy ! ”

“ “ England, my England ! ” ’ thought Michael, ‘ as the poet said.’

THE END