

CHAPTER IV

MERE CONVERSATION

WHEN they came in, Fleur was returning downstairs from showing the young man to his room. Already fully dressed for the evening, she had but little on, and her hair was shingled. . . .

"My dear girl," Michael had said, when shingling came in, "to please me, don't! Your *nuque* will be too bristly for kisses."

"My dear boy," she had answered, "as if one could help it! You're always the same with any new fashion!"

She had been one of the first twelve to shingle, and was just feeling that without care she would miss being one of the first twelve to grow some hair again. Marjorie Ferrar, 'the Pet of the Panjoys,' as Michael called her, already had more than an inch. Somchow, one hated being distanced by Marjorie Ferrar. . . .

Advancing to her father, she said:

"I've asked a young American to stay, Dad; Jon Forsyte has married his sister, out there. You're quite brown, darling. How's mother?"

Soames only gazed at her.

And Fleur passed through one of those shamed moments, when the dumb quality of his love for her seemed accusing the glib quality of her love for him. It was not fair—she felt—that he should look at her like that; as if she had not suffered in that old business with Jon more than he; if she could take it lightly now, surely he could!

As for Michael—not a word!—not even a joke! She bit her lips, shook her shingled head, and passed into the ‘ bimetallic parlour.’

Dinner began with soup and Soames deprecating his own cows for not being Herefords. He supposed that in America they had plenty of Herefords?

Francis Wilmot believed that they were going in for Holsteins now.

“ Holsteins ! ” repeated Soames. “ They’re new since my young days. What’s their colour ? ”

“ Parti-coloured,” said Francis Wilmot. “ The English grass is just wonderful.”

“ Too damp, with us,” said Soames. “ We’re on the river.”

“ The river Thames ? What size will that be, where it hasn’t a tide ? ”

“ Just there—not more than a hundred yards.”

“ Will it have fish ? ”

“ Plenty.”

“ And it’ll run clear—not red ; our Southern rivers have a red colour. And your trees will be willows, and poplars, and elms.”

Soames was a good deal puzzled. He had never been in America. The inhabitants were human, of course, but peculiar and all alike, with more face than feature, heads fastened upright on their backs, and shoulders too square to be real. Their voices clanged in their mouths ; they pronounced the words ‘ very ’ and ‘ America ’ in a way that he had tried to imitate without success ; their dollar was too high, and they all had motor cars ; they despised Europe, came over in great quantities, and took back all they could ; they talked all the time, and were not allowed to drink. This young man cut across all these preconceptions. He drank sherry and only spoke when he was

spoken to. His shoulders looked natural ; he had more feature than face ; and his voice was soft. Perhaps, at least, he despised Europe.

" I suppose," he said, " you find England very small."

" No, sir. I find London very large ; and you certainly have the loveliest kind of a countryside."

Soames looked down one side of his nose. " Pretty enough ! " he said.

Then came turbot and a silence, broken, low down, behind his chair.

" That dog ! " said Soames, impaling a morsel of fish he had set aside as uneatable.

" No, no, Dad ! He just wants to know you've seen him ! "

Soames stretched down a finger, and the Dandie fell on his side.

" He never eats," said Fleur ; " but he has to be noticed."

A small covey of partridges came in, cooked.

" Is there any particular thing you want to see over here, Mr. Wilmot ? " said Michael. " There's nothing very un-American left. You're just too late for Regent Street."

" I want to see the Beefeaters ; and Cruft's Dog Show ; and your blood horses ; and the Derby."

" Darby ! " Soames corrected. " You can't stay for that—it's not till next June."

" My cousin Val will show you race-horses," said Fleur. " He married Jon's sister, you know."

A ' bombe ' appeared. " You have more of this in America, I believe," said Soames.

" We don't have much ice-cream in the South, sir ; but we have special cooking—very tasty."

" I've heard of terrapin."

" Well, I don't get frills like that. I live away back, and have to work pretty hard. My place is kind of

homey ; but I've got some mighty nice darkies that can cook fine—old folk that knew my grannies. The old-time darcy is getting scarce, but he's the real thing."

A Southerner !

Soames had been told that the Southerner was a gentleman. He remembered the 'Alabama,' too ; and his father, James, saying : " I told you so " when the Government ate humble pie over that business.

In the savoury silence that accompanied soft roes on toast, the patter of the Dandie's feet on the parquet floor could be plainly heard.

" This is the only thing he likes," said Fleur. " Dan ! go to your master. Give him a little bit, Michael." And she stole a look at Michael, but he did not answer it.

On their Italian holiday, with Fleur in the throes of novelty, sun and wine warmed, disposed to junketing, amenable to his caresses, he had been having his real honeymoon, enjoying, for the first time since his marriage, a sense of being the chosen companion of his adored. And now had come this stranger, bringing reminder that one played but second fiddle to that young second cousin and first lover ; and he couldn't help feeling the cup withdrawn again from his lips. She had invited this young man because he came from that past of hers whose tune one could not play. And, without looking up, he fed the Dandie with tid-bits of his favourite edible.

Soames broke the silence.

" Take some nutmeg, Mr. Wilmot. Melon without nutmeg——" . . .

When Fleur rose, Soames followed her to the drawing-room ; while Michael led the young American to his study.

" You knew Jon t " said Francis Wilmot.

" No ; I never met him."

“He’s a great little fellow ; and some poet. He’s growing dandy peaches.”

“Is he going on with that, now he’s married ?”

“Surely.”

“Not coming to England ?”

“Not this year. They have a nice home—horses and dogs. They have some hunting there, too. Perhaps he’ll bring my sister over for a trip, next fall.”

“Oh !” said Michael. “And are you staying long, yourself ?”

“Why ! I’ll go back for Christmas. I’d like to see Rome and Seville ; and I want to visit the old home of my people, down in Worcestershire.”

“When did they go over ?”

“William and Mary. Catholics—they were. Is it a nice part, Worcestershire ?”

“Very ; especially in the Spring. It grows a lot of fruit.”

“Oh ! You still grow things in this country ?”

“Not many.”

“I thought that was so, coming on the cars, from Liverpool. I saw a lot of grass and one or two sheep, but I didn’t see anybody working. The people all live in the towns, then ?”

“Except a few unconsidered trifles. You must come down to my father’s ; they still grow a turnip or two thereabouts.”

“It’s sad,” said Francis Wilmot.

“It is. We began to grow wheat again in the war ; but they’ve let it all slip back—and worse.”

“Why was that ?”

Michael shrugged his shoulders : “No accounting for statesmanship. It lets the Land go to blazes when in office ; and beats the drum of it when in opposition. At

the end of the war we had the best air force in the world, and agriculture was well on its way to recovery. And what did they do? Dropped them both like hot potatoes. It was tragic. What do you grow in Carolina?"

"Just cotton, on my place. But it's mighty hard to make cotton pay nowadays. Labour's high."

"High with you, too?"

"Yes, sir. Do they let strangers in to your Parliament?"

"Rather. Would you like to hear the Irish debate? I can get you a seat in the Distinguished Strangers' gallery."

"I thought the English were stiff; but it's wonderful the way you make me feel at home. Is that your father-in-law—the old gentleman?"

"Yes."

"He seems kind of rarefied. Is he a banker?"

"No. But now you mention it—he ought to be."

Francis Wilmot's eyes roved round the room and came to rest on 'The White Monkey.'

"Well, now," he said, softly, "that, surely, is a wonderful picture. Could I get a picture painted by that man, for Jon and my sister?"

"I'm afraid not," said Michael. "You see, he was a Chink—not quite of the best period; but he must have gone West five hundred years ago at least."

"Ah! Well, he had a great sense of animals."

"We think he had a great sense of human beings."

Francis Wilmot stared.

There was something, Michael decided, in this young man unresponsive to satire.

"So you want to see Cruft's Dog Show?" he said. "You're keen on dogs, then?"

"I'll be taking a blood-hound back for Jon, and two for myself. I want to raise blood-hounds."

Michael leaned back, and blew out smoke. To Francis Wilmot, he felt, the world was young, and life running on good tires to some desirable destination. In England——!

“What is it you Americans want out of life?” he said abruptly.

“Well, I suppose you might say we want success—in the North at all events.”

“*We* wanted that in 1824,” said Michael.

“Oh! And nowadays?”

“We’ve had success, and now we’re wondering whether it hasn’t cooked our goose.”

• “Well,” said Francis Wilmot, “we’re sort of thinly populated, compared with you.”

“That’s it,” said Michael. “Every seat here is booked in advance; and a good many sit on their own knees. Will you have another cigar, or shall we join the lady?”