

CHAPTER VIII

ROUND AND ABOUT

GENERAL reticence at breakfast concerning the incident of the night before, made little impression on Soames, because the young American was present, before whom, naturally, one would not discuss it; but he noted that Fleur was pale. In his early-morning vigil legal misgivings had assailed him. Could one call even a red-haired baggage 'traitress' in the hearing of some half-dozen persons with impunity? He went off to his sister Winifred's after breakfast, and told her the whole story.

"Quite right, my dear boy," was her comment. "They tell me that young woman is as fast as they're made. Her father, you know, owned the horse that didn't beat the French horse—I never can remember its name—in that race, the Something Stakes, at—dear me! what was the meeting?"

"I know nothing about racing," said Soames.

But that afternoon at 'The Connoisseurs Club' a card was brought to him:

LORD CHARLES FERRAR

High Marshes,

Nr. Newmarket.

Burton's Club.

For a moment his knees felt a little weak; but the word

'snob' coming to his assistance, he said drily: "Show him into the strangers' room." He was not going to hurry himself for this fellow, and finished his tea before repairing to that forlorn corner.

A tallish man was standing in the middle of the little room, thin and upright, with a moustache brushed arrogantly off his lips, and a single eyeglass which seemed to have grown over the right eye, so unaided was it. There were corrugations in his thin weathered cheeks, and in his thick hair flecked at the sides with grey. Soames had no difficulty in disliking him at sight.

"Mr. Forsyte, I believe?"

Soames inclined his head.

"You made use of an insulting word to my daughter last night in the presence of several people."

"Yes; it was richly deserved."

"You were not drunk, then?"

"Not at all," said Soames.

His dry precision seemed to disconcert the visitor, who twisted his moustache, frowned his eyeglass closer to his eye, and said:

"I have the names of those who overheard it. You will be good enough to write to each of them separately withdrawing your expression unreservedly."

"I shall do nothing of the kind."

A moment's silence ensued.

"You are an attorney, I believe?"

"A solicitor."

"Then you know the consequences of refusal?"

"If your daughter likes to go into Court, I shall be happy to meet her there."

"You refuse to withdraw?"

"Absolutely."

"Good evening, then!"

“ Good evening ! ”

For two pins he would have walked round the fellow, the bristles rising on his back, but, instead, he stood a little to one side to let him out. Insolent brute ! He could so easily hear again the voice of old Uncle Jolyon, characterising some person of the eighties as ‘ a pettifogging little attorney. ’ And he felt that, somehow or other, he must relieve his mind. ‘ Old Mont ’ would know about this fellow—he would go across and ask him.

At ‘ The Aeroplane ’ he found not only Sir Lawrence Mont, looking almost grave, but Michael, who had evidently been detailing to his father last evening’s incident. This was a relief to Soames, who felt the insults to his daughter too bitterly to talk of them. Describing the visit he had just received, he ended with the words :

“ This fellow—Ferrar—what’s his standing ? ”

“ Charlie Ferrar ? He owes money everywhere, has some useful horses, and is a very good shot. ”

“ He didn’t strike me as a gentleman, ” said Soames.

Sir Lawrence cocked his eyebrow, as if debating whether he ought to answer this remark about one who had ancestors, from one who had none.

“ And his daughter, ” said Soames, “ isn’t a lady. ”

Sir Lawrence wagged his head.

“ Single-minded, Forsyte, single-minded ; but you’re right ; there’s a queer streak in that blood. Old Shropshire’s a dear old man ; it skipped his generation, but it’s there—it’s there. His aunt——”

“ He called me an attorney, ” said Soames with a grim smile, “ and she called me a liar. I don’t know which is worse. ”

Sir Lawrence got up and looked into St. James’s Street. Soames had the feeling that the narrow head perched up on that straight thin back counted for more than his

own, in this affair. One was dealing here with people who said and did what they liked and damned the consequences; this baronet chap had been brought up in that way himself, no doubt, he ought to know how their minds worked.

Sir Lawrence turned.

"She may bring an action, Forsyte; it was very public. What evidence have you?"

"My own ears."

Sir Lawrence looked at the ears, as if to gauge their length.

"M'm! Anything else?"

"That paragraph."

"She'll get at the paper. Yes?"

"The man she was talking to."

Michael ejaculated: "Philip Quinsey—put not your trust in Gath!"

"What more?"

"Well," said Soames, "there's what that young American overheard, whatever it was."

"Ah!" said Sir Lawrence: "Take care she doesn't get at *him*. Is that all?"

Soames nodded. It didn't seem much, now he came to think of it!

"You say she called you a liar. How would it be to take the offensive?"

There was a silence; then Soames said: "Women? No!"

"Quite right, Forsyte! They have their privileges still. There's nothing for it but to wait and see how the cat jumps. Traitor! I suppose you know how much the word costs?"

"The cost," said Soames, "is nothing; it's the publicity!"

His imagination was playing streets ahead of him. He saw himself already in 'the box,' retailing the spiteful purrings of that cat, casting forth to the public and the papers the word 'snob,' of his own daughter; for if he didn't, he would have no defence. Too painful!

"What does Fleur say?" he asked, suddenly, of Michael.

"War to the knife."

Soames jumped in his chair.

"Ah!" he said: "That's a woman all over—no imagination!"

"That's what I thought at first, sir, but I'm not so sure. She says if Marjorie Ferrar is not taken by the short hairs, she'll put it across everybody—and that the more public the thing is, the less harm she can do."

"I think," said Sir Lawrence, coming back to his chair, "I'll go and see old Shropshire. My father and his shot woodcock together in Albania in 'fifty-four."

Soames could not see the connection, but did not snub the proposal. A marquess was a sort of gone-off duke; even in this democratic age, he would have some influence, one supposed.

"He's eighty," went on Sir Lawrence, "and gets gout in the stomach, but he's as brisk as a bee."

Soames could not be sure whether it was a comfort.

"The grass shall not grow, Forsyte. I'll go there now."

They parted in the street, Sir Lawrence moving north—towards Mayfair.

The Marquess of Shropshire was dictating to his secretary a letter to his County Council, urging on them an item of his lifelong programme for the electrification of everything. One of the very first to take up electricity, he had remained faithful to it all his brisk and optimistic days. A short, bird-like old man, in shaggy Lovat tweeds,

with a blue tie of knitted silk passed through a ring, bright cheeks and well-trimmed white beard and moustache, he was standing in his favourite attitude, with one foot on a chair, his elbow on his knee, and his chin on his hand.

"Ah! young Mont!" he said: "Sit down."

Sir Lawrence took a chair, crossed his knees, and threaded his finger-tips. He found it pleasing to be called 'young Mont,' at sixty-six or so.

"Have you brought me another of your excellent books?"

"No, Marquess; I've come for your advice."

"Ah! Go on, Mr. Mersey: 'In this way, gentlemen, you will save at least three thousand a year to your rate-payers; confer a blessing on the countryside by abolishing the smoke of four filthy chimneys; and make me your obliged servant,

'SHROPSHIRE.'

Thank you, Mr. Mersey. Now, my dear young Mont?"

Having watched the back of the secretary till it vanished, and the old peer pivot his bright eyes, with their expression of one who means to see more every day, on the face of his visitor, Sir Lawrence took his eyeglass between thumb and finger, and said:

"Your granddaughter, sir, and my daughter-in-law want to fight like billy-o."

"Marjorie?" said the old man, and his head fell to one side like a bird's. "I draw the line—a charming young woman to look at, but I draw the line. What has she done now?"

"Called my daughter-in-law a snob and a lion-hunter; and my daughter-in-law's father has called your granddaughter a traitress to her face."

"Bold man," said the marquess; "bold man! Who is he?"

"His name is Forsyte."

"Forsyte?" repeated the old peer; "Forsyte? The name's familiar—now where would that be? Ah! Forsyte and Treffry—the big tea men. My father had his tea from them direct—real caravan; no such tea now. Is that the——?"

"Some relation, perhaps. This man is a solicitor—retired; chiefly renowned for his pictures. A man of some substance, and probity."

"Indeed! And is his daughter a—a lion-hunter?"

Sir Lawrence smiled.

"She's a charmer. Likes to have people about her. Very pretty. Excellent little mother; some French blood."

"Ah!" said the marquess: "the French! Better built round the middle than our people. What do you want me to do?"

"Speak to your son Charles."

The old man took his foot off the chair, and stood nearly upright. His head moved sideways with a slight continuous motion.

"I never speak to Charlie," he said, gravely. "We haven't spoken for six years."

"I beg your pardon, sir. Didn't know. Sorry to have bothered you."

"No, no; pleasure to see you. If I run across Marjorie, I'll see—I'll see. But, my dear Mont, what shall we do with these young women—no sense of service; no continuity; no hair; no figures? By the way, do you know this Power Scheme on the Severn?" He held up a pamphlet: "I've been at them to do it for years. My Colliery among others could be made to pay with electricity; but they won't move. We want some Americans over here."

Sir Lawrence had risen ; the old man's sense of service had so clearly taken the bit between its teeth again. He held out his hand.

" Good-bye, Marquess ; delighted to see you looking so well."

" Good-bye, my dear young Mont ; command me at any time, and let me have another of your nice books."

They shook hands ; and from the Lovat clothes was disengaged a strong whiff of peat. Sir Lawrence, looking back, saw the old man back in his favourite attitude, foot on chair and chin on hand, already reading the pamphlet. ' Some boy ! ' he thought ; ' as Michael would say. But what has Charlie Ferrar done not to be spoken to for six years ? Old Forsyte ought to know. . . . '

In the meantime ' Old Forsyte ' and Michael were walking homewards across St. James's Park.

" That young American," said Soames ; " what do you suppose made him put his oar in ? "

" I don't know, sir ; and I don't like to ask."

" Exactly," said Soames, glumly. There was, indeed, something repulsive to him in treating with an American over a matter of personal dignity.

" Do they use the word ' snob ' over there ? "

" I'm not sure ; but, in the States to hunt lions is a form of idealism. They want to associate with what they think better than themselves. It's rather fine."

Soames did not agree ; but found difficulty in explaining why. Not to recognise any one as better than himself or his daughter had been a sort of guiding principle, and guiding principles were not talked about. In fact, it was so deep in him that he hadn't known of it.

" I shan't mention it," he said, " unless he does. What more can this young woman do ? She's in a set, I suppose ? "

"The Panjoys——"

"Panjoys!"

"Yes, sir; out for a good time at any cost—they don't really count, of course. But Marjorie Ferrar is frightfully in the limelight. She paints a bit; she's got some standing with the Press; she dances; she hunts; she's something of an actress; she goes everywhere week-ending. It's the week-ends that matter, where people have nothing to do but talk. Were you ever at a week-end party, sir?"

"I?" said Soames: "Good Lord—no!"

Michael smiled—incongruity, indeed, could go no farther.

"We must get one up for you at Lippinghall."

"No, thank you."

"You're right, sir; nothing more boring. But they're the *coulisses* of politics. Fleur thinks they're good for me. And Marjorie Ferrar knows all the people we know, and lots more. It is awkward."

"I should go on as if nothing had happened," said Soames: "But about that paper? They ought to be warned that this woman is venomous."

Michael regarded his father-in-law quizzically.

On entering, they found the man-servant in the hall.

"There's a man to see you, sir, by the name of Bugfill."

"Oh! Ah! Where have you put him, Coaker?"

"Well, I didn't know what to make of him, sir, he shakes all over. I've stood him in the dining-room."

"Excuse me, sir," said Michael.

Soames passed into the 'parlour,' where he found his daughter and Francis Wilmore.

"Mr. Wilmore is leaving us, Father. You're just in time to say good-bye."

If there were moments when Soames felt cordial, they were such as these. He had nothing against the young

man ; indeed, he rather liked the look of him ; but to see the last of almost anybody was in a sense a relief ; besides, there was this question of what he had overheard, and to have him about the place without knowing would be a continual temptation to compromise with one's dignity and ask him what it was.

" Good-bye, Mr. Wilmot," he said ; " if you're interested in pictures—" he paused, and, holding out his hand, added, " you should look in at the British Museum."

Francis Wilmot shook the hand deferentially.

" I will. It's been a privilege to know you, sir."

Soames was wondering why, when the young man turned to Fleur.

" I'll be writing to Jon from Paris, and I'll surely send you love. You've been perfectly wonderful to me. I'll be glad to have you and Michael visit me at any time you come across to the States ; and if you bring the little dog, why—I'll just be honoured to let him bite me again."

He bowed over Fleur's hand, and was gone, leaving Soames staring at the back of his daughter's neck.

" That's rather sudden," he said, when the door was closed ; " anything upset him ? "

She turned on him, and said coldly :

" Why did you make that fuss last night, Father ? "

The injustice of her attack was so palpable, that Soames bit his moustache in silence. As if he could help himself, when she was insulted in his hearing !

" What good do you think you've done ? "

Soames, who had no notion, made no attempt to enlighten her. He only felt sore inside.

" You've made me feel as if I couldn't look anybody in the face. But I'm going to, all the same. If I'm a lion-hunter and a snob, I'll do it thoroughly. Only I do wish

you wouldn't go on thinking I'm a child and can't defend myself."

And still Soames was silent, sore to the soles of his boots.

Fleur flashed a look at him, and said :

"I'm sorry, but I can't help it ; everything's queered ;" and she too went out of the room.

Soames moved blindly to the window and stood looking out. He saw a cab with luggage drive away ; saw some pigeons alight, peck at the pavement, and fly off again ; he saw a man kissing a woman in the dusk ; a policeman light his pipe and go off duty. He saw many human and interesting things ; he heard Big Ben chime. Nothing in it all ! He was staring at a silver spoon. He himself had put it in her mouth at birth.