

SWAN SONG

# SWAN SONG

BY  
JOHN GALSWORTHY

"We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on; and our little life  
Is rounded with a sleep."

—*The Tempest.*

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## PART I





## CHAPTER I

### INITIATION OF THE CANTEEN

IN modern Society, one thing after another, this spice on that, ensures a kind of memoristic vacuum, and Fleur Mont's passage of arms with Marjorie Ferrar was, by the spring of 1926, well-nigh forgotten. Moreover, she gave Society's memory no encouragement, for, after her tour round the world, she was interested in the Empire—a bent so out of fashion as to have all the flavour and excitement of novelty with a sort of impersonality guaranteed.

Colonials, Americans, and Indian students, people whom nobody could suspect of being lions, now encountered each other in the 'bimetallic parlour,' and were found by Fleur 'very interesting,' especially the Indian students, so supple and enigmatic, that she could never tell whether she were 'using' them or they were 'using' her.

Perceiving the extraordinarily uphill nature of Foggartism, she had been looking for a second string to Michael's Parliamentary bow, and, with her knowledge of India, where she had spent six weeks of her tour, she believed that she had found it in the idea of free entrance for the Indians into Kenya. In her talks with these Indian students, she learned that it was impossible to walk in a direction unless you knew what it was. These young men might be complicated and unpractical, meditative and secret, but at least they appeared to be convinced that the molecules in an organism mattered less than the organism itself—that they, in fact, mattered less than India. Fleur, it seemed, had encountered faith—a new and "intriguing" experience. She mentioned the fact to Michael.

"It's all very well," he answered, "but our Indian



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friends didn't live for four years in the trenches, or the fear thereof, for the sake of their faith. If they had, they couldn't possibly have the feeling that it matters as much as they think it does. They might want to, but their feelers would be blunted. That's what the war really did to all of us in Europe who were in the war."

"That doesn't make 'faith' any less interesting," said Fleur, drily.

"Well, my dear, the prophets abuse us for being at loose ends, but can you have faith in a life force so darned extravagant that it makes mincemeat of you by the million? Take it from me, Victorian times fostered a lot of very cheap and easy faith, and our Indian friends are in the same case—their India has lain doggo since the Mutiny, and that was only a surface upheaval. So you needn't take 'em too seriously."

"I don't; but I like the way they believe they're serving India."

And at his smile she frowned, seeing that he thought she was only increasing her collection.

Her father-in-law, who had really made some study of orientalism, lifted his eyebrow over these new acquaintances.

"My oldest friend," he said, on the first of May, "is a judge in India. He's been there forty years. When he'd been there two, he wrote to me that he was beginning to know something about the Indians. When he'd been there ten, he wrote that he knew all about them. I had a letter from him yesterday, and he says that after forty years he knows nothing about them. And they know as little about us. East and West—the circulation of the blood is different."

"Hasn't forty years altered the circulation of your friend's blood?"

"Not a jot," replied Sir Lawrence. "It takes forty

generations. Give me another cup of your nice Turkish coffee, my dear. What does Michael say about the general strike ? ”

“ That the Government won’t budge unless the T.U.C. withdraw the notice unreservedly.”

“ Exactly ! And but for the circulation of English blood there’d be ‘a pretty mess,’ as old Forsyte would say.”

“ Michael’s sympathies are with the miners.”

“ So are mine, young lady. Excellent fellow, the miner—but unfortunately cursed with leaders. The mine-owners are in the same case. Those precious leaders are going to grind the country’s nose before they’ve done. Inconvenient product—coal ; it’s blackened our faces, and now it’s going to black our eyes. Not a merry old soul ! Well, good-bye ! My love to Kit, and tell Michael to keep his head.”

*This was precisely what Michael was trying to do. When ‘the Great War’ broke out, though just old enough to fight, he had been too young to appreciate the fatalism which creeps over human nature with the approach of crisis. He was appreciating it now before ‘the Great Strike,’ together with the peculiar value which the human being attaches to saving face. He noticed that both sides had expressed the intention of meeting the other side in every way, without, of course, making any concessions whatever ; that the slogans, ‘Longer hours, less wages,’ ‘Not a minute more, not a bob off,’ curtsied, and got more and more distant as they neared each other. And now, with the ill-disguised impatience of his somewhat mercurial nature, Michael was watching the sober and tentative approaches of the typical Britons in whose hands any chance of mediation lay. When, on that memorable Monday, not merely the faces of the gentlemen with slogans, but the very faces of the typical Britons, were suddenly confronted with the need for being saved, he knew that all*

was up ; and, returning from the House of Commons at midnight, he looked at his sleeping wife. Should he wake Fleur and tell her that the country was 'for it,' or should he not ? Why spoil her beauty sleep ? She would know soon enough. Besides, she wouldn't take it seriously. Passing into his dressing-room, he stood looking out of the window at the dark square below. A general strike at twelve hours' notice ! 'Some' test of the British character ! The British character ? Suspicion had been dawning on Michael for years that its appearances were deceptive ; that members of Parliament, theatre-goers, trotty little ladies with dresses tight blown about trotty little figures, plethoric generals in armchairs, pettish and petted poets, parsons in pulpits, posters in the street—above all, the Press, were not representative of the national disposition. If the papers were not to come out, one would at least get a chance of feeling and seeing British character ; owing to the papers, one never had seen or felt it clearly during the war, at least not in England. In the trenches, of course, one had—there, sentiment and hate, advertisement and moonshine, had been 'taboo,' and with a grim humour the Briton had just 'carried on,' unornamental and sublime, in the mud and the blood, the stink and the racket, and the endless nightmare of being pitchforked into fire without rhyme or reason ! The Briton's defiant humour that grew better as things grew worse, would—he felt—get its chance again now. And, turning from the window, he undressed and went back into the bedroom.

Fleur was awake.

"Well, Michael ?"

"The strike's on."

"What a bore !"

"Yes ; we shall have to exert ourselves."

"What did they appoint that Commission for, and pay all that subsidy, if not to avoid this?"

"My dear girl, that's mere common-sense—no good at all."

"Why can't they come to an agreement?"

"Because they've got to save face. Saving face is the strongest motive in the world."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, it caused the war; it's causing the strike now; without 'saving face' there'd probably be no life on the earth at all by this time."

"Don't be absurd!"

Michael kissed her.

"I suppose you'll have to do something," she said, sleepily. "There won't be much to talk about in the House while this is on."

"No; we shall sit and glower at each other, and use the word 'formula' at stated intervals."

"I wish we had a Mussolini."

"I don't. You pay for him in the long run. Look at Diaz and Mexico; or Lenin and Russia; or Napoleon and France; or Cromwell and England, for the matter of that."

"Charles the Second," murmured Fleur into her pillow, "was rather a dear."

Michael stayed awake a little, disturbed by the kiss, slept a little, woke again. To save face! No one would make a move because of their faces. For nearly an hour he lay trying to think out a way of saving them all, then fell asleep. He woke at seven with the feeling that he had wasted his time. Under the appearance of concern for the country, and professions of anxiety to find a 'formula,' too many personal feelings, motives, and prejudices were at work. As before the war, there was a profound longing for the humiliation and dejection of the adversary; each wished his face saved at the expense of the other fellow's!

He went out directly after breakfast.

People and cars were streaming in over Westminster Bridge, no 'buses ran, no trams ; but motor lorries, full or empty, rumbled past. Some 'specials' were out already, and emaciated men were selling an emaciated print called 'The British Gazette.' Everybody wore an air of defiant jollity. Michael moved on towards Hyde Park. Over night had sprung up this amazing ordered mish-mash of lorries and cans and tents ! In the midst of all the mental and imaginative lethargy which had produced this national crisis—what a wonderful display of practical and departmental energy ! 'They say we can't organise !' thought Michael ; 'can't we just—*after the event* !'

He went on to a big railway station. It was picketed, but they were running trains already, with volunteer labour. Poking round, he talked here and there among the volunteers. 'By George !' he thought, 'these fellows'll want feeding ! What about a canteen ?' And he returned post haste to South Square.

Fleur was in.

"Will you help me run a railway canteen for volunteers ?" He saw the expression, 'Is that a good stunt ?' rise on her face, and hurried on :

"It'll mean frightfully hard work ; and getting anybody we can to help. I daresay I could rope in Norah Curfew and her gang from Bethnal Green for a start. But it's your quick head that's wanted, and your way with men."

Fleur smiled. "All right," she said.

They took the car—a present from Soames on their return from round the world—and went about, picking people up and dropping them again. They recruited Norah Curfew and 'her gang' in Bethnal Green ; and during this first meeting of Fleur with one whom she had been inclined to suspect as something of a rival, Michael noted how, within five minutes, she had accepted Norah Curfew

as too 'good' to be dangerous. He left them at South Square in conference over culinary details, and set forth to sap the natural opposition of officialdom. It was like cutting barbed wire on a dark night before an 'operation.' He cut a good deal, and went down to the 'House.' Humming with unformulated 'formulas,' it was, on the whole, the least cheerful place he had been in that day. Everyone was talking of the 'menace to the Constitution.' The Government's long face was longer than ever, and nothing—they said—could be done until it had been saved. The expressions 'Freedom of the Press' and 'At the pistol's mouth,' were being used to the point of tautology! He ran across Mr. Blythe brooding in the Lobby on the temporary decease of his beloved Weekly, and took him over to South Square 'for a bite' at nine o'clock. Fleur had come in for the same purpose. According to Mr. Blythe, the solution was to 'form a group' of right-thinking opinion.

"Exactly, Blythe! But what is right-thinking, at 'the present time of speaking'?"

"It all comes back to Foggartism," said Mr. Blythe.

"Oh!" said Fleur, "I do wish you'd both drop that. Nobody will have anything to say to it. You might as well ask the people of to-day to live like St. Francis d'Assisi."

"My dear young lady, suppose St. Francis d'Assisi had said that, we shouldn't be hearing to-day of St. Francis."

"Well, what real effect has he had? He's just a curiosity. All those great spiritual figures are curiosities. Look at Tolstoi now, or Christ, for that matter!"

"Fleur's rather right, Blythe."

"Blasphemy!" said Mr. Blythe.

"I don't know, Blythe; I've been looking at the gutters lately, and I've come to the conclusion that they put a stopper on Foggartism. Watch the children there, and you'll see how attractive gutters are! So long as a child



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can have a gutter, he'll never leave it. And, mind you, gutters are a great civilising influence. We have more gutters here than any other country and more children brought up in them ; and we're the most civilised people in the world. This strike's going to prove that. There'll be less bloodshed and more good humour than there could be anywhere else ; all due to the gutter."

"Renegade !" said Mr. Blythe.

"Well," said Michael, "Foggartism, like all religions, is the over-expression of a home truth. We've been too wholesale, Blythe. What converts have we made ?"

"None," said Mr. Blythe. "But if we can't take children from the gutter, Foggartism is no more."

Michael wriggled ; and Fleur said promptly : "What never was can't be no more. Are you coming with me to see the kitchens, Michael—they've been left in a filthy state. How does one deal with beetles on a large scale ?"

"Get a beetle-man—sort of pied piper, who lures them to their fate."

Arrived on the premises of the canteen-to-be, they were joined by Ruth La Fontaine, of Norah Curfew's 'gang,' and descended to the dark and odorous kitchen. Michael struck a match, and found the switch. Gosh ! In the light, surprised, a brown-black scuttling swarm covered the floor, the walls, the tables. Michael had just sufficient control of his nerves to take in the faces of those three—Fleur's shuddering frown, Mr. Blythe's open mouth, the dark and pretty Ruth La Fontaine's nervous smile. He felt Fleur clutch his arm.

"How *disgusting* !"

The disturbed creatures were finding their holes or had ceased to scuttle ; here and there, a large one, isolated, seemed to watch them.

"Imagine !" cried Fleur. "And food's been cooked here all these years ! Ugh !"

"After all," said Ruth La Fontaine, with a shivery giggle, "they're not so b-bad as b-bugs."

Mr. Blythe puffed hard at his cigar. Fleur muttered :  
"What's to be done, Michael ? "

Her face was pale; she was drawing little shuddering breaths ; and Michael was thinking : 'It's too bad ; I must get her out of this ! ' when suddenly she seized a broom and rushed at a large beetle on the wall. In a minute they were all at it—swabbing and sweeping, and flinging open doors and windows.

## CHAPTER II

### ON THE 'PHONE

WINIFRED DARTIE had not received her 'Morning Post.' Now in her sixty-eighth year, she had not followed too closely the progress of events which led up to the general strike—they were always saying things in the papers, and you never knew what was true ; those Trades Union people, too, were so interfering, that really one had no patience. Besides, the Government always did something in the end. Acting, however, on the advice of her brother Soames, she had filled her cellars with coal and her cupboards with groceries, and by ten o'clock on the second morning of the strike, was seated comfortably at the telephone.

"Is that you, Imogen ? Are you and Jack coming for me this evening ? "

"No, Mother. Jack's sworn in, of course. He has to be on duty at five. Besides, they say the theatres will close. We'll go later. 'Dat Lubly Lady's' sure to run."

"Very well, dear. But what a fuss it all is ! How are the boys ? "

"Awfully fit. They're both going to be little 'specials.' I've made them tiny badges. D'you think the child's department at Harridge's would have toy truncheons ? "

"Sure to, if it goes on. I shall be there to-day ; I'll suggest it. They'd look too sweet, wouldn't they ? Are you all right for coal ? "

"Oh, yes. Jack says we mustn't hoard. He's fearfully patriotic."

"Well, good-bye, dear ! My love to the boys ! "

She had just begun to consider whom she should call up next when the telephone bell rang.