CHAPTER TWO--THE FYNES AND THE GIRL-FRIEND

We were on our feet in the room by then, and Marlow, brown and deliberate, approached the window where Mr. Powell and I had retired. "What was the name of your chance again?" he asked. Mr. Powell stared for a moment.

"Oh! The Ferndale. A Liverpool ship. Composite built."

"Ferndale," repeated Marlow thoughtfully. "Ferndale."

"Know her?"

"Our friend," I said, "knows something of every ship. He seems to have gone about the seas prying into things considerably."

Marlow smiled.

"I've seen her, at least once."

"The finest sea-boat ever launched," declared Mr. Powell sturdily. "Without exception."

"She looked a stout, comfortable ship," assented Marlow. "Uncommonly comfortable. Not very fast tho'."

"She was fast enough for any reasonable man--when I was in her," growled Mr. Powell with his back to us.

"Any ship is that--for a reasonable man," generalized Marlow in a conciliatory tone. "A sailor isn't a globe-trotter."

"No," muttered Mr. Powell.

"Time's nothing to him," advanced Marlow.

"I don't suppose it's much," said Mr. Powell. "All the same a quick passage is a feather in a man's cap."

"True. But that ornament is for the use of the master only. And by the by what was his name?"

"The master of the Ferndale? Anthony. Captain Anthony."

"Just so. Quite right," approved Marlow thoughtfully. Our new acquaintance looked over his shoulder.

"What do you mean? Why is it more right than if it had been Brown?"

"He has known him probably," I explained. "Marlow here appears to know something of every soul that ever went afloat in a sailor's body."

Mr. Powell seemed wonderfully amenable to verbal suggestions for looking again out of the window, he muttered:

"He was a good soul."

This clearly referred to Captain Anthony of the Ferndale. Marlow addressed his protest to me.

"I did not know him. I really didn't. He was a good soul. That's nothing very much out of the way--is it? And I didn't even know that much of him. All I knew of him was an accident called Fyne.

At this Mr. Powell who evidently could be rebellious too turned his back squarely on the window.

"What on earth do you mean?" he asked. "An--accident--called Fyne," he repeated separating the words with emphasis.

Marlow was not disconcerted.

"I don't mean accident in the sense of a mishap. Not in the least. Fyne was a good little man in the Civil Service. By accident I mean that which happens blindly and without intelligent design. That's generally the way a brother-in-law happens into a man's life."

Marlow's tone being apologetic and our new acquaintance having again turned to the window I took it upon myself to say:

"You are justified. There is very little intelligent design in the majority of marriages; but they are none the worse for that. Intelligence leads people astray as far as passion sometimes. I know you are not a cynic."

Marlow smiled his retrospective smile which was kind as though he bore no

grudge against people he used to know.

"Little Fyne's marriage was quite successful. There was no design at all in it. Fyne, you must know, was an enthusiastic pedestrian. He spent his holidays tramping all over our native land. His tastes were simple. He put infinite conviction and perseverance into his holidays. At the proper season you would meet in the fields, Fyne, a serious-faced, broad- chested, little man, with a shabby knap-sack on his back, making for some church steeple. He had a horror of roads. He wrote once a little book called the 'Tramp's Itinerary,' and was recognised as an authority on the footpaths of England. So one year, in his favourite over-the-fields, back-way fashion he entered a pretty Surrey village where he met Miss Anthony. Pure accident, you see. They came to an understanding, across some stile, most likely. Little Fyne held very solemn views as to the destiny of women on this earth, the nature of our sublunary love, the obligations of this transient life and so on. He probably disclosed them to his future wife. Miss Anthony's views of life were very decided too but in a different way. I don't know the story of their wooing. I imagine it was carried on clandestinely and, I am certain, with portentous gravity, at the back of copses, behind hedges . . .

"Why was it carried on clandestinely?" I inquired.

"Because of the lady's father. He was a savage sentimentalist who had his own decided views of his paternal prerogatives. He was a terror; but the only evidence of imaginative faculty about Fyne was his pride in his wife's parentage. It stimulated his ingenuity too. Difficult--is it not?--to introduce one's wife's maiden name into general conversation. But my simple Fyne made use of Captain Anthony for that purpose, or else I would never even have heard of the man. "My wife's sailor-brother" was the phrase. He trotted out the sailor-brother in a pretty wide range of subjects: Indian and colonial affairs, matters of trade, talk of travels, of seaside holidays and so on. Once I remember "My wife's sailor-brother Captain Anthony" being produced in connection with nothing less recondite than a sunset. And little Fyne never failed to add "The son of Carleon Anthony, the poet--you know." He used to lower his voice for that statement, and people were impressed or pretended to be."

The late Carleon Anthony, the poet, sang in his time of the domestic and social amenities of our age with a most felicitous versification, his object being, in his own words, "to glorify the result of six thousand years' evolution towards the refinement of thought, manners and feelings." Why he fixed the term at six thousand years I don't know. His poems read like sentimental novels told in verse of a really superior quality. You felt as if you were being taken out for a delightful country drive by a charming lady in a pony carriage. But in his

domestic life that same Carleon Anthony showed traces of the primitive cave-dweller's temperament. He was a massive, implacable man with a handsome face, arbitrary and exacting with his dependants, but marvellously suave in his manner to admiring strangers. These contrasted displays must have been particularly exasperating to his long-suffering family. After his second wife's death his boy, whom he persisted by a mere whim in educating at home, ran away in conventional style and, as if disgusted with the amenities of civilization, threw himself, figuratively speaking, into the sea. The daughter (the elder of the two children) either from compassion or because women are naturally more enduring, remained in bondage to the poet for several years, till she too seized a chance of escape by throwing herself into the arms, the muscular arms, of the pedestrian Fyne. This was either great luck or great sagacity. A civil servant is, I should imagine, the last human being in the world to preserve those traits of the cave-dweller from which she was fleeing. Her father would never consent to see her after the marriage. Such unforgiving selfishness is difficult to understand unless as a perverse sort of refinement. There were also doubts as to Carleon Anthony's complete sanity for some considerable time before he died.

Most of the above I elicited from Marlow, for all I knew of Carleon Anthony was his unexciting but fascinating verse. Marlow assured me that the Fyne marriage was perfectly successful and even happy, in an earnest, unplayful fashion, being blessed besides by three healthy, active, self- reliant children, all girls. They were all pedestrians too. Even the youngest would wander away for miles if not restrained. Mrs. Fyne had a ruddy out-of-doors complexion and wore blouses with a starched front like a man's shirt, a stand-up collar and a long necktie. Marlow had made their acquaintance one summer in the country, where they were accustomed to take a cottage for the holidays . . .

At this point we were interrupted by Mr. Powell who declared that he must leave us. The tide was on the turn, he announced coming away from the window abruptly. He wanted to be on board his cutter before she swung and of course he would sleep on board. Never slept away from the cutter while on a cruise. He was gone in a moment, unceremoniously, but giving us no offence and leaving behind an impression as though we had known him for a long time. The ingenuous way he had told us of his start in life had something to do with putting him on that footing with us. I gave no thought to seeing him again.

Marlow expressed a confident hope of coming across him before long.

"He cruises about the mouth of the river all the summer. He will be easy to find any week-end," he remarked ringing the bell so that we might settle up with the waiter.

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Later on I asked Marlow why he wished to cultivate this chance acquaintance. He confessed apologetically that it was the commonest sort of curiosity. I flatter myself that I understand all sorts of curiosity. Curiosity about daily facts, about daily things, about daily men. It is the most respectable faculty of the human mind--in fact I cannot conceive the uses of an incurious mind. It would be like a chamber perpetually locked up. But in this particular case Mr. Powell seemed to have given us already a complete insight into his personality such as it was; a personality capable of perception and with a feeling for the vagaries of fate, but essentially simple in itself.

Marlow agreed with me so far. He explained however that his curiosity was not excited by Mr. Powell exclusively. It originated a good way further back in the fact of his accidental acquaintance with the Fynes, in the country. This chance meeting with a man who had sailed with Captain Anthony had revived it. It had revived it to some purpose, to such purpose that to me too was given the knowledge of its origin and of its nature. It was given to me in several stages, at intervals which are not indicated here. On this first occasion I remarked to Marlow with some surprise:

"But, if I remember rightly you said you didn't know Captain Anthony."

"No. I never saw the man. It's years ago now, but I seem to hear solemn little Fyne's deep voice announcing the approaching visit of his wife's brother "the son of the poet, you know." He had just arrived in London from a long voyage, and, directly his occupations permitted, was coming down to stay with his relatives for a few weeks. No doubt we two should find many things to talk about by ourselves in reference to our common calling, added little Fyne portentously in his grave undertones, as if the Mercantile Marine were a secret society.

You must understand that I cultivated the Fynes only in the country, in their holiday time. This was the third year. Of their existence in town I knew no more than may be inferred from analogy. I played chess with Fyne in the late afternoon, and sometimes came over to the cottage early enough to have tea with the whole family at a big round table. They sat about it, an unsmiling, sunburnt company of very few words indeed. Even the children were silent and as if contemptuous of each other and of their elders. Fyne muttered sometimes deep down in his chest some insignificant remark. Mrs. Fyne smiled mechanically (she had splendid teeth) while distributing tea and bread and butter. A something which was not coldness, nor yet indifference, but a sort of peculiar self-possession gave her the appearance of a very trustworthy, very capable and excellent governess; as if Fyne were a widower and the children not her own but

only entrusted to her calm, efficient, unemotional care. One expected her to address Fyne as Mr. When she called him John it surprised one like a shocking familiarity. The atmosphere of that holiday was--if I may put it so--brightly dull. Healthy faces, fair complexions, clear eyes, and never a frank smile in the whole lot, unless perhaps from a girl-friend.

The girl-friend problem exercised me greatly. How and where the Fynes got all these pretty creatures to come and stay with them I can't imagine. I had at first the wild suspicion that they were obtained to amuse Fyne. But I soon discovered that he could hardly tell one from the other, though obviously their presence met with his solemn approval. These girls in fact came for Mrs. Fyne. They treated her with admiring deference. She answered to some need of theirs. They sat at her feet. They were like disciples. It was very curious. Of Fyne they took but scanty notice. As to myself I was made to feel that I did not exist.

After tea we would sit down to chess and then Fyne's everlasting gravity became faintly tinged by an attenuated gleam of something inward which resembled sly satisfaction. Of the divine frivolity of laughter he was only capable over a chess-board. Certain positions of the game struck him as humorous, which nothing else on earth could do . . .

"He used to beat you," I asserted with confidence.

"Yes. He used to beat me," Marlow owned up hastily.

So he and Fyne played two games after tea. The children romped together outside, gravely, unplayfully, as one would expect from Fyne's children, and Mrs. Fyne would be gone to the bottom of the garden with the girl- friend of the week. She always walked off directly after tea with her arm round the girl-friend's waist. Marlow said that there was only one girl-friend with whom he had conversed at all. It had happened quite unexpectedly, long after he had given up all hope of getting into touch with these reserved girl-friends.

One day he saw a woman walking about on the edge of a high quarry, which rose a sheer hundred feet, at least, from the road winding up the hill out of which it had been excavated. He shouted warningly to her from below where he happened to be passing. She was really in considerable danger. At the sound of his voice she started back and retreated out of his sight amongst some young Scotch firs growing near the very brink of the precipice.

"I sat down on a bank of grass," Marlow went on. "She had given me a turn. The hem of her skirt seemed to float over that awful sheer drop, she was so close to the edge. An absurd thing to do. A perfectly mad trick--for no conceivable object!

I was reflecting on the foolhardiness of the average girl and remembering some other instances of the kind, when she came into view walking down the steep curve of the road. She had Mrs. Fyne's walking-stick and was escorted by the Fyne dog. Her dead white face struck me with astonishment, so that I forgot to raise my hat. I just sat and stared. The dog, a vivacious and amiable animal which for some inscrutable reason had bestowed his friendship on my unworthy self, rushed up the bank demonstratively and insinuated himself under my arm.

The girl-friend (it was one of them) went past some way as though she had not seen me, then stopped and called the dog to her several times; but he only nestled closer to my side, and when I tried to push him away developed that remarkable power of internal resistance by which a dog makes himself practically immovable by anything short of a kick. She looked over her shoulder and her arched eyebrows frowned above her blanched face. It was almost a scowl. Then the expression changed. She looked unhappy. "Come here!" she cried once more in an angry and distressed tone. I took off my hat at last, but the dog hanging out his tongue with that cheerfully imbecile expression some dogs know so well how to put on when it suits their purpose, pretended to be deaf.

She cried from the distance desperately.

"Perhaps you will take him to the cottage then. I can't wait."

"I won't be responsible for that dog," I protested getting down the bank and advancing towards her. She looked very hurt, apparently by the desertion of the dog. "But if you let me walk with you he will follow us all right," I suggested.

She moved on without answering me. The dog launched himself suddenly full speed down the road receding from us in a small cloud of dust. It vanished in the distance, and presently we came up with him lying on the grass. He panted in the shade of the hedge with shining eyes but pretended not to see us. We had not exchanged a word so far. The girl by my side gave him a scornful glance in passing.

"He offered to come with me," she remarked bitterly.

"And then abandoned you!" I sympathized. "It looks very unchivalrous. But that's merely his want of tact. I believe he meant to protest against your reckless proceedings. What made you come so near the edge of that quarry? The earth might have given way. Haven't you noticed a smashed fir tree at the bottom? Tumbled over only the other morning after a night's rain."

"I don't see why I shouldn't be as reckless as I please."

I was nettled by her brusque manner of asserting her folly, and I told her that neither did I as far as that went, in a tone which almost suggested that she was welcome to break her neck for all I cared. This was considerably more than I meant, but I don't like rude girls. I had been introduced to her only the day before--at the round tea-table--and she had barely acknowledged the introduction. I had not caught her name but I had noticed her fine, arched eyebrows which, so the physiognomists say, are a sign of courage.

I examined her appearance quietly. Her hair was nearly black, her eyes blue, deeply shaded by long dark eyelashes. She had a little colour now. She looked straight before her; the corner of her lip on my side drooped a little; her chin was fine, somewhat pointed. I went on to say that some regard for others should stand in the way of one's playing with danger. I urged playfully the distress of the poor Fynes in case of accident, if nothing else. I told her that she did not know the bucolic mind. Had she given occasion for a coroner's inquest the verdict would have been suicide, with the implication of unhappy love. They would never be able to understand that she had taken the trouble to climb over two post-and-rail fences only for the fun of being reckless. Indeed even as I talked chaffingly I was greatly struck myself by the fact.

She retorted that once one was dead what horrid people thought of one did not matter. It was said with infinite contempt; but something like a suppressed quaver in the voice made me look at her again. I perceived then that her thick eyelashes were wet. This surprising discovery silenced me as you may guess. She looked unhappy. And--I don't know how to say it--well--it suited her. The clouded brow, the pained mouth, the vague fixed glance! A victim. And this characteristic aspect made her attractive; an individual touch--you know.

The dog had run on ahead and now gazed at us by the side of the Fyne's garden-gate in a tense attitude and wagging his stumpy tail very, very slowly, with an air of concentrated attention. The girl-friend of the Fynes bolted violently through the aforesaid gate and into the cottage leaving me on the road--astounded.

A couple of hours afterwards I returned to the cottage for chess as usual. I saw neither the girl nor Mrs. Fyne then. We had our two games and on parting I warned Fyne that I was called to town on business and might be away for some time. He regretted it very much. His brother-in- law was expected next day but he didn't know whether he was a chess-player. Captain Anthony ("the son of the poet--you know") was of a retiring disposition, shy with strangers, unused to society and very much devoted to his calling, Fyne explained. All the time they had been married he could be induced only once before to come and stay with them for a few days. He had had a rather unhappy boyhood; and it made him a

silent man. But no doubt, concluded Fyne, as if dealing portentously with a mystery, we two sailors should find much to say to one another.

This point was never settled. I was detained in town from week to week till it seemed hardly worth while to go back. But as I had kept on my rooms in the farmhouse I concluded to go down again for a few days.

It was late, deep dusk, when I got out at our little country station. My eyes fell on the unmistakable broad back and the muscular legs in cycling stockings of little Fyne. He passed along the carriages rapidly towards the rear of the train, which presently pulled out and left him solitary at the end of the rustic platform. When he came back to where I waited I perceived that he was much perturbed, so perturbed as to forget the convention of the usual greetings. He only exclaimed Oh! on recognizing me, and stopped irresolute. When I asked him if he had been expecting somebody by that train he didn't seem to know. He stammered disconnectedly. I looked hard at him. To all appearances he was perfectly sober; moreover to suspect Fyne of a lapse from the proprieties high or low, great or small, was absurd. He was also a too serious and deliberate person to go mad suddenly. But as he seemed to have forgotten that he had a tongue in his head I concluded I would leave him to his mystery. To my surprise he followed me out of the station and kept by my side, though I did not encourage him. I did not however repulse his attempts at conversation. He was no longer expecting me, he said. He had given me up. The weather had been uniformly fine--and so on. I gathered also that the son of the poet had curtailed his stay somewhat and gone back to his ship the day before.

That information touched me but little. Believing in heredity in moderation I knew well how sea-life fashions a man outwardly and stamps his soul with the mark of a certain prosaic fitness--because a sailor is not an adventurer. I expressed no regret at missing Captain Anthony and we proceeded in silence till, on approaching the holiday cottage, Fyne suddenly and unexpectedly broke it by the hurried declaration that he would go on with me a little farther.

"Go with you to your door," he mumbled and started forward to the little gate where the shadowy figure of Mrs. Fyne hovered, clearly on the lookout for him. She was alone. The children must have been already in bed and I saw no attending girl-friend shadow near her vague but unmistakable form, half-lost in the obscurity of the little garden.

I heard Fyne exclaim "Nothing" and then Mrs. Fyne's well-trained, responsible voice uttered the words, "It's what I have said," with incisive equanimity. By that time I had passed on, raising my hat. Almost at once Fyne caught me up and slowed down to my strolling gait which must have been infinitely irksome to his

high pedestrian faculties. I am sure that all his muscular person must have suffered from awful physical boredom; but he did not attempt to charm it away by conversation. He preserved a portentous and dreary silence. And I was bored too. Suddenly I perceived the menace of even worse boredom. Yes! He was so silent because he had something to tell me.

I became extremely frightened. But man, reckless animal, is so made that in him curiosity, the paltriest curiosity, will overcome all terrors, every disgust, and even despair itself. To my laconic invitation to come in for a drink he answered by a deep, gravely accented: "Thanks, I will" as though it were a response in church. His face as seen in the lamplight gave me no clue to the character of the impending communication; as indeed from the nature of things it couldn't do, its normal expression being already that of the utmost possible seriousness. It was perfect and immovable; and for a certainty if he had something excruciatingly funny to tell me it would be all the same.

He gazed at me earnestly and delivered himself of some weighty remarks on Mrs. Fyne's desire to befriend, counsel, and guide young girls of all sorts on the path of life. It was a voluntary mission. He approved his wife's action and also her views and principles in general.

All this with a solemn countenance and in deep measured tones. Yet somehow I got an irresistible conviction that he was exasperated by something in particular. In the unworthy hope of being amused by the misfortunes of a fellow-creature I asked him point-blank what was wrong now.

What was wrong was that a girl-friend was missing. She had been missing precisely since six o'clock that morning. The woman who did the work of the cottage saw her going out at that hour, for a walk. The pedestrian Fyne's ideas of a walk were extensive, but the girl did not turn up for lunch, nor yet for tea, nor yet for dinner. She had not turned up by footpath, road or rail. He had been reluctant to make inquiries. It would have set all the village talking. The Fynes had expected her to reappear every moment, till the shades of the night and the silence of slumber had stolen gradually over the wide and peaceful rural landscape commanded by the cottage.

After telling me that much Fyne sat helpless in unconclusive agony. Going to bed was out of the question--neither could any steps be taken just then. What to do with himself he did not know!

I asked him if this was the same young lady I saw a day or two before I went to town? He really could not remember. Was she a girl with dark hair and blue eyes? I asked further. He really couldn't tell what colour her eyes were. He was

very unobservant except as to the peculiarities of footpaths, on which he was an authority.

I thought with amazement and some admiration that Mrs. Fyne's young disciples were to her husband's gravity no more than evanescent shadows. However, with but little hesitation Fyne ventured to affirm that--yes, her hair was of some dark shade.

"We had a good deal to do with that girl first and last," he explained solemnly; then getting up as if moved by a spring he snatched his cap off the table. "She may be back in the cottage," he cried in his bass voice. I followed him out on the road.

It was one of those dewy, clear, starry nights, oppressing our spirit, crushing our pride, by the brilliant evidence of the awful loneliness, of the hopeless obscure insignificance of our globe lost in the splendid revelation of a glittering, soulless universe. I hate such skies. Daylight is friendly to man toiling under a sun which warms his heart; and cloudy soft nights are more kindly to our littleness. I nearly ran back again to my lighted parlour; Fyne fussing in a knicker-bocker suit before the hosts of heaven, on a shadowy earth, about a transient, phantom-like girl, seemed too ridiculous to associate with. On the other hand there was something fascinating in the very absurdity. He cut along in his best pedestrian style and I found myself let in for a spell of severe exercise at eleven o'clock at night.

In the distance over the fields and trees smudging and blotching the vast obscurity, one lighted window of the cottage with the blind up was like a bright beacon kept alight to guide the lost wanderer. Inside, at the table bearing the lamp, we saw Mrs. Fyne sitting with folded arms and not a hair of her head out of place. She looked exactly like a governess who had put the children to bed; and her manner to me was just the neutral manner of a governess. To her husband, too, for that matter.

Fyne told her that I was fully informed. Not a muscle of her ruddy smooth handsome face moved. She had schooled herself into that sort of thing. Having seen two successive wives of the delicate poet chivied and worried into their graves, she had adopted that cool, detached manner to meet her gifted father's outbreaks of selfish temper. It had now become a second nature. I suppose she was always like that; even in the very hour of elopement with Fyne. That transaction when one remembered it in her presence acquired a quaintly marvellous aspect to one's imagination. But somehow her self-possession matched very well little Fyne's invariable solemnity.

I was rather sorry for him. Wasn't he worried! The agony of solemnity. At the same time I was amused. I didn't take a gloomy view of that "vanishing girl" trick. Somehow I couldn't. But I said nothing. None of us said anything. We sat about that big round table as if assembled for a conference and looked at each other in a sort of fatuous consternation. I would have ended by laughing outright if I had not been saved from that impropriety by poor Fyne becoming preposterous.

He began with grave anguish to talk of going to the police in the morning, of printing descriptive bills, of setting people to drag the ponds for miles around. It was extremely gruesome. I murmured something about communicating with the young lady's relatives. It seemed to me a very natural suggestion; but Fyne and his wife exchanged such a significant glance that I felt as though I had made a tactless remark.

But I really wanted to help poor Fyne; and as I could see that, manlike, he suffered from the present inability to act, the passive waiting, I said: "Nothing of this can be done till to-morrow. But as you have given me an insight into the nature of your thoughts I can tell you what may be done at once. We may go and look at the bottom of the old quarry which is on the level of the road, about a mile from here."

The couple made big eyes at this, and then I told them of my meeting with the girl. You may be surprised but I assure you I had not perceived this aspect of it till that very moment. It was like a startling revelation; the past throwing a sinister light on the future. Fyne opened his mouth gravely and as gravely shut it. Nothing more. Mrs. Fyne said, "You had better go," with an air as if her self-possession had been pricked with a pin in some secret place.

And I--you know how stupid I can be at times--I perceived with dismay for the first time that by pandering to Fyne's morbid fancies I had let myself in for some more severe exercise. And wasn't I sorry I spoke! You know how I hate walking--at least on solid, rural earth; for I can walk a ship's deck a whole foggy night through, if necessary, and think little of it. There is some satisfaction too in playing the vagabond in the streets of a big town till the sky pales above the ridges of the roofs. I have done that repeatedly for pleasure--of a sort. But to tramp the slumbering country-side in the dark is for me a wearisome nightmare of exertion.

With perfect detachment Mrs. Fyne watched me go out after her husband. That woman was flint.

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The fresh night had a smell of soil, of turned-up sods like a grave--an association particularly odious to a sailor by its idea of confinement and narrowness; yes, even when he has given up the hope of being buried at sea; about the last hope a sailor gives up consciously after he has been, as it does happen, decoyed by some chance into the toils of the land. A strong grave-like sniff. The ditch by the side of the road must have been freshly dug in front of the cottage.

Once clear of the garden Fyne gathered way like a racing cutter. What was a mile to him--or twenty miles? You think he might have gone shrinkingly on such an errand. But not a bit of it. The force of pedestrian genius I suppose. I raced by his side in a mood of profound self-derision, and infinitely vexed with that minx. Because dead or alive I thought of her as a minx . . ."

I smiled incredulously at Marlow's ferocity; but Marlow pausing with a whimsically retrospective air, never flinched.

"Yes, yes. Even dead. And now you are shocked. You see, you are such a chivalrous masculine beggar. But there is enough of the woman in my nature to free my judgment of women from glamorous reticency. And then, why should I upset myself? A woman is not necessarily either a doll or an angel to me. She is a human being, very much like myself. And I have come across too many dead souls lying so to speak at the foot of high unscaleable places for a merely possible dead body at the bottom of a quarry to strike my sincerity dumb.

The cliff-like face of the quarry looked forbiddingly impressive. I will admit that Fyne and I hung back for a moment before we made a plunge off the road into the bushes growing in a broad space at the foot of the towering limestone wall. These bushes were heavy with dew. There were also concealed mudholes in there. We crept and tumbled and felt about with our hands along the ground. We got wet, scratched, and plastered with mire all over our nether garments. Fyne fell suddenly into a strange cavity--probably a disused lime-kiln. His voice uplifted in grave distress sounded more than usually rich, solemn and profound. This was the comic relief of an absurdly dramatic situation. While hauling him out I permitted myself to laugh aloud at last. Fyne, of course, didn't.

I need not tell you that we found nothing after a most conscientious search. Fyne even pushed his way into a decaying shed half-buried in dew- soaked vegetation. He struck matches, several of them too, as if to make absolutely sure that the vanished girl-friend of his wife was not hiding there. The short flares illuminated his grave, immovable countenance while I let myself go completely and laughed in peals.

I asked him if he really and truly supposed that any sane girl would go and hide

in that shed; and if so why?

Disdainful of my mirth he merely muttered his basso-profundo thankfulness that we had not found her anywhere about there. Having grown extremely sensitive (an effect of irritation) to the tonalities, I may say, of this affair, I felt that it was only an imperfect, reserved, thankfulness, with one eye still on the possibilities of the several ponds in the neighbourhood. And I remember I snorted, I positively snorted, at that poor Fyne.

What really jarred upon me was the rate of his walking. Differences in politics, in ethics and even in aesthetics need not arouse angry antagonism. One's opinion may change; one's tastes may alter--in fact they do. One's very conception of virtue is at the mercy of some felicitous temptation which may be sprung on one any day. All these things are perpetually on the swing. But a temperamental difference, temperament being immutable, is the parent of hate. That's why religious quarrels are the fiercest of all. My temperament, in matters pertaining to solid land, is the temperament of leisurely movement, of deliberate gait. And there was that little Fyne pounding along the road in a most offensive manner; a man wedded to thick-soled, laced boots; whereas my temperament demands thin shoes of the lightest kind. Of course there could never have been question of friendship between us; but under the provocation of having to keep up with his pace I began to dislike him actively. I begged sarcastically to know whether he could tell me if we were engaged in a farce or in a tragedy. I wanted to regulate my feelings which, I told him, were in an unbecoming state of confusion.

But Fyne was as impervious to sarcasm as a turtle. He tramped on, and all he did was to ejaculate twice out of his deep chest, vaguely, doubtfully.

"I am afraid . . . I am afraid! . . . "

This was tragic. The thump of his boots was the only sound in a shadowy world. I kept by his side with a comparatively ghostly, silent tread. By a strange illusion the road appeared to run up against a lot of low stars at no very great distance, but as we advanced new stretches of whitey- brown ribbon seemed to come up from under the black ground. I observed, as we went by, the lamp in my parlour in the farmhouse still burning. But I did not leave Fyne to run in and put it out. The impetus of his pedestrian excellence carried me past in his wake before I could make up my mind.

"Tell me, Fyne," I cried, "you don't think the girl was mad--do you?"

He answered nothing. Soon the lighted beacon-like window of the cottage came into view. Then Fyne uttered a solemn: "Certainly not," with profound assurance.

But immediately after he added a "Very highly strung young person indeed," which unsettled me again. Was it a tragedy?

"Nobody ever got up at six o'clock in the morning to commit suicide," I declared crustily. "It's unheard of! This is a farce."

As a matter of fact it was neither farce nor tragedy.

Coming up to the cottage we had a view of Mrs. Fyne inside still sitting in the strong light at the round table with folded arms. It looked as though she had not moved her very head by as much as an inch since we went away. She was amazing in a sort of unsubtle way; crudely amazing--I thought. Why crudely? I don't know. Perhaps because I saw her then in a crude light. I mean this materially--in the light of an unshaded lamp. Our mental conclusions depend so much on momentary physical sensations--don't they? If the lamp had been shaded I should perhaps have gone home after expressing politely my concern at the Fynes' unpleasant predicament.

Losing a girl-friend in that manner is unpleasant. It is also mysterious. So mysterious that a certain mystery attaches to the people to whom such a thing does happen. Moreover I had never really understood the Fynes; he with his solemnity which extended to the very eating of bread and butter; she with that air of detachment and resolution in breasting the common-place current of their unexciting life, in which the cutting of bread and butter appeared to me, by a long way, the most dangerous episode. Sometimes I amused myself by supposing that to their minds this world of ours must be wearing a perfectly overwhelming aspect, and that their heads contained respectively awfully serious and extremely desperate thoughts--and trying to imagine what an exciting time they must be having of it in the inscrutable depths of their being. This last was difficult to a volatile person (I am sure that to the Fynes I was a volatile person) and the amusement in itself was not very great; but still--in the country--away from all mental stimulants! . . . My efforts had invested them with a sort of amusing profundity.

But when Fyne and I got back into the room, then in the searching, domestic, glare of the lamp, inimical to the play of fancy, I saw these two stripped of every vesture it had amused me to put on them for fun. Queer enough they were. Is there a human being that isn't that--more or less secretly? But whatever their secret, it was manifest to me that it was neither subtle nor profound. They were a good, stupid, earnest couple and very much bothered. They were that--with the usual unshaded crudity of average people. There was nothing in them that the lamplight might not touch without the slightest risk of indiscretion.

Directly we had entered the room Fyne announced the result by saying "Nothing" in the same tone as at the gate on his return from the railway station. And as then Mrs. Fyne uttered an incisive "It's what I've said," which might have been the veriest echo of her words in the garden. We three looked at each other as if on the brink of a disclosure. I don't know whether she was vexed at my presence. It could hardly be called intrusion--could it? Little Fyne began it. It had to go on. We stood before her, plastered with the same mud (Fyne was a sight!), scratched by the same brambles, conscious of the same experience. Yes. Before her. And she looked at us with folded arms, with an extraordinary fulness of assumed responsibility. I addressed her.

"You don't believe in an accident, Mrs. Fyne, do you?"

She shook her head in curt negation while, caked in mud and inexpressibly serious-faced, Fyne seemed to be backing her up with all the weight of his solemn presence. Nothing more absurd could be conceived. It was delicious. And I went on in deferential accents: "Am I to understand then that you entertain the theory of suicide?"

I don't know that I am liable to fits of delirium but by a sudden and alarming aberration while waiting for her answer I became mentally aware of three trained dogs dancing on their hind legs. I don't know why. Perhaps because of the pervading solemnity. There's nothing more solemn on earth than a dance of trained dogs.

"She has chosen to disappear. That's all."

In these words Mrs. Fyne answered me. The aggressive tone was too much for my endurance. In an instant I found myself out of the dance and down on all-fours so to speak, with liberty to bark and bite.

"The devil she has," I cried. "Has chosen to . . . Like this, all at once, anyhow, regardless . . . I've had the privilege of meeting that reckless and brusque young lady and I must say that with her air of an angry victim . . . "

"Precisely," Mrs. Fyne said very unexpectedly like a steel trap going off. I stared at her. How provoking she was! So I went on to finish my tirade. "She struck me at first sight as the most inconsiderate wrong- headed girl that I ever . . . "

"Why should a girl be more considerate than anyone else? More than any man, for instance?" inquired Mrs. Fyne with a still greater assertion of responsibility in her bearing.

Of course I exclaimed at this, not very loudly it is true, but forcibly. Were then the feelings of friends, relations and even of strangers to be disregarded? I asked Mrs. Fyne if she did not think it was a sort of duty to show elementary consideration not only for the natural feelings but even for the prejudices of one's fellow-creatures.

Her answer knocked me over.

"Not for a woman."

Just like that. I confess that I went down flat. And while in that collapsed state I learned the true nature of Mrs. Fyne's feminist doctrine. It was not political, it was not social. It was a knock-me- down doctrine--a practical individualistic doctrine. You would not thank me for expounding it to you at large. Indeed I think that she herself did not enlighten me fully. There must have been things not fit for a man to hear. But shortly, and as far as my bewilderment allowed me to grasp its naive atrociousness, it was something like this: that no consideration, no delicacy, no tenderness, no scruples should stand in the way of a woman (who by the mere fact of her sex was the predestined victim of conditions created by men's selfish passions, their vices and their abominable tyranny) from taking the shortest cut towards securing for herself the easiest possible existence. She had even the right to go out of existence without considering anyone's feelings or convenience since some women's existences were made impossible by the shortsighted baseness of men.

I looked at her, sitting before the lamp at one o'clock in the morning, with her mature, smooth-cheeked face of masculine shape robbed of its freshness by fatigue; at her eyes dimmed by this senseless vigil. I looked also at Fyne; the mud was drying on him; he was obviously tired. The weariness of solemnity. But he preserved an unflinching, endorsing, gravity of expression. Endorsing it all as became a good, convinced husband.

"Oh! I see," I said. "No consideration . . . Well I hope you like it."

They amused me beyond the wildest imaginings of which I was capable. After the first shock, you understand, I recovered very quickly. The order of the world was safe enough. He was a civil servant and she his good and faithful wife. But when it comes to dealing with human beings anything, anything may be expected. So even my astonishment did not last very long. How far she developed and illustrated that conscienceless and austere doctrine to the girl-friends, who were mere transient shadows to her husband, I could not tell. Any length I supposed. And he looked on, acquiesced, approved, just for that very reason--because these pretty girls were but shadows to him. O! Most virtuous Fyne! He cast his eyes

down. He didn't like it. But I eyed him with hidden animosity for he had got me to run after him under somewhat false pretences.

Mrs. Fyne had only smiled at me very expressively, very self-confidently. "Oh I quite understand that you accept the fullest responsibility," I said. "I am the only ridiculous person in this--this--I don't know how to call it--performance. However, I've nothing more to do here, so I'll say good-night--or good morning, for it must be past one."

But before departing, in common decency, I offered to take any wires they might write. My lodgings were nearer the post-office than the cottage and I would send them off the first thing in the morning. I supposed they would wish to communicate, if only as to the disposal of the luggage, with the young lady's relatives . . .

Fyne, he looked rather downcast by then, thanked me and declined.

"There is really no one," he said, very grave.

"No one," I exclaimed.

"Practically," said curt Mrs. Fyne.

And my curiosity was aroused again.

"Ah! I see. An orphan."

Mrs. Fyne looked away weary and sombre, and Fyne said "Yes" impulsively, and then qualified the affirmative by the quaint statement: "To a certain extent."

I became conscious of a languid, exhausted embarrassment, bowed to Mrs. Fyne, and went out of the cottage to be confronted outside its door by the bespangled, cruel revelation of the Immensity of the Universe. The night was not sufficiently advanced for the stars to have paled; and the earth seemed to me more profoundly asleep--perhaps because I was alone now. Not having Fyne with me to set the pace I let myself drift, rather than walk, in the direction of the farmhouse. To drift is the only reposeful sort of motion (ask any ship if it isn't) and therefore consistent with thoughtfulness. And I pondered: How is one an orphan "to a certain extent"?

No amount of solemnity could make such a statement other than bizarre. What a strange condition to be in. Very likely one of the parents only was dead? But no; it couldn't be, since Fyne had said just before that "there was really no one" to

communicate with. No one! And then remembering Mrs. Fyne's snappy "Practically" my thoughts fastened upon that lady as a more tangible object of speculation.

I wondered--and wondering I doubted--whether she really understood herself the theory she had propounded to me. Everything may be said--indeed ought to be said--providing we know how to say it. She probably did not. She was not intelligent enough for that. She had no knowledge of the world. She had got hold of words as a child might get hold of some poisonous pills and play with them for "dear, tiny little marbles." No! The domestic-slave daughter of Carleon Anthony and the little Fyne of the Civil Service (that flower of civilization) were not intelligent people. They were commonplace, earnest, without smiles and without guile. But he had his solemnities and she had her reveries, her lurid, violent, crude reveries. And I thought with some sadness that all these revolts and indignations, all these protests, revulsions of feeling, pangs of suffering and of rage, expressed but the uneasiness of sensual beings trying for their share in the joys of form, colour, sensations--the only riches of our world of senses. A poet may be a simple being but he is bound to be various and full of wiles, ingenious and irritable. I reflected on the variety of ways the ingenuity of the late bard of civilization would be able to invent for the tormenting of his dependants. Poets not being generally foresighted in practical affairs, no vision of consequences would restrain him. Yes. The Fynes were excellent people, but Mrs. Fyne wasn't the daughter of a domestic tyrant for nothing. There were no limits to her revolt. But they were excellent people. It was clear that they must have been extremely good to that girl whose position in the world seemed somewhat difficult, with her face of a victim, her obvious lack of resignation and the bizarre status of orphan "to a certain extent."

Such were my thoughts, but in truth I soon ceased to trouble about all these people. I found that my lamp had gone out leaving behind an awful smell. I fled from it up the stairs and went to bed in the dark. My slumbers--I suppose the one good in pedestrian exercise, confound it, is that it helps our natural callousness--my slumbers were deep, dreamless and refreshing.

My appetite at breakfast was not affected by my ignorance of the facts, motives, events and conclusions. I think that to understand everything is not good for the intellect. A well-stocked intelligence weakens the impulse to action; an overstocked one leads gently to idiocy. But Mrs. Fyne's individualist woman-doctrine, naively unscrupulous, flitted through my mind. The salad of unprincipled notions she put into these girl-friends' heads! Good innocent creature, worthy wife, excellent mother (of the strict governess type), she was as guileless of consequences as any determinist philosopher ever was.

As to honour--you know--it's a very fine medieval inheritance which women never got hold of. It wasn't theirs. Since it may be laid as a general principle that women always get what they want we must suppose they didn't want it. In addition they are devoid of decency. I mean masculine decency. Cautiousness too is foreign to them--the heavy reasonable cautiousness which is our glory. And if they had it they would make of it a thing of passion, so that its own mother--I mean the mother of cautiousness--wouldn't recognize it. Prudence with them is a matter of thrill like the rest of sublunary contrivances. "Sensation at any cost," is their secret device. All the virtues are not enough for them; they want also all the crimes for their own. And why? Because in such completeness there is power--the kind of thrill they love most . . . "

"Do you expect me to agree to all this?" I interrupted.

"No, it isn't necessary," said Marlow, feeling the check to his eloquence but with a great effort at amiability. "You need not even understand it. I continue: with such disposition what prevents women--to use the phrase an old boatswain of my acquaintance applied descriptively to his captain--what prevents them from "coming on deck and playing hell with the ship" generally, is that something in them precise and mysterious, acting both as restraint and as inspiration; their femininity in short which they think they can get rid of by trying hard, but can't, and never will. Therefore we may conclude that, for all their enterprises, the world is and remains safe enough. Feeling, in my character of a lover of peace, soothed by that conclusion I prepared myself to enjoy a fine day.

And it was a fine day; a delicious day, with the horror of the Infinite veiled by the splendid tent of blue; a day innocently bright like a child with a washed face, fresh like an innocent young girl, suave in welcoming one's respects like--like a Roman prelate. I love such days. They are perfection for remaining indoors. And I enjoyed it temperamentally in a chair, my feet up on the sill of the open window, a book in my hands and the murmured harmonies of wind and sun in my heart making an accompaniment to the rhythms of my author. Then looking up from the page I saw outside a pair of grey eyes thatched by ragged yellowy-white eyebrows gazing at me solemnly over the toes of my slippers. There was a grave, furrowed brow surmounting that portentous gaze, a brown tweed cap set far back on the perspiring head.

"Come inside," I cried as heartily as my sinking heart would permit.

After a short but severe scuffle with his dog at the outer door, Fyne entered. I treated him without ceremony and only waved my hand towards a chair. Even before he sat down he gasped out:

"We've heard--midday post."

Gasped out! The grave, immovable Fyne of the Civil Service, gasped! This was enough, you'll admit, to cause me to put my feet to the ground swiftly. That fellow was always making me do things in subtle discord with my meditative temperament. No wonder that I had but a qualified liking for him. I said with just a suspicion of jeering tone:

"Of course. I told you last night on the road that it was a farce we were engaged in."

He made the little parlour resound to its foundations with a note of anger positively sepulchral in its depth of tone. "Farce be hanged! She has bolted with my wife's brother, Captain Anthony." This outburst was followed by complete subsidence. He faltered miserably as he added from force of habit: "The son of the poet, you know."

A silence fell. Fyne's several expressions were so many examples of varied consistency. This was the discomfiture of solemnity. My interest of course was revived.

"But hold on," I said. "They didn't go together. Is it a suspicion or does she actually say that . . . "

"She has gone after him," stated Fyne in comminatory tones. "By previous arrangement. She confesses that much."

He added that it was very shocking. I asked him whether he should have preferred them going off together; and on what ground he based that preference. This was sheer fun for me in regard of the fact that Fyne's too was a runaway match, which even got into the papers in its time, because the late indignant poet had no discretion and sought to avenge this outrage publicly in some absurd way before a bewigged judge. The dejected gesture of little Fyne's hand disarmed my mocking mood. But I could not help expressing my surprise that Mrs. Fyne had not detected at once what was brewing. Women were supposed to have an unerring eye.

He told me that his wife had been very much engaged in a certain work. I had always wondered how she occupied her time. It was in writing. Like her husband she too published a little book. Much later on I came upon it. It had nothing to do with pedestrianism. It was a sort of hand-book for women with grievances (and all women had them), a sort of compendious theory and practice of feminine free morality. It made you laugh at its transparent simplicity. But

that authorship was revealed to me much later. I didn't of course ask Fyne what work his wife was engaged on; but I marvelled to myself at her complete ignorance of the world, of her own sex and of the other kind of sinners. Yet, where could she have got any experience? Her father had kept her strictly cloistered. Marriage with Fyne was certainly a change but only to another kind of claustration. You may tell me that the ordinary powers of observation ought to have been enough. Why, yes! But, then, as she had set up for a guide and teacher, there was nothing surprising for me in the discovery that she was blind. That's quite in order. She was a profoundly innocent person; only it would not have been proper to tell her husband so.