

CHAPTER FIVE--THE TEA-PARTY

"Amiable personality," I observed seeing Fyne on the point of falling into a brown study. But I could not help adding with meaning: "He hadn't the gift of prophecy though."

Fyne got up suddenly with a muttered "No, evidently not." He was gloomy, hesitating. I supposed that he would not wish to play chess that afternoon. This would dispense me from leaving my rooms on a day much too fine to be wasted in walking exercise. And I was disappointed when picking up his cap he intimated to me his hope of seeing me at the cottage about four o'clock--as usual.

"It wouldn't be as usual." I put a particular stress on that remark. He admitted, after a short reflection, that it would not be. No. Not as usual. In fact it was his wife who hoped, rather, for my presence. She had formed a very favourable opinion of my practical sagacity.

This was the first I ever heard of it. I had never suspected that Mrs. Fyne had taken the trouble to distinguish in me the signs of sagacity or folly. The few words we had exchanged last night in the excitement--or the bother--of the girl's disappearance, were the first moderately significant words which had ever passed between us. I had felt myself always to be in Mrs. Fyne's view her husband's chess-player and nothing else--a convenience--almost an implement.

"I am highly flattered," I said. "I have always heard that there are no limits to feminine intuition; and now I am half inclined to believe it is so. But still I fail to see in what way my sagacity, practical or otherwise, can be of any service to Mrs. Fyne. One man's sagacity is very much like any other man's sagacity. And with you at hand--"

Fyne, manifestly not attending to what I was saying, directed straight at me his worried solemn eyes and struck in:

"Yes, yes. Very likely. But you will come--won't you?"

I had made up my mind that no Fyne of either sex would make me walk three miles (there and back to their cottage) on this fine day. If the Fynes had been an average sociable couple one knows only because leisure must be got through somehow, I would have made short work of that special invitation. But they were not that. Their undeniable humanity had to be acknowledged. At the same time I wanted to have my own way. So I proposed that I should be allowed the

pleasure of offering them a cup of tea at my rooms.

A short reflective pause--and Fyne accepted eagerly in his own and his wife's name. A moment after I heard the click of the gate-latch and then in an ecstasy of barking from his demonstrative dog his serious head went past my window on the other side of the hedge, its troubled gaze fixed forward, and the mind inside obviously employed in earnest speculation of an intricate nature. One at least of his wife's girl-friends had become more than a mere shadow for him. I surmised however that it was not of the girl-friend but of his wife that Fyne was thinking. He was an excellent husband.

I prepared myself for the afternoon's hospitalities, calling in the farmer's wife and reviewing with her the resources of the house and the village. She was a helpful woman. But the resources of my sagacity I did not review. Except in the gross material sense of the afternoon tea I made no preparations for Mrs. Fyne.

It was impossible for me to make any such preparations. I could not tell what sort of sustenance she would look for from my sagacity. And as to taking stock of the wares of my mind no one I imagine is anxious to do that sort of thing if it can be avoided. A vaguely grandiose state of mental self-confidence is much too agreeable to be disturbed recklessly by such a delicate investigation. Perhaps if I had had a helpful woman at my elbow, a dear, flattering acute, devoted woman . . . There are in life moments when one positively regrets not being married. No! I don't exaggerate. I have said--moments, not years or even days. Moments. The farmer's wife obviously could not be asked to assist. She could not have been expected to possess the necessary insight and I doubt whether she would have known how to be flattering enough. She was being helpful in her own way, with an extraordinary black bonnet on her head, a good mile off by that time, trying to discover in the village shops a piece of eatable cake. The pluck of women! The optimism of the dear creatures!

And she managed to find something which looked eatable. That's all I know as I had no opportunity to observe the more intimate effects of that comestible. I myself never eat cake, and Mrs. Fyne, when she arrived punctually, brought with her no appetite for cake. She had no appetite for anything. But she had a thirst--the sign of deep, of tormenting emotion. Yes it was emotion, not the brilliant sunshine--more brilliant than warm as is the way of our discreet self-repressed, distinguished, insular sun, which would not turn a real lady scarlet--not on any account. Mrs. Fyne looked even cool. She wore a white skirt and coat; a white hat with a large brim reposed on her smoothly arranged hair. The coat was cut something like an army mess-jacket and the style suited her. I dare say there are many youthful subalterns, and not the worst-looking too, who resemble Mrs. Fyne in the type of face, in the sunburnt complexion, down to that something

alert in bearing. But not many would have had that aspect breathing a readiness to assume any responsibility under Heaven. This is the sort of courage which ripens late in life and of course Mrs. Fyne was of mature years for all her unwrinkled face.

She looked round the room, told me positively that I was very comfortable there; to which I assented, humbly, acknowledging my undeserved good fortune.

"Why undeserved?" she wanted to know.

"I engaged these rooms by letter without asking any questions. It might have been an abominable hole," I explained to her. "I always do things like that. I don't like to be bothered. This is no great proof of sagacity--is it? Sagacious people I believe like to exercise that faculty. I have heard that they can't even help showing it in the veriest trifles. It must be very delightful. But I know nothing of it. I think that I have no sagacity--no practical sagacity."

Fyne made an inarticulate bass murmur of protest. I asked after the children whom I had not seen yet since my return from town. They had been very well. They were always well. Both Fyne and Mrs. Fyne spoke of the rude health of their children as if it were a result of moral excellence; in a peculiar tone which seemed to imply some contempt for people whose children were liable to be unwell at times. One almost felt inclined to apologize for the inquiry. And this annoyed me; unreasonably, I admit, because the assumption of superior merit is not a very exceptional weakness. Anxious to make myself disagreeable by way of retaliation I observed in accents of interested civility that the dear girls must have been wondering at the sudden disappearance of their mother's young friend. Had they been putting any awkward questions about Miss Smith. Wasn't it as Miss Smith that Miss de Barral had been introduced to me?

Mrs. Fyne, staring fixedly but also colouring deeper under her tan, told me that the children had never liked Flora very much. She hadn't the high spirits which endear grown-ups to healthy children, Mrs. Fyne explained unflinchingly. Flora had been staying at the cottage several times before. Mrs. Fyne assured me that she often found it very difficult to have her in the house.

"But what else could we do?" she exclaimed.

That little cry of distress quite genuine in its inexpressiveness, altered my feeling towards Mrs. Fyne. It would have been so easy to have done nothing and to have thought no more about it. My liking for her began while she was trying to tell me of the night she spent by the girl's bedside, the night before her departure with her unprepossessing relative. That Mrs. Fyne found means to comfort the child I

doubt very much. She had not the genius for the task of undoing that which the hate of an infuriated woman had planned so well.

You will tell me perhaps that children's impressions are not durable. That's true enough. But here, child is only a manner of speaking. The girl was within a few days of her sixteenth birthday; she was old enough to be matured by the shock. The very effort she had to make in conveying the impression to Mrs. Fyne, in remembering the details, in finding adequate words--or any words at all--was in itself a terribly enlightening, an ageing process. She had talked a long time, uninterrupted by Mrs. Fyne, childlike enough in her wonder and pain, pausing now and then to interject the pitiful query: "It was cruel of her. Wasn't it cruel, Mrs. Fyne?"

For Charley she found excuses. He at any rate had not said anything, while he had looked very gloomy and miserable. He couldn't have taken part against his aunt--could he? But after all he did, when she called upon him, take "that cruel woman away." He had dragged her out by the arm. She had seen that plainly. She remembered it. That was it! The woman was mad. "Oh! Mrs. Fyne, don't tell me she wasn't mad. If you had only seen her face . . ."

But Mrs. Fyne was unflinching in her idea that as much truth as could be told was due in the way of kindness to the girl, whose fate she feared would be to live exposed to the hardest realities of unprivileged existences. She explained to her that there were in the world evil-minded, selfish people. Unscrupulous people . . . These two persons had been after her father's money. The best thing she could do was to forget all about them.

"After papa's money? I don't understand," poor Flora de Barral had murmured, and lay still as if trying to think it out in the silence and shadows of the room where only a night-light was burning. Then she had a long shivering fit while holding tight the hand of Mrs. Fyne whose patient immobility by the bedside of that brutally murdered childhood did infinite honour to her humanity. That vigil must have been the more trying because I could see very well that at no time did she think the victim particularly charming or sympathetic. It was a manifestation of pure compassion, of compassion in itself, so to speak, not many women would have been capable of displaying with that unflinching steadiness. The shivering fit over, the girl's next words in an outburst of sobs were, "Oh! Mrs. Fyne, am I really such a horrid thing as she has made me out to be?"

"No, no!" protested Mrs. Fyne. "It is your former governess who is horrid and odious. She is a vile woman. I cannot tell you that she was mad but I think she must have been beside herself with rage and full of evil thoughts. You must try not to think of these abominations, my dear child."

They were not fit for anyone to think of much, Mrs. Fyne commented to me in a curt positive tone. All that had been very trying. The girl was like a creature struggling under a net.

"But how can I forget? she called my father a cheat and a swindler! Do tell me Mrs. Fyne that it isn't true. It can't be true. How can it be true?"

She sat up in bed with a sudden wild motion as if to jump out and flee away from the sound of the words which had just passed her own lips. Mrs. Fyne restrained her, soothed her, induced her at last to lay her head on her pillow again, assuring her all the time that nothing this woman had had the cruelty to say deserved to be taken to heart. The girl, exhausted, cried quietly for a time. It may be she had noticed something evasive in Mrs. Fyne's assurances. After a while, without stirring, she whispered brokenly:

"That awful woman told me that all the world would call papa these awful names. Is it possible? Is it possible?"

Mrs. Fyne kept silent.

"Do say something to me, Mrs. Fyne," the daughter of de Barral insisted in the same feeble whisper.

Again Mrs. Fyne assured me that it had been very trying. Terribly trying. "Yes, thanks, I will." She leaned back in the chair with folded arms while I poured another cup of tea for her, and Fyne went out to pacify the dog which, tied up under the porch, had become suddenly very indignant at somebody having the audacity to walk along the lane. Mrs. Fyne stirred her tea for a long time, drank a little, put the cup down and said with that air of accepting all the consequences:

"Silence would have been unfair. I don't think it would have been kind either. I told her that she must be prepared for the world passing a very severe judgment on her father . . ."

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"Wasn't it admirable," cried Marlow interrupting his narrative. "Admirable!" And as I looked dubiously at this unexpected enthusiasm he started justifying it after his own manner.

"I say admirable because it was so characteristic. It was perfect. Nothing short of

genius could have found better. And this was nature! As they say of an artist's work: this was a perfect Fyne. Compassion--judiciousness--something correctly measured. None of your dishevelled sentiment. And right! You must confess that nothing could have been more right. I had a mind to shout "Brava! Brava!" but I did not do that. I took a piece of cake and went out to bribe the Fyne dog into some sort of self-control. His sharp comical yapping was unbearable, like stabs through one's brain, and Fyne's deeply modulated remonstrances abashed the vivacious animal no more than the deep, patient murmur of the sea abashes a nigger minstrel on a popular beach. Fyne was beginning to swear at him in low, sepulchral tones when I appeared. The dog became at once wildly demonstrative, half strangling himself in his collar, his eyes and tongue hanging out in the excess of his incomprehensible affection for me. This was before he caught sight of the cake in my hand. A series of vertical springs high up in the air followed, and then, when he got the cake, he instantly lost his interest in everything else.

Fyne was slightly vexed with me. As kind a master as any dog could wish to have, he yet did not approve of cake being given to dogs. The Fyne dog was supposed to lead a Spartan existence on a diet of repulsive biscuits with an occasional dry, hygienic, bone thrown in. Fyne looked down gloomily at the appeased animal, I too looked at that fool-dog; and (you know how one's memory gets suddenly stimulated) I was reminded visually, with an almost painful distinctness, of the ghostly white face of the girl I saw last accompanied by that dog--deserted by that dog. I almost heard her distressed voice as if on the verge of resentful tears calling to the dog, the unsympathetic dog. Perhaps she had not the power of evoking sympathy, that personal gift of direct appeal to the feelings. I said to Fyne, mistrusting the supine attitude of the dog:

"Why don't you let him come inside?"

Oh dear no! He couldn't think of it! I might indeed have saved my breath, I knew it was one of the Fynes' rules of life, part of their solemnity and responsibility, one of those things that were part of their unassertive but ever present superiority, that their dog must not be allowed in. It was most improper to intrude the dog into the houses of the people they were calling on--if it were only a careless bachelor in farmhouse lodgings and a personal friend of the dog. It was out of the question. But they would let him bark one's sanity away outside one's window. They were strangely consistent in their lack of imaginative sympathy. I didn't insist but simply led the way back to the parlour, hoping that no wayfarer would happen along the lane for the next hour or so to disturb the dog's composure.

Mrs. Fyne seated immovable before the table charged with plates, cups, jugs, a

cold teapot, crumbs, and the general litter of the entertainment turned her head towards us.

"You see, Mr. Marlow," she said in an unexpectedly confidential tone: "they are so utterly unsuited for each other."

At the moment I did not know how to apply this remark. I thought at first of Fyne and the dog. Then I adjusted it to the matter in hand which was neither more nor less than an elopement. Yes, by Jove! It was something very much like an elopement--with certain unusual characteristics of its own which made it in a sense equivocal. With amused wonder I remembered that my sagacity was requisitioned in such a connection. How unexpected! But we never know what tests our gifts may be put to. Sagacity dictated caution first of all. I believe caution to be the first duty of sagacity. Fyne sat down as if preparing himself to witness a joust, I thought.

"Do you think so, Mrs. Fyne?" I said sagaciously. "Of course you are in a position . . ." I was continuing with caution when she struck out vivaciously for immediate assent.

"Obviously! Clearly! You yourself must admit . . ."

"But, Mrs. Fyne," I remonstrated, "you forget that I don't know your brother."

This argument which was not only sagacious but true, overwhelmingly true, unanswerably true, seemed to surprise her.

I wondered why. I did not know enough of her brother for the remotest guess at what he might be like. I had never set eyes on the man. I didn't know him so completely that by contrast I seemed to have known Miss de Barral--whom I had seen twice (altogether about sixty minutes) and with whom I had exchanged about sixty words--from the cradle so to speak. And perhaps, I thought, looking down at Mrs. Fyne (I had remained standing) perhaps she thinks that this ought to be enough for a sagacious assent.

She kept silent; and I looking at her with polite expectation, went on addressing her mentally in a mood of familiar approval which would have astonished her had it been audible: You my dear at any rate are a sincere woman . . ."

"I call a woman sincere," Marlow began again after giving me a cigar and lighting one himself, "I call a woman sincere when she volunteers a statement resembling remotely in form what she really would like to say, what she really thinks ought to be said if it were not for the necessity to spare the stupid sensitiveness of men."

The women's rougher, simpler, more upright judgment, embraces the whole truth, which their tact, their mistrust of masculine idealism, ever prevents them from speaking in its entirety. And their tact is unerring. We could not stand women speaking the truth. We could not bear it. It would cause infinite misery and bring about most awful disturbances in this rather mediocre, but still idealistic fool's paradise in which each of us lives his own little life--the unit in the great sum of existence. And they know it. They are merciful. This generalization does not apply exactly to Mrs. Fyne's outburst of sincerity in a matter in which neither my affections nor my vanity were engaged. That's why, may be, she ventured so far. For a woman she chose to be as open as the day with me. There was not only the form but almost the whole substance of her thought in what she said. She believed she could risk it. She had reasoned somewhat in this way; there's a man, possessing a certain amount of sagacity . . . "

Marlow paused with a whimsical look at me. The last few words he had spoken with the cigar in his teeth. He took it out now by an ample movement of his arm and blew a thin cloud.

"You smile? It would have been more kind to spare my blushes. But as a matter of fact I need not blush. This is not vanity; it is analysis. We'll let sagacity stand. But we must also note what sagacity in this connection stands for. When you see this you shall see also that there was nothing in it to alarm my modesty. I don't think Mrs. Fyne credited me with the possession of wisdom tempered by common sense. And had I had the wisdom of the Seven Sages of Antiquity, she would not have been moved to confidence or admiration. The secret scorn of women for the capacity to consider judiciously and to express profoundly a meditated conclusion is unbounded. They have no use for these lofty exercises which they look upon as a sort of purely masculine game--game meaning a respectable occupation devised to kill time in this man-arranged life which must be got through somehow. What women's acuteness really respects are the inept "ideas" and the sheeplike impulses by which our actions and opinions are determined in matters of real importance. For if women are not rational they are indeed acute. Even Mrs. Fyne was acute. The good woman was making up to her husband's chess-player simply because she had scented in him that small portion of 'femininity,' that drop of superior essence of which I am myself aware; which, I gratefully acknowledge, has saved me from one or two misadventures in my life either ridiculous or lamentable, I am not very certain which. It matters very little. Anyhow misadventures. Observe that I say 'femininity,' a privilege--not 'feminism,' an attitude. I am not a feminist. It was Fyne who on certain solemn grounds had adopted that mental attitude; but it was enough to glance at him sitting on one side, to see that he was purely masculine to his finger-tips, masculine solidly, densely, amusingly,--hopelessly.

I did glance at him. You don't get your sagacity recognized by a man's wife without feeling the propriety and even the need to glance at the man now and again. So I glanced at him. Very masculine. So much so that "hopelessly" was not the last word of it. He was helpless. He was bound and delivered by it. And if by the obscure promptings of my composite temperament I beheld him with malicious amusement, yet being in fact, by definition and especially from profound conviction, a man, I could not help sympathizing with him largely. Seeing him thus disarmed, so completely captive by the very nature of things I was moved to speak to him kindly.

"Well. And what do you think of it?"

"I don't know. How's one to tell? But I say that the thing is done now and there's an end of it," said the masculine creature as bluntly as his innate solemnity permitted.

Mrs. Fyne moved a little in her chair. I turned to her and remarked gently that this was a charge, a criticism, which was often made. Some people always ask: What could he see in her? Others wonder what she could have seen in him? Expressions of unsuitability.

She said with all the emphasis of her quietly folded arms:

"I know perfectly well what Flora has seen in my brother."

I bowed my head to the gust but pursued my point.

"And then the marriage in most cases turns out no worse than the average, to say the least of it."

Mrs. Fyne was disappointed by the optimistic turn of my sagacity. She rested her eyes on my face as though in doubt whether I had enough femininity in my composition to understand the case.

I waited for her to speak. She seemed to be asking herself; Is it after all, worth while to talk to that man? You understand how provoking this was. I looked in my mind for something appallingly stupid to say, with the object of distressing and teasing Mrs. Fyne. It is humiliating to confess a failure. One would think that a man of average intelligence could command stupidity at will. But it isn't so. I suppose it's a special gift or else the difficulty consists in being relevant. Discovering that I could find no really telling stupidity, I turned to the next best thing; a platitude. I advanced, in a common-sense tone, that, surely, in the

matter of marriage a man had only himself to please.

Mrs. Fyne received this without the flutter of an eyelid. Fyne's masculine breast, as might have been expected, was pierced by that old, regulation shaft. He grunted most feelingly. I turned to him with false simplicity. "Don't you agree with me?"

"The very thing I've been telling my wife," he exclaimed in his extra- manly bass. "We have been discussing--"

A discussion in the Fyne menage! How portentous! Perhaps the very first difference they had ever had: Mrs. Fyne unflinching and ready for any responsibility, Fyne solemn and shrinking--the children in bed upstairs; and outside the dark fields, the shadowy contours of the land on the starry background of the universe, with the crude light of the open window like a beacon for the truant who would never come back now; a truant no longer but a downright fugitive. Yet a fugitive carrying off spoils. It was the flight of a raider-- or a traitor? This affair of the purloined brother, as I had named it to myself, had a very puzzling physiognomy. The girl must have been desperate, I thought, hearing the grave voice of Fyne well enough but catching the sense of his words not at all, except the very last words which were:

"Of course, it's extremely distressing."

I looked at him inquisitively. What was distressing him? The purloining of the son of the poet-tyrant by the daughter of the financier-convict. Or only, if I may say so, the wind of their flight disturbing the solemn placidity of the Fynes' domestic atmosphere. My incertitude did not last long, for he added:

"Mrs. Fyne urges me to go to London at once."

One could guess at, almost see, his profound distaste for the journey, his distress at a difference of feeling with his wife. With his serious view of the sublunary comedy Fyne suffered from not being able to agree solemnly with her sentiment as he was accustomed to do, in recognition of having had his way in one supreme instance; when he made her elope with him--the most momentous step imaginable in a young lady's life. He had been really trying to acknowledge it by taking the rightness of her feeling for granted on every other occasion. It had become a sort of habit at last. And it is never pleasant to break a habit. The man was deeply troubled. I said: "Really! To go to London!"

He looked dumbly into my eyes. It was pathetic and funny. "And you of course feel it would be useless," I pursued.

He evidently felt that, though he said nothing. He only went on blinking at me with a solemn and comical slowness. "Unless it be to carry there the family's blessing," I went on, indulging my chaffing humour steadily, in a rather sneaking fashion, for I dared not look at Mrs. Fyne, to my right. No sound or movement came from that direction. "You think very naturally that to match mere good, sound reasons, against the passionate conclusions of love is a waste of intellect bordering on the absurd."

He looked surprised as if I had discovered something very clever. He, dear man, had thought of nothing at all.

He simply knew that he did not want to go to London on that mission. Mere masculine delicacy. In a moment he became enthusiastic.

"Yes! Yes! Exactly. A man in love . . . You hear, my dear? Here you have an independent opinion--"

"Can anything be more hopeless," I insisted to the fascinated little Fyne, "than to pit reason against love. I must confess however that in this case when I think of that poor girl's sharp chin I wonder if . . ."

My levity was too much for Mrs. Fyne. Still leaning back in her chair she exclaimed:

"Mr. Marlow!"

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As if mysteriously affected by her indignation the absurd Fyne dog began to bark in the porch. It might have been at a trespassing bumble-bee however. That animal was capable of any eccentricity. Fyne got up quickly and went out to him. I think he was glad to leave us alone to discuss that matter of his journey to London. A sort of anti-sentimental journey. He, too, apparently, had confidence in my sagacity. It was touching, this confidence. It was at any rate more genuine than the confidence his wife pretended to have in her husband's chess-player, of three successive holidays. Confidence be hanged! Sagacity--indeed! She had simply marched in without a shadow of misgiving to make me back her up. But she had delivered herself into my hands . . ."

Interrupting his narrative Marlow addressed me in his tone between grim jest and grim earnest:

"Perhaps you didn't know that my character is upon the whole rather vindictive."

"No, I didn't know," I said with a grin. "That's rather unusual for a sailor. They always seemed to me the least vindictive body of men in the world."

"H'm! Simple souls," Marlow muttered moodily. "Want of opportunity. The world leaves them alone for the most part. For myself it's towards women that I feel vindictive mostly, in my small way. I admit that it is small. But then the occasions in themselves are not great. Mainly I resent that pretence of winding us round their dear little fingers, as of right. Not that the result ever amounts to much generally. There are so very few momentous opportunities. It is the assumption that each of us is a combination of a kid and an imbecile which I find provoking--in a small way; in a very small way. You needn't stare as though I were breathing fire and smoke out of my nostrils. I am not a women-devouring monster. I am not even what is technically called "a brute." I hope there's enough of a kid and an imbecile in me to answer the requirements of some really good woman eventually--some day . . . Some day. Why do you gasp? You don't suppose I should be afraid of getting married? That supposition would be offensive . . ."

"I wouldn't dream of offending you," I said.

"Very well. But meantime please remember that I was not married to Mrs. Fyne. That lady's little finger was none of my legal property. I had not run off with it. It was Fyne who had done that thing. Let him be wound round as much as his backbone could stand--or even more, for all I cared. His rushing away from the discussion on the transparent pretence of quieting the dog confirmed my notion of there being a considerable strain on his elasticity. I confronted Mrs. Fyne resolved not to assist her in her eminently feminine occupation of thrusting a stick in the spokes of another woman's wheel.

She tried to preserve her calm-eyed superiority. She was familiar and olympian, fenced in by the tea-table, that excellent symbol of domestic life in its lighter hour and its perfect security. In a few severely unadorned words she gave me to understand that she had ventured to hope for some really helpful suggestion from me. To this almost chiding declaration--because my vindictiveness seldom goes further than a bit of teasing--I said that I was really doing my best. And being a physiognomist . . ."

"Being what?" she interrupted me.

"A physiognomist," I repeated raising my voice a little. "A physiognomist, Mrs. Fyne. And on the principles of that science a pointed little chin is a sufficient

ground for interference. You want to interfere--do you not?"

Her eyes grew distinctly bigger. She had never been bantered before in her life. The late subtle poet's method of making himself unpleasant was merely savage and abusive. Fyne had been always solemnly subservient. What other men she knew I cannot tell but I assume they must have been gentlemanly creatures. The girl-friends sat at her feet. How could she recognize my intention. She didn't know what to make of my tone.

"Are you serious in what you say?" she asked slowly. And it was touching. It was as if a very young, confiding girl had spoken. I felt myself relenting.

"No. I am not, Mrs. Fyne," I said. "I didn't know I was expected to be serious as well as sagacious. No. That science is farcical and therefore I am not serious. It's true that most sciences are farcical except those which teach us how to put things together."

"The question is how to keep these two people apart," she struck in. She had recovered. I admired the quickness of women's wit. Mental agility is a rare perfection. And aren't they agile! Aren't they--just! And tenacious! When they once get hold you may uproot the tree but you won't shake them off the branch. In fact the more you shake . . . But only look at the charm of contradictory perfections! No wonder men give in--generally. I won't say I was actually charmed by Mrs. Fyne. I was not delighted with her. What affected me was not what she displayed but something which she could not conceal. And that was emotion--nothing less. The form of her declaration was dry, almost peremptory--but not its tone. Her voice faltered just the least bit, she smiled faintly; and as we were looking straight at each other I observed that her eyes were glistening in a peculiar manner. She was distressed. And indeed that Mrs. Fyne should have appealed to me at all was in itself the evidence of her profound distress. "By Jove she's desperate too," I thought. This discovery was followed by a movement of instinctive shrinking from this unreasonable and unmasculine affair. They were all alike, with their supreme interest aroused only by fighting with each other about some man: a lover, a son, a brother.

"But do you think there's time yet to do anything?" I asked.

She had an impatient movement of her shoulders without detaching herself from the back of the chair. Time! Of course? It was less than forty- eight hours since she had followed him to London . . . I am no great clerk at those matters but I murmured vaguely an allusion to special licences. We couldn't tell what might have happened to-day already. But she knew better, scornfully. Nothing had happened.

"Nothing's likely to happen before next Friday week,--if then."

This was wonderfully precise. Then after a pause she added that she should never forgive herself if some effort were not made, an appeal.

"To your brother?" I asked.

"Yes. John ought to go to-morrow. Nine o'clock train."

"So early as that!" I said. But I could not find it in my heart to pursue this discussion in a jocular tone. I submitted to her several obvious arguments, dictated apparently by common sense but in reality by my secret compassion. Mrs. Fyne brushed them aside, with the semi-conscious egoism of all safe, established, existences. They had known each other so little. Just three weeks. And of that time, too short for the birth of any serious sentiment, the first week had to be deducted. They would hardly look at each other to begin with. Flora barely consented to acknowledge Captain Anthony's presence. Good morning--good night--that was all--absolutely the whole extent of their intercourse. Captain Anthony was a silent man, completely unused to the society of girls of any sort and so shy in fact that he avoided raising his eyes to her face at the table. It was perfectly absurd. It was even inconvenient, embarrassing to her--Mrs. Fyne. After breakfast Flora would go off by herself for a long walk and Captain Anthony (Mrs. Fyne referred to him at times also as Roderick) joined the children. But he was actually too shy to get on terms with his own nieces.

This would have sounded pathetic if I hadn't known the Fyne children who were at the same time solemn and malicious, and nursed a secret contempt for all the world. No one could get on terms with those fresh and comely young monsters! They just tolerated their parents and seemed to have a sort of mocking understanding among themselves against all outsiders, yet with no visible affection for each other. They had the habit of exchanging derisive glances which to a shy man must have been very trying. They thought their uncle no doubt a bore and perhaps an ass.

I was not surprised to hear that very soon Anthony formed the habit of crossing the two neighbouring fields to seek the shade of a clump of elms at a good distance from the cottage. He lay on the grass and smoked his pipe all the morning. Mrs. Fyne wondered at her brother's indolent habits. He had asked for books it is true but there were but few in the cottage. He read them through in three days and then continued to lie contentedly on his back with no other companion but his pipe. Amazing indolence! The live-long morning, Mrs. Fyne, busy writing upstairs in the cottage, could see him out of the window. She had a

very long sight, and these elms were grouped on a rise of the ground. His indolence was plainly exposed to her criticism on a gentle green slope. Mrs. Fyne wondered at it; she was disgusted too. But having just then 'commenced author,' as you know, she could not tear herself away from the fascinating novelty. She let him wallow in his vice. I imagine Captain Anthony must have had a rather pleasant time in a quiet way. It was, I remember, a hot dry summer, favourable to contemplative life out of doors. And Mrs. Fyne was scandalized. Women don't understand the force of a contemplative temperament. It simply shocks them. They feel instinctively that it is the one which escapes best the domination of feminine influences. The dear girls were exchanging jeering remarks about "lazy uncle Roderick" openly, in her indulgent hearing. And it was so strange, she told me, because as a boy he was anything but indolent. On the contrary. Always active.

I remarked that a man of thirty-five was no longer a boy. It was an obvious remark but she received it without favour. She told me positively that the best, the nicest men remained boys all their lives. She was disappointed not to be able to detect anything boyish in her brother. Very, very sorry. She had not seen him for fifteen years or thereabouts, except on three or four occasions for a few hours at a time. No. Not a trace of the boy, he used to be, left in him.

She fell silent for a moment and I mused idly on the boyhood of little Fyne. I could not imagine what it might have been like. His dominant trait was clearly the remnant of still earlier days, because I've never seen such staring solemnity as Fyne's except in a very young baby. But where was he all that time? Didn't he suffer contamination from the indolence of Captain Anthony, I inquired. I was told that Mr. Fyne was very little at the cottage at the time. Some colleague of his was convalescing after a severe illness in a little seaside village in the neighbourhood and Fyne went off every morning by train to spend the day with the elderly invalid who had no one to look after him. It was a very praiseworthy excuse for neglecting his brother-in-law "the son of the poet, you know," with whom he had nothing in common even in the remotest degree. If Captain Anthony (Roderick) had been a pedestrian it would have been sufficient; but he was not. Still, in the afternoon, he went sometimes for a slow casual stroll, by himself of course, the children having definitely cold-shouldered him, and his only sister being busy with that inflammatory book which was to blaze upon the world a year or more afterwards. It seems however that she was capable of detaching her eyes from her task now and then, if only for a moment, because it was from that garret fitted out for a study that one afternoon she observed her brother and Flora de Barral coming down the road side by side. They had met somewhere accidentally (which of them crossed the other's path, as the saying is, I don't know), and were returning to tea together. She noticed that they appeared to be conversing without constraint.

"I had the simplicity to be pleased," Mrs. Fyne commented with a dry little laugh. "Pleased for both their sakes." Captain Anthony shook off his indolence from that day forth, and accompanied Miss Flora frequently on her morning walks. Mrs. Fyne remained pleased. She could now forget them comfortably and give herself up to the delights of audacious thought and literary composition. Only a week before the blow fell she, happening to raise her eyes from the paper, saw two figures seated on the grass under the shade of the elms. She could make out the white blouse. There could be no mistake.

"I suppose they imagined themselves concealed by the hedge. They forgot no doubt I was working in the garret," she said bitterly. "Or perhaps they didn't care. They were right. I am rather a simple person . . ." She laughed again . . . "I was incapable of suspecting such duplicity."

"Duplicity is a strong word, Mrs. Fyne--isn't it?" I expostulated. "And considering that Captain Anthony himself . . ."

"Oh well--perhaps," she interrupted me. Her eyes which never strayed away from mine, her set features, her whole immovable figure, how well I knew those appearances of a person who has "made up her mind." A very hopeless condition that, specially in women. I mistrusted her concession so easily, so stonily made. She reflected a moment. "Yes. I ought to have said--ingratitude, perhaps."

After having thus disengaged her brother and pushed the poor girl a little further off as it were--isn't women's cleverness perfectly diabolic when they are really put on their mettle?--after having done these things and also made me feel that I was no match for her, she went on scrupulously: "One doesn't like to use that word either. The claim is very small. It's so little one could do for her. Still . . ."

"I dare say," I exclaimed, throwing diplomacy to the winds. "But really, Mrs. Fyne, it's impossible to dismiss your brother like this out of the business . . ."

"She threw herself at his head," Mrs. Fyne uttered firmly.

"He had no business to put his head in the way, then," I retorted with an angry laugh. I didn't restrain myself because her fixed stare seemed to express the purpose to daunt me. I was not afraid of her, but it occurred to me that I was within an ace of drifting into a downright quarrel with a lady and, besides, my guest. There was the cold teapot, the emptied cups, emblems of hospitality. It could not be. I cut short my angry laugh while Mrs. Fyne murmured with a slight movement of her shoulders, "He! Poor man! Oh come . . ."

By a great effort of will I found myself able to smile amiably, to speak with proper softness.

"My dear Mrs. Fyne, you forget that I don't know him--not even by sight. It's difficult to imagine a victim as passive as all that; but granting you the (I very nearly said: imbecility, but checked myself in time) innocence of Captain Anthony, don't you think now, frankly, that there is a little of your own fault in what has happened. You bring them together, you leave your brother to himself!"

She sat up and leaning her elbow on the table sustained her head in her open palm casting down her eyes. Compunction? It was indeed a very off-hand way of treating a brother come to stay for the first time in fifteen years. I suppose she discovered very soon that she had nothing in common with that sailor, that stranger, fashioned and marked by the sea of long voyages. In her strong-minded way she had scorned pretences, had gone to her writing which interested her immensely. A very praiseworthy thing your sincere conduct,--if it didn't at times resemble brutality so much. But I don't think it was compunction. That sentiment is rare in women . . . "

"Is it?" I interrupted indignantly.

"You know more women than I do," retorted the unabashed Marlow. "You make it your business to know them--don't you? You go about a lot amongst all sorts of people. You are a tolerably honest observer. Well, just try to remember how many instances of compunction you have seen. I am ready to take your bare word for it. Compunction! Have you ever seen as much as its shadow? Have you ever? Just a shadow--a passing shadow! I tell you it is so rare that you may call it non-existent. They are too passionate. Too pedantic. Too courageous with themselves--perhaps. No I don't think for a moment that Mrs. Fyne felt the slightest compunction at her treatment of her sea-going brother. What he thought of it who can tell? It is possible that he wondered why he had been so insistently urged to come. It is possible that he wondered bitterly--or contemptuously--or humbly. And it may be that he was only surprised and bored. Had he been as sincere in his conduct as his only sister he would have probably taken himself off at the end of the second day. But perhaps he was afraid of appearing brutal. I am not far removed from the conviction that between the sincerities of his sister and of his dear nieces, Captain Anthony of the Ferndale must have had his loneliness brought home to his bosom for the first time of his life, at an age, thirty-five or thereabouts, when one is mature enough to feel the pang of such a discovery. Angry or simply sad but certainly disillusioned he wanders about and meets the girl one afternoon and under the sway of a strong feeling forgets his shyness. This is no supposition. It is a fact. There was such a meeting in which the shyness must have perished before we

don't know what encouragement, or in the community of mood made apparent by some casual word. You remember that Mrs. Fyne saw them one afternoon coming back to the cottage together. Don't you think that I have hit on the psychology of the situation? . . . "

"Doubtless . . . " I began to ponder.

"I was very certain of my conclusions at the time," Marlow went on impatiently. "But don't think for a moment that Mrs. Fyne in her new attitude and toying thoughtfully with a teaspoon was about to surrender. She murmured:

"It's the last thing I should have thought could happen."

"You didn't suppose they were romantic enough," I suggested dryly.

She let it pass and with great decision but as if speaking to herself,

"Roderick really must be warned."

She didn't give me the time to ask of what precisely. She raised her head and addressed me.

"I am surprised and grieved more than I can tell you at Mr. Fyne's resistance. We have been always completely at one on every question. And that we should differ now on a point touching my brother so closely is a most painful surprise to me." Her hand rattled the teaspoon brusquely by an involuntary movement. "It is intolerable," she added tempestuously--for Mrs. Fyne that is. I suppose she had nerves of her own like any other woman.

Under the porch where Fyne had sought refuge with the dog there was silence. I took it for a proof of deep sagacity. I don't mean on the part of the dog. He was a confirmed fool.

I said:

"You want absolutely to interfere . . . ?" Mrs. Fyne nodded just perceptibly . . .

"Well--for my part . . . but I don't really know how matters stand at the present time. You have had a letter from Miss de Barral. What does that letter say?"

"She asks for her valise to be sent to her town address," Mrs. Fyne uttered reluctantly and stopped. I waited a bit--then exploded.

"Well! What's the matter? Where's the difficulty? Does your husband object to

that? You don't mean to say that he wants you to appropriate the girl's clothes?"

"Mr. Marlow!"

"Well, but you talk of a painful difference of opinion with your husband, and then, when I ask for information on the point, you bring out a valise. And only a few moments ago you reproached me for not being serious. I wonder who is the serious person of us two now."

She smiled faintly and in a friendly tone, from which I concluded at once that she did not mean to show me the girl's letter, she said that undoubtedly the letter disclosed an understanding between Captain Anthony and Flora de Barral.

"What understanding?" I pressed her. "An engagement is an understanding."

"There is no engagement--not yet," she said decisively. "That letter, Mr. Marlow, is couched in very vague terms. That is why--"

I interrupted her without ceremony.

"You still hope to interfere to some purpose. Isn't it so? Yes? But how should you have liked it if anybody had tried to interfere between you and Mr. Fyne at the time when your understanding with each other could still have been described in vague terms?"

She had a genuine movement of astonished indignation. It is with the accent of perfect sincerity that she cried out at me:

"But it isn't at all the same thing! How can you!"

Indeed how could I! The daughter of a poet and the daughter of a convict are not comparable in the consequences of their conduct if their necessity may wear at times a similar aspect. Amongst these consequences I could perceive undesirable cousins for these dear healthy girls, and such like, possible causes of embarrassment in the future.

"No! You can't be serious," Mrs. Fyne's smouldering resentment broke out again. "You haven't thought--"

"Oh yes, Mrs. Fyne! I have thought. I am still thinking. I am even trying to think like you."

"Mr. Marlow," she said earnestly. "Believe me that I really am thinking of my

brother in all this . . . " I assured her that I quite believed she was. For there is no law of nature making it impossible to think of more than one person at a time. Then I said:

"She has told him all about herself of course."

"All about her life," assented Mrs. Fyne with an air, however, of making some mental reservation which I did not pause to investigate. "Her life!" I repeated. "That girl must have had a mighty bad time of it."

"Horrible," Mrs. Fyne admitted with a ready frankness very creditable under the circumstances, and a warmth of tone which made me look at her with a friendly eye. "Horrible! No! You can't imagine the sort of vulgar people she became dependent on . . . You know her father never attempted to see her while he was still at large. After his arrest he instructed that relative of his--the odious person who took her away from Brighton--not to let his daughter come to the court during the trial. He refused to hold any communication with her whatever."

I remembered what Mrs. Fyne had told me before of the view she had years ago of de Barral clinging to the child at the side of his wife's grave and later on of these two walking hand in hand the observed of all eyes by the sea. Pictures from Dickens--pregnant with pathos.