CHAPTER SIX--FLORA

"A very singular prohibition," remarked Mrs. Fyne after a short silence. "He seemed to love the child."

She was puzzled. But I surmised that it might have been the sullenness of a man unconscious of guilt and standing at bay to fight his "persecutors," as he called them; or else the fear of a softer emotion weakening his defiant attitude; perhaps, even, it was a self-denying ordinance, in order to spare the girl the sight of her father in the dock, accused of cheating, sentenced as a swindler--proving the possession of a certain moral delicacy.

Mrs. Fyne didn't know what to think. She supposed it might have been mere callousness. But the people amongst whom the girl had fallen had positively not a grain of moral delicacy. Of that she was certain. Mrs. Fyne could not undertake to give me an idea of their abominable vulgarity. Flora used to tell her something of her life in that household, over there, down Limehouse way. It was incredible. It passed Mrs. Fyne's comprehension. It was a sort of moral savagery which she could not have thought possible.

I, on the contrary, thought it very possible. I could imagine easily how the poor girl must have been bewildered and hurt at her reception in that household--envied for her past while delivered defenceless to the tender mercies of people without any fineness either of feeling or mind, unable to understand her misery, grossly curious, mistaking her manner for disdain, her silent shrinking for pride. The wife of the "odious person" was witless and fatuously conceited. Of the two girls of the house one was pious and the other a romp; both were coarse-minded--if they may be credited with any mind at all. The rather numerous men of the family were dense and grumpy, or dense and jocose. None in that grubbing lot had enough humanity to leave her alone. At first she was made much of, in an offensively patronising manner. The connection with the great de Barral gratified their vanity even in the moment of the smash. They dragged her to their place of worship, whatever it might have been, where the congregation stared at her, and they gave parties to other beings like themselves at which they exhibited her with ignoble self-satisfaction. She did not know how to defend herself from their importunities, insolence and exigencies. She lived amongst them, a passive victim, quivering in every nerve, as if she were flayed. After the trial her position became still worse. On the least occasion and even on no occasions at all she was scolded, or else taunted with her dependence. The pious girl lectured her on her defects, the romping girl teased her with contemptuous references to her accomplishments, and was always trying to pick insensate quarrels with her

about some "fellow" or other. The mother backed up her girls invariably, adding her own silly, wounding remarks. I must say they were probably not aware of the ugliness of their conduct. They were nasty amongst themselves as a matter of course; their disputes were nauseating in origin, in manner, in the spirit of mean selfishness. These women, too, seemed to enjoy greatly any sort of row and were always ready to combine together to make awful scenes to the luckless girl on incredibly flimsy pretences. Thus Flora on one occasion had been reduced to rage and despair, had her most secret feelings lacerated, had obtained a view of the utmost baseness to which common human nature can descend--I won't say a propos de bottes as the French would excellently put it, but literally a propos of some mislaid cheap lace trimmings for a nightgown the romping one was making for herself. Yes, that was the origin of one of the grossest scenes which, in their repetition, must have had a deplorable effect on the unformed character of the most pitiful of de Barral's victims. I have it from Mrs. Fyne. The girl turned up at the Fynes' house at half-past nine on a cold, drizzly evening. She had walked bareheaded, I believe, just as she ran out of the house, from somewhere in Poplar to the neighbourhood of Sloane Square--without stopping, without drawing breath, if only for a sob.

"We were having some people to dinner," said the anxious sister of Captain Anthony.

She had heard the front door bell and wondered what it might mean. The parlourmaid managed to whisper to her without attracting attention. The servants had been frightened by the invasion of that wild girl in a muddy skirt and with wisps of damp hair sticking to her pale cheeks. But they had seen her before. This was not the first occasion, nor yet the last.

Directly she could slip away from her guests Mrs. Fyne ran upstairs.

"I found her in the night nursery crouching on the floor, her head resting on the cot of the youngest of my girls. The eldest was sitting up in bed looking at her across the room."

Only a nightlight was burning there. Mrs. Fyne raised her up, took her over to Mr. Fyne's little dressing-room on the other side of the landing, to a fire by which she could dry herself, and left her there. She had to go back to her guests.

A most disagreeable surprise it must have been to the Fynes. Afterwards they both went up and interviewed the girl. She jumped up at their entrance. She had shaken her damp hair loose; her eyes were dry--with the heat of rage.

I can imagine little Fyne solemnly sympathetic, solemnly listening, solemnly

retreating to the marital bedroom. Mrs. Fyne pacified the girl, and, fortunately, there was a bed which could be made up for her in the dressing-room.

"But--what could one do after all!" concluded Mrs. Fyne.

And this stereotyped exclamation, expressing the difficulty of the problem and the readiness (at any rate) of good intentions, made me, as usual, feel more kindly towards her.

Next morning, very early, long before Fyne had to start for his office, the "odious personage" turned up, not exactly unexpected perhaps, but startling all the same, if only by the promptness of his action. From what Flora herself related to Mrs. Fyne, it seems that without being very perceptibly less "odious" than his family he had in a rather mysterious fashion interposed his authority for the protection of the girl. "Not that he cares," explained Flora. "I am sure he does not. I could not stand being liked by any of these people. If I thought he liked me I would drown myself rather than go back with him."

For of course he had come to take "Florrie" home. The scene was the dining-room--breakfast interrupted, dishes growing cold, little Fyne's toast growing leathery, Fyne out of his chair with his back to the fire, the newspaper on the carpet, servants shut out, Mrs. Fyne rigid in her place with the girl sitting beside her--the "odious person," who had bustled in with hardly a greeting, looking from Fyne to Mrs. Fyne as though he were inwardly amused at something he knew of them; and then beginning ironically his discourse. He did not apologize for disturbing Fyne and his "good lady" at breakfast, because he knew they did not want (with a nod at the girl) to have more of her than could be helped. He came the first possible moment because he had his business to attend to. He wasn't drawing a tip-top salary (this staring at Fyne) in a luxuriously furnished office. Not he. He had risen to be an employer of labour and was bound to give a good example.

I believe the fellow was aware of, and enjoyed quietly, the consternation his presence brought to the bosom of Mr. and Mrs. Fyne. He turned briskly to the girl. Mrs. Fyne confessed to me that they had remained all three silent and inanimate. He turned to the girl: "What's this game, Florrie? You had better give it up. If you expect me to run all over London looking for you every time you happen to have a tiff with your auntie and cousins you are mistaken. I can't afford it."

Tiff--was the sort of definition to take one's breath away, having regard to the fact that both the word convict and the word pauper had been used a moment before Flora de Barral ran away from the quarrel about the lace trimmings. Yes, these

very words! So at least the girl had told Mrs. Fyne the evening before. The word tiff in connection with her tale had a peculiar savour, a paralysing effect. Nobody made a sound. The relative of de Barral proceeded uninterrupted to a display of magnanimity. "Auntie told me to tell you she's sorry--there! And Amelia (the romping sister) shan't worry you again. I'll see to that. You ought to be satisfied. Remember your position."

Emboldened by the utter stillness pervading the room he addressed himself to Mrs. Fyne with stolid effrontery:

"What I say is that people should be good-natured. She can't stand being chaffed. She puts on her grand airs. She won't take a bit of a joke from people as good as herself anyway. We are a plain lot. We don't like it. And that's how trouble begins."

Insensible to the stony stare of three pairs of eyes, which, if the stories of our childhood as to the power of the human eye are true, ought to have been enough to daunt a tiger, that unabashed manufacturer from the East End fastened his fangs, figuratively speaking, into the poor girl and prepared to drag her away for a prey to his cubs of both sexes. "Auntie has thought of sending you your hat and coat. I've got them outside in the cab."

Mrs. Fyne looked mechanically out of the window. A four-wheeler stood before the gate under the weeping sky. The driver in his conical cape and tarpaulin hat, streamed with water. The drooping horse looked as though it had been fished out, half unconscious, from a pond. Mrs. Fyne found some relief in looking at that miserable sight, away from the room in which the voice of the amiable visitor resounded with a vulgar intonation exhorting the strayed sheep to return to the delightful fold. "Come, Florrie, make a move. I can't wait on you all day here."

Mrs. Fyne heard all this without turning her head away from the window. Fyne on the hearthrug had to listen and to look on too. I shall not try to form a surmise as to the real nature of the suspense. Their very goodness must have made it very anxious. The girl's hands were lying in her lap; her head was lowered as if in deep thought; and the other went on delivering a sort of homily. Ingratitude was condemned in it, the sinfulness of pride was pointed out--together with the proverbial fact that it "goes before a fall." There were also some sound remarks as to the danger of nonsensical notions and the disadvantages of a quick temper. It sets one's best friends against one. "And if anybody ever wanted friends in the world it's you, my girl." Even respect for parental authority was invoked. "In the first hour of his trouble your father wrote to me to take care of you--don't forget it. Yes, to me, just a plain man, rather than to any of his fine West-End friends. You can't get over that. And a father's a father no matter what

a mess he's got himself into. You ain't going to throw over your own father--are you?"

It was difficult to say whether he was more absurd than cruel or more cruel than absurd. Mrs. Fyne, with the fine ear of a woman, seemed to detect a jeering intention in his meanly unctuous tone, something more vile than mere cruelty. She glanced quickly over her shoulder and saw the girl raise her two hands to her head, then let them fall again on her lap. Fyne in front of the fire was like the victim of an unholy spell--bereft of motion and speech but obviously in pain. It was a short pause of perfect silence, and then that "odious creature" (he must have been really a remarkable individual in his way) struck out into sarcasm.

"Well? . . . " Again a silence. "If you have fixed it up with the lady and gentleman present here for your board and lodging you had better say so. I don't want to interfere in a bargain I know nothing of. But I wonder how your father will take it when he comes out . . . or don't you expect him ever to come out?"

At that moment, Mrs. Fyne told me she met the girl's eyes. There was that in them which made her shut her own. She also felt as though she would have liked to put her fingers in her ears. She restrained herself, however; and the "plain man" passed in his appalling versatility from sarcasm to veiled menace.

"You have--eh? Well and good. But before I go home let me ask you, my girl, to think if by any chance you throwing us over like this won't be rather bad for your father later on? Just think it over."

He looked at his victim with an air of cunning mystery. She jumped up so suddenly that he started back. Mrs. Fyne rose too, and even the spell was removed from her husband. But the girl dropped again into the chair and turned her head to look at Mrs. Fyne. This time it was no accidental meeting of fugitive glances. It was a deliberate communication. To my question as to its nature Mrs. Fyne said she did not know. "Was it appealing?" I suggested. "No," she said. "Was it frightened, angry, crushed, resigned?" "No! No! Nothing of these." But it had frightened her. She remembered it to this day. She had been ever since fancying she could detect the lingering reflection of that look in all the girl's glances. In the attentive, in the casual--even in the grateful glances--in the expression of the softest moods.

"Has she her soft moods, then?" I asked with interest.

Mrs Fyne, much moved by her recollections, heeded not my inquiry. All her mental energy was concentrated on the nature of that memorable glance. The general tradition of mankind teaches us that glances occupy a considerable place

in the self-expression of women. Mrs. Fyne was trying honestly to give me some idea, as much perhaps to satisfy her own uneasiness as my curiosity. She was frowning in the effort as you see sometimes a child do (what is delightful in women is that they so often resemble intelligent children--I mean the crustiest, the sourest, the most battered of them do--at times). She was frowning, I say, and I was beginning to smile faintly at her when all at once she came out with something totally unexpected.

"It was horribly merry," she said.

I suppose she must have been satisfied by my sudden gravity because she looked at me in a friendly manner.

"Yes, Mrs. Fyne," I said, smiling no longer. "I see. It would have been horrible even on the stage."

"Ah!" she interrupted me--and I really believe her change of attitude back to folded arms was meant to check a shudder. "But it wasn't on the stage, and it was not with her lips that she laughed."

"Yes. It must have been horrible," I assented. "And then she had to go away ultimately--I suppose. You didn't say anything?"

"No," said Mrs. Fyne. "I rang the bell and told one of the maids to go and bring the hat and coat out of the cab. And then we waited."

I don't think that there ever was such waiting unless possibly in a jail at some moment or other on the morning of an execution. The servant appeared with the hat and coat, and then, still as on the morning of an execution, when the condemned, I believe, is offered a breakfast, Mrs. Fyne, anxious that the white-faced girl should swallow something warm (if she could) before leaving her house for an interminable drive through raw cold air in a damp four-wheeler--Mrs. Fyne broke the awful silence: "You really must try to eat something," in her best resolute manner. She turned to the "odious person" with the same determination. "Perhaps you will sit down and have a cup of coffee, too."

The worthy "employer of labour" sat down. He might have been awed by Mrs. Fyne's peremptory manner--for she did not think of conciliating him then. He sat down, provisionally, like a man who finds himself much against his will in doubtful company. He accepted ungraciously the cup handed to him by Mrs. Fyne, took an unwilling sip or two and put it down as if there were some moral contamination in the coffee of these "swells." Between whiles he directed mysteriously inexpressive glances at little Fyne, who, I gather, had no breakfast

that morning at all. Neither had the girl. She never moved her hands from her lap till her appointed guardian got up, leaving his cup half full.

"Well. If you don't mean to take advantage of this lady's kind offer I may just as well take you home at once. I want to begin my day--I do."

After a few more dumb, leaden-footed minutes while Flora was putting on her hat and jacket, the Fynes without moving, without saying anything, saw these two leave the room.

"She never looked back at us," said Mrs. Fyne. "She just followed him out. I've never had such a crushing impression of the miserable dependence of girls--of women. This was an extreme case. But a young man--any man--could have gone to break stones on the roads or something of that kind--or enlisted--or--"

It was very true. Women can't go forth on the high roads and by-ways to pick up a living even when dignity, independence, or existence itself are at stake. But what made me interrupt Mrs. Fyne's tirade was my profound surprise at the fact of that respectable citizen being so willing to keep in his home the poor girl for whom it seemed there was no place in the world. And not only willing but anxious. I couldn't credit him with generous impulses. For it seemed obvious to me from what I had learned that, to put it mildly, he was not an impulsive person.

"I confess that I can't understand his motive," I exclaimed.

"This is exactly what John wondered at, at first," said Mrs. Fyne. By that time an intimacy--if not exactly confidence--had sprung up between us which permitted her in this discussion to refer to her husband as John. "You know he had not opened his lips all that time," she pursued. "I don't blame his restraint. On the contrary. What could he have said? I could see he was observing the man very thoughtfully."

"And so, Mr. Fyne listened, observed and meditated," I said. "That's an excellent way of coming to a conclusion. And may I ask at what conclusion he had managed to arrive? On what ground did he cease to wonder at the inexplicable? For I can't admit humanity to be the explanation. It would be too monstrous."

It was nothing of the sort, Mrs. Fyne assured me with some resentment, as though I had aspersed little Fyne's sanity. Fyne very sensibly had set himself the mental task of discovering the self-interest. I should not have thought him capable of so much cynicism. He said to himself that for people of that sort (religious fears or the vanity of righteousness put aside) money--not great wealth,

but money, just a little money--is the measure of virtue, of expediency, of wisdom--of pretty well everything. But the girl was absolutely destitute. The father was in prison after the most terribly complete and disgraceful smash of modern times. And then it dawned upon Fyne that this was just it. The great smash, in the great dust of vanishing millions! Was it possible that they all had vanished to the last penny? Wasn't there, somewhere, something palpable; some fragment of the fabric left?

"That's it," had exclaimed Fyne, startling his wife by this explosive unseating of his lips less than half an hour after the departure of de Barral's cousin with de Barral's daughter. It was still in the dining- room, very near the time for him to go forth affronting the elements in order to put in another day's work in his country's service. All he could say at the moment in elucidation of this breakdown from his usual placid solemnity was:

"The fellow imagines that de Barral has got some plunder put away somewhere."

This being the theory arrived at by Fyne, his comment on it was that a good many bankrupts had been known to have taken such a precaution. It was possible in de Barral's case. Fyne went so far in his display of cynical pessimism as to say that it was extremely probable.

He explained at length to Mrs. Fyne that de Barral certainly did not take anyone into his confidence. But the beastly relative had made up his low mind that it was so. He was selfish and pitiless in his stupidity, but he had clearly conceived the notion of making a claim on de Barral when de Barral came out of prison on the strength of having "looked after" (as he would have himself expressed it) his daughter. He nursed his hopes, such as they were, in secret, and it is to be supposed kept them even from his wife.

I could see it very well. That belief accounted for his mysterious air while he interfered in favour of the girl. He was the only protector she had. It was as though Flora had been fated to be always surrounded by treachery and lies stifling every better impulse, every instinctive aspiration of her soul to trust and to love. It would have been enough to drive a fine nature into the madness of universal suspicion--into any sort of madness. I don't know how far a sense of humour will stand by one. To the foot of the gallows, perhaps. But from my recollection of Flora de Barral I feared that she hadn't much sense of humour. She had cried at the desertion of the absurd Fyne dog. That animal was certainly free from duplicity. He was frank and simple and ridiculous. The indignation of the girl at his unhypocritical behaviour had been funny but not humorous.

As you may imagine I was not very anxious to resume the discussion on the

justice, expediency, effectiveness or what not, of Fyne's journey to London. It isn't that I was unfaithful to little Fyne out in the porch with the dog. (They kept amazingly quiet there. Could they have gone to sleep?) What I felt was that either my sagacity or my conscience would come out damaged from that campaign. And no man will willingly put himself in the way of moral damage. I did not want a war with Mrs. Fyne. I much preferred to hear something more of the girl. I said:

"And so she went away with that respectable ruffian."

Mrs. Fyne moved her shoulders slightly--"What else could she have done?" I agreed with her by another hopeless gesture. It isn't so easy for a girl like Flora de Barral to become a factory hand, a pathetic seamstress or even a barmaid. She wouldn't have known how to begin. She was the captive of the meanest conceivable fate. And she wasn't mean enough for it. It is to be remarked that a good many people are born curiously unfitted for the fate awaiting them on this earth. As I don't want you to think that I am unduly partial to the girl we shall say that she failed decidedly to endear herself to that simple, virtuous and, I believe, teetotal household. It's my conviction that an angel would have failed likewise. It's no use going into details; suffice it to state that before the year was out she was again at the Fynes' door.

This time she was escorted by a stout youth. His large pale face wore a smile of inane cunning soured by annoyance. His clothes were new and the indescribable smartness of their cut, a genre which had never been obtruded on her notice before, astonished Mrs. Fyne, who came out into the hall with her hat on; for she was about to go out to hear a new pianist (a girl) in a friend's house. The youth addressing Mrs. Fyne easily begged her not to let "that silly thing go back to us any more." There had been, he said, nothing but "ructions" at home about her for the last three weeks. Everybody in the family was heartily sick of quarrelling. His governor had charged him to bring her to this address and say that the lady and gentleman were quite welcome to all there was in it. She hadn't enough sense to appreciate a plain, honest English home and she was better out of it.

The young, pimply-faced fellow was vexed by this job his governor had sprung on him. It was the cause of his missing an appointment for that afternoon with a certain young lady. The lady he was engaged to. But he meant to dash back and try for a sight of her that evening yet "if he were to burst over it." "Good-bye, Florrie. Good luck to you--and I hope I'll never see your face again."

With that he ran out in lover-like haste leaving the hall-door wide open. Mrs. Fyne had not found a word to say. She had been too much taken aback even to gasp freely. But she had the presence of mind to grab the girl's arm just as she,

too, was running out into the street--with the haste, I suppose, of despair and to keep I don't know what tragic tryst.

"You stopped her with your own hand, Mrs. Fyne," I said. "I presume she meant to get away. That girl is no comedian--if I am any judge."

"Yes! I had to use some force to drag her in."

Mrs. Fyne had no difficulty in stating the truth. "You see I was in the very act of letting myself out when these two appeared. So that, when that unpleasant young man ran off, I found myself alone with Flora. It was all I could do to hold her in the hall while I called to the servants to come and shut the door."

As is my habit, or my weakness, or my gift, I don't know which, I visualized the story for myself. I really can't help it. And the vision of Mrs. Fyne dressed for a rather special afternoon function, engaged in wrestling with a wild-eyed, white-faced girl had a certain dramatic fascination.

"Really!" I murmured.

"Oh! There's no doubt that she struggled," said Mrs. Fyne. She compressed her lips for a moment and then added: "As to her being a comedian that's another question."

Mrs. Fyne had returned to her attitude of folded arms. I saw before me the daughter of the refined poet accepting life whole with its unavoidable conditions of which one of the first is the instinct of self- preservation and the egoism of every living creature. "The fact remains nevertheless that you--yourself--have, in your own words, pulled her in," I insisted in a jocular tone, with a serious intention.

"What was one to do," exclaimed Mrs. Fyne with almost comic exasperation. "Are you reproaching me with being too impulsive?"

And she went on telling me that she was not that in the least. One of the recommendations she always insisted on (to the girl-friends, I imagine) was to be on guard against impulse. Always! But I had not been there to see the face of Flora at the time. If I had it would be haunting me to this day. Nobody unless made of iron would have allowed a human being with a face like that to rush out alone into the streets.

"And doesn't it haunt you, Mrs. Fyne?" I asked.

"No, not now," she said implacably. "Perhaps if I had let her go it might have done . . . Don't conclude, though, that I think she was playing a comedy then, because after struggling at first she ended by remaining. She gave up very suddenly. She collapsed in our arms, mine and the maid's who came running up in response to my calls, and . . . "

"And the door was then shut," I completed the phrase in my own way.

"Yes, the door was shut," Mrs. Fyne lowered and raised her head slowly.

I did not ask her for details. Of one thing I am certain, and that is that Mrs. Fyne did not go out to the musical function that afternoon. She was no doubt considerably annoyed at missing the privilege of hearing privately an interesting young pianist (a girl) who, since, had become one of the recognized performers. Mrs. Fyne did not dare leave her house. As to the feelings of little Fyne when he came home from the office, via his club, just half an hour before dinner, I have no information. But I venture to affirm that in the main they were kindly, though it is quite possible that in the first moment of surprise he had to keep down a swear-word or two.

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The long and the short of it all is that next day the Fynes made up their minds to take into their confidence a certain wealthy old lady. With certain old ladies the passing years bring back a sort of mellowed youthfulness of feeling, an optimistic outlook, liking for novelty, readiness for experiment. The old lady was very much interested: "Do let me see the poor thing!" She was accordingly allowed to see Flora de Barral in Mrs. Fyne's drawing-room on a day when there was no one else there, and she preached to her with charming, sympathetic authority: "The only way to deal with our troubles, my dear child, is to forget them. You must forget yours. It's very simple. Look at me. I always forget mine. At your age one ought to be cheerful."

Later on when left alone with Mrs. Fyne she said to that lady: "I do hope the child will manage to be cheerful. I can't have sad faces near me. At my age one needs cheerful companions."

And in this hope she carried off Flora de Barral to Bournemouth for the winter months in the quality of reader and companion. She had said to her with kindly jocularity: "We shall have a good time together. I am not a grumpy old woman." But on their return to London she sought Mrs. Fyne at once. She had discovered that Flora was not naturally cheerful. When she made efforts to be it was still worse. The old lady couldn't stand the strain of that. And then, to have the

whole thing out, she could not bear to have for a companion anyone who did not love her. She was certain that Flora did not love her. Why? She couldn't say. Moreover, she had caught the girl looking at her in a peculiar way at times. Oh no!--it was not an evil look--it was an unusual expression which one could not understand. And when one remembered that her father was in prison shut up together with a lot of criminals and so on--it made one uncomfortable. If the child had only tried to forget her troubles! But she obviously was incapable or unwilling to do so. And that was somewhat perverse--wasn't it? Upon the whole, she thought it would be better perhaps--

Mrs. Fyne assented hurriedly to the unspoken conclusion: "Oh certainly! Certainly," wondering to herself what was to be done with Flora next; but she was not very much surprised at the change in the old lady's view of Flora de Barral. She almost understood it.

What came next was a German family, the continental acquaintances of the wife of one of Fyne's colleagues in the Home Office. Flora of the enigmatical glances was dispatched to them without much reflection. As it was not considered absolutely necessary to take them into full confidence, they neither expected the girl to be specially cheerful nor were they discomposed unduly by the indescribable quality of her glances. The German woman was quite ordinary; there were two boys to look after; they were ordinary, too, I presume; and Flora, I understand, was very attentive to them. If she taught them anything it must have been by inspiration alone, for she certainly knew nothing of teaching. But it was mostly "conversation" which was demanded from her. Flora de Barral conversing with two small German boys, regularly, industriously, conscientiously, in order to keep herself alive in the world which held for her the past we know and the future of an even more undesirable quality--seems to me a very fantastic combination. But I believe it was not so bad. She was being, she wrote, mercifully drugged by her task. She had learned to "converse" all day long, mechanically, absently, as if in a trance. An uneasy trance it must have been! Her worst moments were when off duty--alone in the evening, shut up in her own little room, her dulled thoughts waking up slowly till she started into the full consciousness of her position, like a person waking up in contact with something venomous--a snake, for instance--experiencing a mad impulse to fling the thing away and run off screaming to hide somewhere.

At this period of her existence Flora de Barral used to write to Mrs. Fyne not regularly but fairly often. I don't know how long she would have gone on "conversing" and, incidentally, helping to supervise the beautifully stocked linen closets of that well-to-do German household, if the man of it had not developed in the intervals of his avocations (he was a merchant and a thoroughly domesticated character) a psychological resemblance to the Bournemouth old lady. It appeared

that he, too, wanted to be loved.

He was not, however, of a conquering temperament--a kiss-snatching, door-bursting type of libertine. In the very act of straying from the path of virtue he remained a respectable merchant. It would have been perhaps better for Flora if he had been a mere brute. But he set about his sinister enterprise in a sentimental, cautious, almost paternal manner; and thought he would be safe with a pretty orphan. The girl for all her experience was still too innocent, and indeed not yet sufficiently aware of herself as a woman, to mistrust these masked approaches. She did not see them, in fact. She thought him sympathetic--the first expressively sympathetic person she had ever met. She was so innocent that she could not understand the fury of the German woman. For, as you may imagine, the wifely penetration was not to be deceived for any great length of time--the more so that the wife was older than the husband. The man with the peculiar cowardice of respectability never said a word in Flora's defence. He stood by and heard her reviled in the most abusive terms, only nodding and frowning vaguely from time to time. It will give you the idea of the girl's innocence when I say that at first she actually thought this storm of indignant reproaches was caused by the discovery of her real name and her relation to a convict. She had been sent out under an assumed name--a highly recommended orphan of honourable parentage. Her distress, her burning cheeks, her endeavours to express her regret for this deception were taken for a confession of guilt. "You attempted to bring dishonour to my home," the German woman screamed at her.

Here's a misunderstanding for you! Flora de Barral, who felt the shame but did not believe in the guilt of her father, retorted fiercely, "Nevertheless I am as honourable as you are." And then the German woman nearly went into a fit from rage. "I shall have you thrown out into the street."

Flora was not exactly thrown out into the street, I believe, but she was bundled bag and baggage on board a steamer for London. Did I tell you these people lived in Hamburg? Well yes--sent to the docks late on a rainy winter evening in charge of some sneering lackey or other who behaved to her insolently and left her on deck burning with indignation, her hair half down, shaking with excitement and, truth to say, scared as near as possible into hysterics. If it had not been for the stewardess who, without asking questions, good soul, took charge of her quietly in the ladies' saloon (luckily it was empty) it is by no means certain she would ever have reached England. I can't tell if a straw ever saved a drowning man, but I know that a mere glance is enough to make despair pause. For in truth we who are creatures of impulse are not creatures of despair. Suicide, I suspect, is very often the outcome of mere mental weariness--not an act of savage energy but the final symptom of complete collapse. The quiet, matter-of-fact attentions of a

ship's stewardess, who did not seem aware of other human agonies than sea-sickness, who talked of the probable weather of the passage--it would be a rough night, she thought--and who insisted in a professionally busy manner, "Let me make you comfortable down below at once, miss," as though she were thinking of nothing else but her tip--was enough to dissipate the shades of death gathering round the mortal weariness of bewildered thinking which makes the idea of non-existence welcome so often to the young. Flora de Barral did lie down, and it may be presumed she slept. At any rate she survived the voyage across the North Sea and told Mrs. Fyne all about it, concealing nothing and receiving no rebuke--for Mrs. Fyne's opinions had a large freedom in their pedantry. She held, I suppose, that a woman holds an absolute right--or possesses a perfect excuse--to escape in her own way from a man-mismanaged world.

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What is to be noted is that even in London, having had time to take a reflective view, poor Flora was far from being certain as to the true inwardness of her violent dismissal. She felt the humiliation of it with an almost maddened resentment.

"And did you enlighten her on the point?" I ventured to ask.

Mrs. Fyne moved her shoulders with a philosophical acceptance of all the necessities which ought not to be. Something had to be said, she murmured. She had told the girl enough to make her come to the right conclusion by herself.

"And she did?"

"Yes. Of course. She isn't a goose," retorted Mrs. Fyne tartly.

"Then her education is completed," I remarked with some bitterness. "Don't you think she ought to be given a chance?"

Mrs. Fyne understood my meaning.

"Not this one," she snapped in a quite feminine way. "It's all very well for you to plead, but I--"

"I do not plead. I simply asked. It seemed natural to ask what you thought."

"It's what I feel that matters. And I can't help my feelings. You may guess," she added in a softer tone, "that my feelings are mostly concerned with my brother. We were very fond of each other. The difference of our ages was not very great. I

suppose you know he is a little younger than I am. He was a sensitive boy. He had the habit of brooding. It is no use concealing from you that neither of us was happy at home. You have heard, no doubt . . . Yes? Well, I was made still more unhappy and hurt--I don't mind telling you that. He made his way to some distant relations of our mother's people who I believe were not known to my father at all. I don't wish to judge their action."

I interrupted Mrs. Fyne here. I had heard. Fyne was not very communicative in general, but he was proud of his father-in-law--"Carleon Anthony, the poet, you know." Proud of his celebrity without approving of his character. It was on that account, I strongly suspect, that he seized with avidity upon the theory of poetical genius being allied to madness, which he got hold of in some idiotic book everybody was reading a few years ago. It struck him as being truth itself--illuminating like the sun. He adopted it devoutly. He bored me with it sometimes. Once, just to shut him up, I asked quietly if this theory which he regarded as so incontrovertible did not cause him some uneasiness about his wife and the dear girls? He transfixed me with a pitying stare and requested me in his deep solemn voice to remember the "well-established fact" that genius was not transmissible.

I said only "Oh! Isn't it?" and he thought he had silenced me by an unanswerable argument. But he continued to talk of his glorious father- in-law, and it was in the course of that conversation that he told me how, when the Liverpool relations of the poet's late wife naturally addressed themselves to him in considerable concern, suggesting a friendly consultation as to the boy's future, the incensed (but always refined) poet wrote in answer a letter of mere polished badinage which offended mortally the Liverpool people. This witty outbreak of what was in fact mortification and rage appeared to them so heartless that they simply kept the boy. They let him go to sea not because he was in their way but because he begged hard to be allowed to go.

"Oh! You do know," said Mrs. Fyne after a pause. "Well--I felt myself very much abandoned. Then his choice of life--so extraordinary, so unfortunate, I may say. I was very much grieved. I should have liked him to have been distinguished--or at any rate to remain in the social sphere where we could have had common interests, acquaintances, thoughts. Don't think that I am estranged from him. But the precise truth is that I do not know him. I was most painfully affected when he was here by the difficulty of finding a single topic we could discuss together."

While Mrs. Fyne was talking of her brother I let my thoughts wander out of the room to little Fyne who by leaving me alone with his wife had, so to speak, entrusted his domestic peace to my honour.

"Well, then, Mrs. Fyne, does it not strike you that it would be reasonable under the circumstances to let your brother take care of himself?"

"And suppose I have grounds to think that he can't take care of himself in a given instance." She hesitated in a funny, bashful manner which roused my interest. Then:

"Sailors I believe are very susceptible," she added with forced assurance.

I burst into a laugh which only increased the coldness of her observing stare.

"They are. Immensely! Hopelessly! My dear Mrs. Fyne, you had better give it up! It only makes your husband miserable."

"And I am quite miserable too. It is really our first difference . . . "

"Regarding Miss de Barral?" I asked.

"Regarding everything. It's really intolerable that this girl should be the occasion. I think he really ought to give way."

She turned her chair round a little and picking up the book I had been reading in the morning began to turn the leaves absently.

Her eyes being off me, I felt I could allow myself to leave the room. Its atmosphere had become hopeless for little Fyne's domestic peace. You may smile. But to the solemn all things are solemn. I had enough sagacity to understand that.

I slipped out into the porch. The dog was slumbering at Fyne's feet. The muscular little man leaning on his elbow and gazing over the fields presented a forlorn figure. He turned his head quickly, but seeing I was alone, relapsed into his moody contemplation of the green landscape.

I said loudly and distinctly: "I've come out to smoke a cigarette," and sat down near him on the little bench. Then lowering my voice: "Tolerance is an extremely difficult virtue," I said. "More difficult for some than heroism. More difficult than compassion."

I avoided looking at him. I knew well enough that he would not like this opening. General ideas were not to his taste. He mistrusted them. I lighted a cigarette, not that I wanted to smoke, but to give another moment to the consideration of

the advice--the diplomatic advice I had made up my mind to bowl him over with. And I continued in subdued tones.

"I have been led to make these remarks by what I have discovered since you left us. I suspected from the first. And now I am certain. What your wife cannot tolerate in this affair is Miss de Barral being what she is."

He made a movement, but I kept my eyes away from him and went on steadily. "That is--her being a woman. I have some idea of Mrs. Fyne's mental attitude towards society with its injustices, with its atrocious or ridiculous conventions. As against them there is no audacity of action your wife's mind refuses to sanction. The doctrine which I imagine she stuffs into the pretty heads of your girl-guests is almost vengeful. A sort of moral fire-and-sword doctrine. How far the lesson is wise is not for me to say. I don't permit myself to judge. I seem to see her very delightful disciples singeing themselves with the torches, and cutting their fingers with the swords of Mrs. Fyne's furnishing."

"My wife holds her opinions very seriously," murmured Fyne suddenly.

"Yes. No doubt," I assented in a low voice as before. "But it is a mere intellectual exercise. What I see is that in dealing with reality Mrs. Fyne ceases to be tolerant. In other words, that she can't forgive Miss de Barral for being a woman and behaving like a woman. And yet this is not only reasonable and natural, but it is her only chance. A woman against the world has no resources but in herself. Her only means of action is to be what she is. You understand what I mean."

Fyne mumbled between his teeth that he understood. But he did not seem interested. What he expected of me was to extricate him from a difficult situation. I don't know how far credible this may sound, to less solemn married couples, but to remain at variance with his wife seemed to him a considerable incident. Almost a disaster.

"It looks as though I didn't care what happened to her brother," he said. "And after all if anything . . . "

I became a little impatient but without raising my tone:

"What thing?" I asked. "The liability to get penal servitude is so far like genius that it isn't hereditary. And what else can be objected to the girl? All the energy of her deeper feelings, which she would use up vainly in the danger and fatigue of a struggle with society may be turned into devoted attachment to the man who offers her a way of escape from what can be only a life of moral anguish. I don't mention the physical difficulties."

Glancing at Fyne out of the corner of one eye I discovered that he was attentive. He made the remark that I should have said all this to his wife. It was a sensible enough remark. But I had given Mrs. Fyne up. I asked him if his impression was that his wife meant to entrust him with a letter for her brother?

No. He didn't think so. There were certain reasons which made Mrs. Fyne unwilling to commit her arguments to paper. Fyne was to be primed with them. But he had no doubt that if he persisted in his refusal she would make up her mind to write.

"She does not wish me to go unless with a full conviction that she is right," said Fyne solemnly.

"She's very exacting," I commented. And then I reflected that she was used to it. "Would nothing less do for once?"

"You don't mean that I should give way--do you?" asked Fyne in a whisper of alarmed suspicion.

As this was exactly what I meant, I let his fright sink into him. He fidgeted. If the word may be used of so solemn a personage, he wriggled. And when the horrid suspicion had descended into his very heels, so to speak, he became very still. He sat gazing stonily into space bounded by the yellow, burnt-up slopes of the rising ground a couple of miles away. The face of the down showed the white scar of the quarry where not more than sixteen hours before Fyne and I had been groping in the dark with horrible apprehension of finding under our hands the shattered body of a girl. For myself I had in addition the memory of my meeting with her. She was certainly walking very near the edge--courting a sinister solution. But, now, having by the most unexpected chance come upon a man, she had found another way to escape from the world. Such world as was open to her--without shelter, without bread, without honour. The best she could have found in it would have been a precarious dole of pity diminishing as her years increased. The appeal of the abandoned child Flora to the sympathies of the Fynes had been irresistible. But now she had become a woman, and Mrs. Fyne was presenting an implacable front to a particularly feminine transaction. I may say triumphantly feminine. It is true that Mrs. Fyne did not want women to be women. Her theory was that they should turn themselves into unscrupulous sexless nuisances. An offended theorist dwelt in her bosom somewhere. In what way she expected Flora de Barral to set about saving herself from a most miserable existence I can't conceive; but I verify believe that she would have found it easier to forgive the girl an actual crime; say the rifling of the Bournemouth old lady's desk, for instance. And then--for Mrs. Fyne was very

much of a woman herself--her sense of proprietorship was very strong within her; and though she had not much use for her brother, yet she did not like to see him annexed by another woman. By a chit of a girl. And such a girl, too. Nothing is truer than that, in this world, the luckless have no right to their opportunities--as if misfortune were a legal disqualification. Fyne's sentiments (as they naturally would be in a man) had more stability. A good deal of his sympathy survived. Indeed I heard him murmur "Ghastly nuisance," but I knew it was of the integrity of his domestic accord that he was thinking. With my eyes on the dog lying curled up in sleep in the middle of the porch I suggested in a subdued impersonal tone: "Yes. Why not let yourself be persuaded?"

I never saw little Fyne less solemn. He hissed through his teeth in unexpectedly figurative style that it would take a lot to persuade him to "push under the head of a poor devil of a girl quite sufficiently plucky"--and snorted. He was still gazing at the distant quarry, and I think he was affected by that sight. I assured him that I was far from advising him to do anything so cruel. I am convinced he had always doubted the soundness of my principles, because he turned on me swiftly as though he had been on the watch for a lapse from the straight path.

"Then what do you mean? That I should pretend!"

"No! What nonsense! It would be immoral. I may however tell you that if I had to make a choice I would rather do something immoral than something cruel. What I meant was that, not believing in the efficacy of the interference, the whole question is reduced to your consenting to do what your wife wishes you to do. That would be acting like a gentleman, surely. And acting unselfishly too, because I can very well understand how distasteful it may be to you. Generally speaking, an unselfish action is a moral action. I'll tell you what. I'll go with you."

He turned round and stared at me with surprise and suspicion. "You would go with me?" he repeated.

"You don't understand," I said, amused at the incredulous disgust of his tone. "I must run up to town, to-morrow morning. Let us go together. You have a set of travelling chessmen."

His physiognomy, contracted by a variety of emotions, relaxed to a certain extent at the idea of a game. I told him that as I had business at the Docks he should have my company to the very ship.

"We shall beguile the way to the wilds of the East by improving conversation," I encouraged him.

"My brother-in-law is staying at an hotel--the Eastern Hotel," he said, becoming sombre again. "I haven't the slightest idea where it is."

"I know the place. I shall leave you at the door with the comfortable conviction that you are doing what's right since it pleases a lady and cannot do any harm to anybody whatever."

"You think so? No harm to anybody?" he repeated doubtfully.

"I assure you it's not the slightest use," I said with all possible emphasis which seemed only to increase the solemn discontent of his expression.

"But in order that my going should be a perfectly candid proceeding I must first convince my wife that it isn't the slightest use," he objected portentously.

"Oh, you casuist!" I said. And I said nothing more because at that moment Mrs. Fyne stepped out into the porch. We rose together at her appearance. Her clear, colourless, unflinching glance enveloped us both critically. I sustained the chill smilingly, but Fyne stooped at once to release the dog. He was some time about it; then simultaneously with his recovery of upright position the animal passed at one bound from profoundest slumber into most tumultuous activity. Enveloped in the tornado of his inane scurryings and barkings I took Mrs. Fyne's hand extended to me woodenly and bowed over it with deference. She walked down the path without a word; Fyne had preceded her and was waiting by the open gate. They passed out and walked up the road surrounded by a low cloud of dust raised by the dog gyrating madly about their two figures progressing side by side with rectitude and propriety, and (I don't know why) looking to me as if they had annexed the whole country- side. Perhaps it was that they had impressed me somehow with the sense of their superiority. What superiority? Perhaps it consisted just in their limitations. It was obvious that neither of them had carried away a high opinion of me. But what affected me most was the indifference of the Fyne dog. He used to precipitate himself at full speed and with a frightful final upward spring upon my waistcoat, at least once at each of our meetings. He had neglected that ceremony this time notwithstanding my correct and even conventional conduct in offering him a cake; it seemed to me symbolic of my final separation from the Fyne household. And I remembered against him how on a certain day he had abandoned poor Flora de Barral--who was morbidly sensitive.

I sat down in the porch and, maybe inspired by secret antagonism to the Fynes, I said to myself deliberately that Captain Anthony must be a fine fellow. Yet on the facts as I knew them he might have been a dangerous trifler or a downright

scoundrel. He had made a miserable, hopeless girl follow him clandestinely to London. It is true that the girl had written since, only Mrs. Fyne had been remarkably vague as to the contents. They were unsatisfactory. They did not positively announce imminent nuptials as far as I could make it out from her rather mysterious hints. But then her inexperience might have led her astray. There was no fathoming the innocence of a woman like Mrs. Fyne who, venturing as far as possible in theory, would know nothing of the real aspect of things. It would have been comic if she were making all this fuss for nothing. But I rejected this suspicion for the honour of human nature.

I imagined to myself Captain Anthony as simple and romantic. It was much more pleasant. Genius is not hereditary but temperament may be. And he was the son of a poet with an admirable gift of individualising, of etherealizing the common-place; of making touching, delicate, fascinating the most hopeless conventions of the, so-called, refined existence.

What I could not understand was Mrs. Fyne's dog-in-the-manger attitude. Sentimentally she needed that brother of hers so little! What could it matter to her one way or another--setting aside common humanity which would suggest at least a neutral attitude. Unless indeed it was the blind working of the law that in our world of chances the luckless must be put in the wrong somehow.

And musing thus on the general inclination of our instincts towards injustice I met unexpectedly, at the turn of the road, as it were, a shape of duplicity. It might have been unconscious on Mrs. Fyne's part, but her leading idea appeared to me to be not to keep, not to preserve her brother, but to get rid of him definitely. She did not hope to stop anything. She had too much sense for that. Almost anyone out of an idiot asylum would have had enough sense for that. She wanted the protest to be made, emphatically, with Fyne's fullest concurrence in order to make all intercourse for the future impossible. Such an action would estrange the pair for ever from the Fynes. She understood her brother and the girl too. Happy together, they would never forgive that outspoken hostility--and should the marriage turn out badly . . . Well, it would be just the same. Neither of them would be likely to bring their troubles to such a good prophet of evil.

Yes. That must have been her motive. The inspiration of a possibly unconscious Machiavellism! Either she was afraid of having a sister-in- law to look after during the husband's long absences; or dreaded the more or less distant eventuality of her brother being persuaded to leave the sea, the friendly refuge of his unhappy youth, and to settle on shore, bringing to her very door this undesirable, this embarrassing connection. She wanted to be done with it--maybe simply from the fatigue of continuous effort in good or evil, which, in the bulk of common mortals, accounts for so many surprising inconsistencies of conduct.

I don't know that I had classed Mrs. Fyne, in my thoughts, amongst common mortals. She was too quietly sure of herself for that. But little Fyne, as I spied him next morning (out of the carriage window) speeding along the platform, looked very much like a common, flustered mortal who has made a very near thing of catching his train: the starting wild eyes, the tense and excited face, the distracted gait, all the common symptoms were there, rendered more impressive by his native solemnity which flapped about him like a disordered garment. Had he--I asked myself with interest--resisted his wife to the very last minute and then bolted up the road from the last conclusive argument, as though it had been a loaded gun suddenly produced? I opened the carriage door, and a vigorous porter shoved him in from behind just as the end of the rustic platform went gliding swiftly from under his feet. He was very much out of breath, and I waited with some curiosity for the moment he would recover his power of speech. That moment came. He said "Good morning" with a slight gasp, remained very still for another minute and then pulled out of his pocket the travelling chessboard, and holding it in his hand, directed at me a glance of inquiry.

"Yes. Certainly," I said, very much disappointed.