PART II--THE KNIGHT

CHAPTER ONE--THE FERNDALE

I have said that the story of Flora de Barral was imparted to me in stages. At this stage I did not see Marlow for some time. At last, one evening rather early, very soon after dinner, he turned up in my rooms.

I had been waiting for his call primed with a remark which had not occurred to me till after he had gone away.

"I say," I tackled him at once, "how can you be certain that Flora de Barral ever went to sea? After all, the wife of the captain of the Ferndale--" the lady that mustn't be disturbed "of the old ship-keeper--may not have been Flora."

"Well, I do know," he said, "if only because I have been keeping in touch with Mr. Powell."

"You have!" I cried. "This is the first I hear of it. And since when?"

"Why, since the first day. You went up to town leaving me in the inn. I slept ashore. In the morning Mr. Powell came in for breakfast; and after the first awkwardness of meeting a man you have been yarning with over- night had worn off, we discovered a liking for each other."

As I had discovered the fact of their mutual liking before either of them, I was not surprised.

"And so you kept in touch," I said.

"It was not so very difficult. As he was always knocking about the river I hired Dingle's sloop-rigged three-tonner to be more on an equality. Powell was friendly but elusive. I don't think he ever wanted to avoid me. But it is a fact that he used to disappear out of the river in a very mysterious manner sometimes. A man may land anywhere and bolt inland--but what about his five-ton cutter? You can't carry that in your hand like a suit-case.

"Then as suddenly he would reappear in the river, after one had given him up. I did not like to be beaten. That's why I hired Dingle's decked boat. There was just the accommodation in her to sleep a man and a dog. But I had no dog-friend to

invite. Fyne's dog who saved Flora de Barral's life is the last dog-friend I had. I was rather lonely cruising about; but that, too, on the river has its charm, sometimes. I chased the mystery of the vanishing Powell dreamily, looking about me at the ships, thinking of the girl Flora, of life's chances--and, do you know, it was very simple."

"What was very simple?" I asked innocently.

"The mystery."

"They generally are that," I said.

Marlow eyed me for a moment in a peculiar manner.

"Well, I have discovered the mystery of Powell's disappearances. The fellow used to run into one of these narrow tidal creeks on the Essex shore. These creeks are so inconspicuous that till I had studied the chart pretty carefully I did not know of their existence. One afternoon, I made Powell's boat out, heading into the shore. By the time I got close to the mud-flat his craft had disappeared inland. But I could see the mouth of the creek by then. The tide being on the turn I took the risk of getting stuck in the mud suddenly and headed in. All I had to guide me was the top of the roof of some sort of small building. I got in more by good luck than by good management. The sun had set some time before; my boat glided in a sort of winding ditch between two low grassy banks; on both sides of me was the flatness of the Essex marsh, perfectly still. All I saw moving was a heron; he was flying low, and disappeared in the murk. Before I had gone half a mile, I was up with the building the roof of which I had seen from the river. It looked like a small barn. A row of piles driven into the soft bank in front of it and supporting a few planks made a sort of wharf. All this was black in the falling dusk, and I could just distinguish the whitish ruts of a cart- track stretching over the marsh towards the higher land, far away. Not a sound was to be heard. Against the low streak of light in the sky I could see the mast of Powell's cutter moored to the bank some twenty yards, no more, beyond that black barn or whatever it was. I hailed him with a loud shout. Got no answer. After making fast my boat just astern, I walked along the bank to have a look at Powell's. Being so much bigger than mine she was aground already. Her sails were furled; the slide of her scuttle hatch was closed and padlocked. Powell was gone. He had walked off into that dark, still marsh somewhere. I had not seen a single house anywhere near; there did not seem to be any human habitation for miles; and now as darkness fell denser over the land I couldn't see the glimmer of a single light. However, I supposed that there must be some village or hamlet not very far away; or only one of these mysterious little inns one comes upon sometimes in most unexpected and lonely places.

"The stillness was oppressive. I went back to my boat, made some coffee over a spirit-lamp, devoured a few biscuits, and stretched myself aft, to smoke and gaze at the stars. The earth was a mere shadow, formless and silent, and empty, till a bullock turned up from somewhere, quite shadowy too. He came smartly to the very edge of the bank as though he meant to step on board, stretched his muzzle right over my boat, blew heavily once, and walked off contemptuously into the darkness from which he had come. I had not expected a call from a bullock, though a moment's thought would have shown me that there must be lots of cattle and sheep on that marsh. Then everything became still as before. I might have imagined myself arrived on a desert island. In fact, as I reclined smoking a sense of absolute loneliness grew on me. And just as it had become intense, very abruptly and without any preliminary sound I heard firm, quick footsteps on the little wharf. Somebody coming along the cart-track had just stepped at a swinging gait on to the planks. That somebody could only have been Mr. Powell. Suddenly he stopped short, having made out that there were two masts alongside the bank where he had left only one. Then he came on silent on the grass. When I spoke to him he was astonished.

"Who would have thought of seeing you here!" he exclaimed, after returning my good evening.

"I told him I had run in for company. It was rigorously true."

"You knew I was here?" he exclaimed.

"Of course," I said. "I tell you I came in for company."

"He is a really good fellow," went on Marlow. "And his capacity for astonishment is quickly exhausted, it seems. It was in the most matter- of-fact manner that he said, 'Come on board of me, then; I have here enough supper for two.' He was holding a bulky parcel in the crook of his arm. I did not wait to be asked twice, as you may guess. His cutter has a very neat little cabin, quite big enough for two men not only to sleep but to sit and smoke in. We left the scuttle wide open, of course. As to his provisions for supper, they were not of a luxurious kind. He complained that the shops in the village were miserable. There was a big village within a mile and a half. It struck me he had been very long doing his shopping; but naturally I made no remark. I didn't want to talk at all except for the purpose of setting him going."

"And did you set him going?" I asked.

"I did," said Marlow, composing his features into an impenetrable expression

which somehow assured me of his success better than an air of triumph could have done.

* * * * *

"You made him talk?" I said after a silence.

"Yes, I made him . . . about himself."

"And to the point?"

"If you mean by this," said Marlow, "that it was about the voyage of the Ferndale, then again, yes. I brought him to talk about that voyage, which, by the by, was not the first voyage of Flora de Barral. The man himself, as I told you, is simple, and his faculty of wonder not very great. He's one of those people who form no theories about facts. Straightforward people seldom do. Neither have they much penetration. But in this case it did not matter. I--we--have already the inner knowledge. We know the history of Flora de Barral. We know something of Captain Anthony. We have the secret of the situation. The man was intoxicated with the pity and tenderness of his part. Oh yes! Intoxicated is not too strong a word; for you know that love and desire take many disguises. I believe that the girl had been frank with him, with the frankness of women to whom perfect frankness is impossible, because so much of their safety depends on judicious reticences. I am not indulging in cheap sneers. There is necessity in these things. And moreover she could not have spoken with a certain voice in the face of his impetuosity, because she did not have time to understand either the state of her feelings, or the precise nature of what she was doing.

Had she spoken ever so clearly he was, I take it, too elated to hear her distinctly. I don't mean to imply that he was a fool. Oh dear no! But he had no training in the usual conventions, and we must remember that he had no experience whatever of women. He could only have an ideal conception of his position. An ideal is often but a flaming vision of reality.

To him enters Fyne, wound up, if I may express myself so irreverently, wound up to a high pitch by his wife's interpretation of the girl's letter. He enters with his talk of meanness and cruelty, like a bucket of water on the flame. Clearly a shock. But the effects of a bucket of water are diverse. They depend on the kind of flame. A mere blaze of dry straw, of course . . . but there can be no question of straw there. Anthony of the Ferndale was not, could not have been, a straw-stuffed specimen of a man. There are flames a bucket of water sends leaping sky-high.

We may well wonder what happened when, after Fyne had left him, the hesitating girl went up at last and opened the door of that room where our man, I am certain, was not extinguished. Oh no! Nor cold; whatever else he might have been.

It is conceivable he might have cried at her in the first moment of humiliation, of exasperation, "Oh, it's you! Why are you here? If I am so odious to you that you must write to my sister to say so, I give you back your word." But then, don't you see, it could not have been that. I have the practical certitude that soon afterwards they went together in a hansom to see the ship--as agreed. That was my reason for saying that Flora de Barral did go to sea . . . "

"Yes. It seems conclusive," I agreed. "But even without that--if, as you seem to think, the very desolation of that girlish figure had a sort of perversely seductive charm, making its way through his compassion to his senses (and everything is possible)--then such words could not have been spoken."

"They might have escaped him involuntarily," observed Marlow. "However, a plain fact settles it. They went off together to see the ship."

"Do you conclude from this that nothing whatever was said?" I inquired.

"I should have liked to see the first meeting of their glances upstairs there," mused Marlow. "And perhaps nothing was said. But no man comes out of such a 'wrangle' (as Fyne called it) without showing some traces of it. And you may be sure that a girl so bruised all over would feel the slightest touch of anything resembling coldness. She was mistrustful; she could not be otherwise; for the energy of evil is so much more forcible than the energy of good that she could not help looking still upon her abominable governess as an authority. How could one have expected her to throw off the unholy prestige of that long domination? She could not help believing what she had been told; that she was in some mysterious way odious and unlovable. It was cruelly true--to her. The oracle of so many years had spoken finally. Only other people did not find her out at once . . . I would not go so far as to say she believed it altogether. That would be hardly possible. But then haven't the most flattered, the most conceited of us their moments of doubt? Haven't they? Well, I don't know. There may be lucky beings in this world unable to believe any evil of themselves. For my own part I'll tell you that once, many years ago now, it came to my knowledge that a fellow I had been mixed up with in a certain transaction--a clever fellow whom I really despised--was going around telling people that I was a consummate hypocrite. He could know nothing of it. It suited his humour to say so. I had given him no ground for that particular calumny. Yet to this day there are moments when it comes into my mind, and involuntarily I ask myself, 'What if it were true?' It's absurd, but it

has on one or two occasions nearly affected my conduct. And yet I was not an impressionable ignorant young girl. I had taken the exact measure of the fellow's utter worthlessness long before. He had never been for me a person of prestige and power, like that awful governess to Flora de Barral. See the might of suggestion? We live at the mercy of a malevolent word. A sound, a mere disturbance of the air, sinks into our very soul sometimes. Flora de Barral had been more astounded than convinced by the first impetuosity of Roderick Anthony. She let herself be carried along by a mysterious force which her person had called into being, as her father had been carried away out of his depth by the unexpected power of successful advertising.

They went on board that morning. The Ferndale had just come to her loading berth. The only living creature on board was the ship-keeper--whether the same who had been described to us by Mr. Powell, or another, I don't know. Possibly some other man. He, looking over the side, saw, in his own words, 'the captain come sailing round the corner of the nearest cargo-shed, in company with a girl.' He lowered the accommodation ladder down on to the jetty . . . "

"How do you know all this?" I interrupted.

Marlow interjected an impatient:

"You shall see by and by . . . Flora went up first, got down on deck and stood stock-still till the captain took her by the arm and led her aft. The ship-keeper let them into the saloon. He had the keys of all the cabins, and stumped in after them. The captain ordered him to open all the doors, every blessed door; state-rooms, passages, pantry, fore-cabin--and then sent him away.

"The Ferndale had magnificent accommodation. At the end of a passage leading from the quarter-deck there was a long saloon, its sumptuosity slightly tarnished perhaps, but having a grand air of roominess and comfort. The harbour carpets were down, the swinging lamps hung, and everything in its place, even to the silver on the sideboard. Two large stern cabins opened out of it, one on each side of the rudder casing. These two cabins communicated through a small bathroom between them, and one was fitted up as the captain's state-room. The other was vacant, and furnished with arm-chairs and a round table, more like a room on shore, except for the long curved settee following the shape of the ship's stern. In a dim inclined mirror, Flora caught sight down to the waist of a pale-faced girl in a white straw hat trimmed with roses, distant, shadowy, as if immersed in water, and was surprised to recognize herself in those surroundings. They seemed to her arbitrary, bizarre, strange. Captain Anthony moved on, and she followed him. He showed her the other cabins. He talked all the time loudly in a voice she seemed to have known extremely well for a long time; and yet, she reflected, she

had not heard it often in her life. What he was saying she did not quite follow. He was speaking of comparatively indifferent things in a rather moody tone, but she felt it round her like a caress. And when he stopped she could hear, alarming in the sudden silence, the precipitated beating of her heart.

The ship-keeper dodged about the quarter-deck, out of hearing, and trying to keep out of sight. At the same time, taking advantage of the open doors with skill and prudence, he could see the captain and "that girl" the captain had brought aboard. The captain was showing her round very thoroughly. Through the whole length of the passage, far away aft in the perspective of the saloon the ship-keeper had interesting glimpses of them as they went in and out of the various cabins, crossing from side to side, remaining invisible for a time in one or another of the state-rooms, and then reappearing again in the distance. The girl, always following the captain, had her sunshade in her hands. Mostly she would hang her head, but now and then she would look up. They had a lot to say to each other, and seemed to forget they weren't alone in the ship. He saw the captain put his hand on her shoulder, and was preparing himself with a certain zest for what might follow, when the "old man" seemed to recollect himself, and came striding down all the length of the saloon. At this move the ship-keeper promptly dodged out of sight, as you may believe, and heard the captain slam the inner door of the passage. After that disappointment the ship-keeper waited resentfully for them to clear out of the ship. It happened much sooner than he had expected. The girl walked out on deck first. As before she did not look round. She didn't look at anything; and she seemed to be in such a hurry to get ashore that she made for the gangway and started down the ladder without waiting for the captain.

What struck the ship-keeper most was the absent, unseeing expression of the captain, striding after the girl. He passed him, the ship-keeper, without notice, without an order, without so much as a look. The captain had never done so before. Always had a nod and a pleasant word for a man. From this slight the ship-keeper drew a conclusion unfavourable to the strange girl. He gave them time to get down on the wharf before crossing the deck to steal one more look at the pair over the rail. The captain took hold of the girl's arm just before a couple of railway trucks drawn by a horse came rolling along and hid them from the ship- keeper's sight for good.

Next day, when the chief mate joined the ship, he told him the tale of the visit, and expressed himself about the girl "who had got hold of the captain" disparagingly. She didn't look healthy, he explained. "Shabby clothes, too," he added spitefully.

The mate was very much interested. He had been with Anthony for several years,

and had won for himself in the course of many long voyages, a footing of familiarity, which was to be expected with a man of Anthony's character. But in that slowly-grown intimacy of the sea, which in its duration and solitude had its unguarded moments, no words had passed, even of the most casual, to prepare him for the vision of his captain associated with any kind of girl. His impression had been that women did not exist for Captain Anthony. Exhibiting himself with a girl! A girl! What did he want with a girl? Bringing her on board and showing her round the cabin! That was really a little bit too much. Captain Anthony ought to have known better.

Franklin (the chief mate's name was Franklin) felt disappointed; almost disillusioned. Silly thing to do! Here was a confounded old ship-keeper set talking. He snubbed the ship-keeper, and tried to think of that insignificant bit of foolishness no more; for it diminished Captain Anthony in his eyes of a jealously devoted subordinate.

Franklin was over forty; his mother was still alive. She stood in the forefront of all women for him, just as Captain Anthony stood in the forefront of all men. We may suppose that these groups were not very large. He had gone to sea at a very early age. The feeling which caused these two people to partly eclipse the rest of mankind were of course not similar; though in time he had acquired the conviction that he was "taking care" of them both. The "old lady" of course had to be looked after as long as she lived. In regard to Captain Anthony, he used to say that: why should he leave him? It wasn't likely that he would come across a better sailor or a better man or a more comfortable ship. As to trying to better himself in the way of promotion, commands were not the sort of thing one picked up in the streets, and when it came to that, Captain Anthony was as likely to give him a lift on occasion as anyone in the world.

From Mr. Powell's description Franklin was a short, thick black-haired man, bald on the top. His head sunk between the shoulders, his staring prominent eyes and a florid colour, gave him a rather apoplectic appearance. In repose, his congested face had a humorously melancholy expression.

The ship-keeper having given him up all the keys and having been chased forward with the admonition to mind his own business and not to chatter about what did not concern him, Mr. Franklin went under the poop. He opened one door after another; and, in the saloon, in the captain's state- room and everywhere, he stared anxiously as if expecting to see on the bulkheads, on the deck, in the air, something unusual--sign, mark, emanation, shadow--he hardly knew what--some subtle change wrought by the passage of a girl. But there was nothing. He entered the unoccupied stern cabin and spent some time there unscrewing the two stern ports. In the absence of all material evidences his

uneasiness was passing away. With a last glance round he came out and found himself in the presence of his captain advancing from the other end of the saloon.

Franklin, at once, looked for the girl. She wasn't to be seen. The captain came up quickly. 'Oh! you are here, Mr. Franklin.' And the mate said, 'I was giving a little air to the place, sir.' Then the captain, his hat pulled down over his eyes, laid his stick on the table and asked in his kind way: 'How did you find your mother, Franklin?'--'The old lady's first-rate, sir, thank you.' And then they had nothing to say to each other. It was a strange and disturbing feeling for Franklin. He, just back from leave, the ship just come to her loading berth, the captain just come on board, and apparently nothing to say! The several questions he had been anxious to ask as to various things which had to be done had slipped out of his mind. He, too, felt as though he had nothing to say.

The captain, picking up his stick off the table, marched into his state- room and shut the door after him. Franklin remained still for a moment and then started slowly to go on deck. But before he had time to reach the other end of the saloon he heard himself called by name. He turned round. The captain was staring from the doorway of his state-room. Franklin said, "Yes, sir." But the captain, silent, leaned a little forward grasping the door handle. So he, Franklin, walked aft keeping his eyes on him. When he had come up quite close he said again, "Yes, sir?" interrogatively. Still silence. The mate didn't like to be stared at in that manner, a manner quite new in his captain, with a defiant and self-conscious stare, like a man who feels ill and dares you to notice it. Franklin gazed at his captain, felt that there was something wrong, and in his simplicity voiced his feelings by asking point-blank:

"What's wrong, sir?"

The captain gave a slight start, and the character of his stare changed to a sort of sinister surprise. Franklin grew very uncomfortable, but the captain asked negligently:

"What makes you think that there's something wrong?"

"I can't say exactly. You don't look quite yourself, sir," Franklin owned up.

"You seem to have a confoundedly piercing eye," said the captain in such an aggressive tone that Franklin was moved to defend himself.

"We have been together now over six years, sir, so I suppose I know you a bit by this time. I could see there was something wrong directly you came on board."

"Mr. Franklin," said the captain, "we have been more than six years together, it is true, but I didn't know you for a reader of faces. You are not a correct reader though. It's very far from being wrong. You understand? As far from being wrong as it can very well be. It ought to teach you not to make rash surmises. You should leave that to the shore people. They are great hands at spying out something wrong. I dare say they know what they have made of the world. A dam' poor job of it and that's plain. It's a confoundedly ugly place, Mr. Franklin. You don't know anything of it? Well--no, we sailors don't. Only now and then one of us runs against something cruel or underhand, enough to make your hair stand on end. And when you do see a piece of their wickedness you find that to set it right is not so easy as it looks . . . Oh! I called you back to tell you that there will be a lot of workmen, joiners and all that sent down on board first thing to-morrow morning to start making alterations in the cabin. You will see to it that they don't loaf. There isn't much time."

Franklin was impressed by this unexpected lecture upon the wickedness of the solid world surrounded by the salt, uncorruptible waters on which he and his captain had dwelt all their lives in happy innocence. What he could not understand was why it should have been delivered, and what connection it could have with such a matter as the alterations to be carried out in the cabin. The work did not seem to him to be called for in such a hurry. What was the use of altering anything? It was a very good accommodation, spacious, well-distributed, on a rather old-fashioned plan, and with its decorations somewhat tarnished. But a dab of varnish, a touch of gilding here and there, was all that was necessary. As to comfort, it could not be improved by any alterations. He resented the notion of change; but he said dutifully that he would keep his eye on the workmen if the captain would only let him know what was the nature of the work he had ordered to be done.

"You'll find a note of it on this table. I'll leave it for you as I go ashore," said Captain Anthony hastily. Franklin thought there was no more to hear, and made a movement to leave the saloon. But the captain continued after a slight pause, "You will be surprised, no doubt, when you look at it. There'll be a good many alterations. It's on account of a lady coming with us. I am going to get married, Mr. Franklin!"