

Mrs. Poultney had two obsessions : or two aspects of the same obsession. One was Dirt – though she made some sort of exception of the kitchen, since only the servants lived there – and the other was Immorality. In neither field did anything untoward escape her eagle eye.

She was like some plump vulture, endlessly circling in her endless leisure, and endowed in the first field with a miraculous sixth sense as regards dust, fingermarks, insufficiently starched linen, smells, stains, breakages and all the ills that houses are heir to. A gardener would be dismissed for being seen to come into the house with earth on his hands ; a butler for having a spot of wine on his stock ; a maid for having slut's wool under her bed.

But the most abominable thing of all was that even outside her house she acknowledged no bounds to her authority. Failure to be seen at church, both at matins and at evensong, on Sunday was tantamount to proof of the worst moral laxity. Heaven help the maid seen out walking, on one of her rare free afternoons – one a month was the reluctant allowance – with a young man. And heaven also help the young man so in love that he tried to approach Marlborough House secretly to keep an assignation : for the gardens were a positive forest of humane man-traps – “humane” in this context referring to the fact that the great waiting jaws were untoothed, though quite powerful enough to break a man's leg. These iron servants were the most cherished by Mrs. Poultney. *Them*, she had never dismissed.

There would have been a place in the Gestapo for the lady ; she had a way of interrogation that could reduce the sturdiest girls to tears in the first five minutes. In her fashion she was an epitome of all the most crassly arrogant traits of the ascendant British Empire. Her only notion of justice was that she must be right ; and her only notion of government was an angry bombardment of the impertinent populace.

Yet among her own class, a very limited circle, she was renowned for her charity. And if you had disputed that reputation, your opponents would have produced an incontrovertible piece of evidence : had not dear, kind Mrs. Poultney taken in the French Lieutenant's Woman ? I need hardly add that at the time the dear, kind lady knew only the other, more Grecian, nickname.

This remarkable event had taken place in the spring of 1866, exactly a year before the time of which I write ; and it had to do with the great secret of Mrs. Poultney's life. It was a very simple secret. She believed in hell.

The vicar of Lyme at that time was a comparatively emancipated man theologically, but he also knew very well which side his pastoral bread was buttered. He suited Lyme, a traditionally Low Church congregation, very well. He had the knack of a certain fervid eloquence in his sermons ; and he kept his church free of crucifixes, images, ornaments and all other signs of the Romish cancer.

John Fowles
The French Lieutenant's Woman
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Cours de Ph. Romanski