CHAPTER II

A JOURNEY IN THE TWOPENNY TUBE. A VERY NICE GIRL, AND A NEGOTIATION. AN EXPOSED WIRE, AND AN ELECTROCUTION

He took his fare in the Twopenny Tube. It was the last twopence but one that he had in his pocket. Something fascinated him in the idea of commanding, in exchange for that twopence, the power of alighting at any point between Cheapside and Shepherd's Bush. Which should it be?

If he could only make up his mind to *not* alighting at Chancery Lane, he would have two whole minutes for consideration. If British Museum he would have four. If Tottenham Court Road, six—and so on. For the time being he was a sort of monarch, in a small way, over Time and Space. He would go on to the Museum, at any rate.

What little things life hangs on, sometimes! If he had foolishly got out at either Chancery Lane or British Museum, there either would have been no reason for writing this story; or, if written, it would have been quite different. For at the Museum Station a girl got into the carriage; and, passing him on her way to a central haven of rest, trod on his foot, with severity. It hurt, so palpably, that the girl begged his pardon. She was a nice girl, and sorry.

He forgave her because she was a nice girl, with beautiful rows of teeth and merry eyebrows. He might have forgiven her if she had been a dowdy. But he liked forgiving those teeth, and those eyebrows.

So when she sat down in the haven, close to his left shoulder, he wasn't sorry that his remark that *he* ought to beg *her* pardon, because it was all his fault for sticking out, overlapped her coming to an anchor. If it had been got through quicker, the incident would have been regarded as closed. As it was, the fag-end of it was unexhausted, and she didn't quite catch the whole. It was in no way unnatural that she should turn her head

slightly, and say: "I beg your pardon." Absolute silence would have been almost discourteous, after plunging on to what might have been a bad corn.

"I only meant it was my fault for jamming up the whole gangway."

"Oh yes—but it was my fault all the same—for—for——"

"Yes—I beg your pardon? You were going to say—for——?"

"Well—I mean—for standing on it so long, then! If you had called out—but indeed I didn't think it was a foot. I thought it was something in the electricity."

Two things were evident. One was that it was perfectly impossible to be stiff and stodgy over it, and not laugh out. The other, the obvious absurdity of imputing any sort of motive to the serene frankness and absolute candour of the speaker. Any sort of motive—"of *that* sort"—said he to himself, without further analysis. He threw himself into the laugh, without attempting any. It disposed of the discussion of the subject, but left matters so that stolid silence would have been priggish. It seemed to him that not to say another word would almost have amounted to an insinuation against the eyebrows and the teeth. He would say one—a most impersonal one.

"Do they stop at Bond Street?"

"Do you want to stop at Bond Street?"

"Not at all. I don't care where I stop. I think I meant—is there a station at Bond Street?"

"The station wasn't opened at first. But it's open now."

What an irritating thing a conversation can be! Here was this one, just as one of its constituents was beginning to wish it to go on, must needs exhaust its subject and confess that artificial nourishment was needed to sustain it. And she—(for it was she, not he:—did you guess wrong?)—had begun to want to know, don't you see, why the man with the hair on the back of his browned hand and the big plain gold ring on his thumb did not care where he stopped. If he had had a holiday look about him she might have concluded that he was seeing London, and then what could be more natural than to break loose, as it were, in the Twopenny Tube? But in spite of his leisurely look, he had not in the least the seeming of a holiday-maker. His clothes were not right for the part. What he was

could not be guessed without a clue, and the conversation had collapsed, clearly! It was irritating to be gravelled for lack of matter—and he was such a perfect stranger! The girl was a reader of Shakespeare, but she certainly didn't see her way to Rosalind's little expedient. "Even though my own name *is* Rosalind," said she to herself.

It was the readiness and completeness with which the man dropped the subject, and recoiled into himself, that gave the girl courage to make an attempt to satisfy her curiosity. When a man harks back, palpably, on some preoccupation, after exchanging a laugh and an impersonal word or two with a girl who does not know him, it is the best confirmation possible of his previous good faith in seeming more fatherlike than manlike. Rosalind could risk it, surely. "Very likely he has a daughter my age," said she to herself. Then she saw an opening—the thumb-ring.

"Do pray excuse me for asking, but do you find it does good? My mother was recommended to try one."

"This ring? It hasn't done *me* any good. But then, I have hardly anything the matter. I don't know about other people. I'm sorry I bought it, now. It cost four-and-sixpence, I think. I would sooner have the four-and-sixpence. . . . Yes, decidedly! I would sooner have the four-and-sixpence."

"Can't you sell it?"

"I don't believe I could get sixpence for it."

"Do please excuse me—I mean, excuse the liberty I take—but I should so much like to—to . . ."

"To buy it for sixpence? Certainly. Why not? Much better than paying four-and-six for a new one. Your mother *may* find it do her good. I don't care about it, and I really have nothing the matter."

He drew the ring off his thumb, and Rosalind took it from him. She slipped it on her finger, over her glove. Naturally it slipped off—a man's thumb-ring! She passed it up inside the glove-palm, through the little slot above the buttons. Then she got out her purse, and looked in to see what its resources were.

"I have only got half-a-crown," said she. The man flushed slightly. Rosalind fancied he was angry, and had supposed she

was offering beyond her bargain, which might have implied liberality, or benevolence, or something equally offensive. But it wasn't that at all.

"I have no change," said he. "Never mind about the sixpence. Send me stamps. I'll give you my card." And then he recollected he had no card, and said so.

"It doesn't matter being very exact," said she.

"I have no money at all. Except twopence."

Rosalind hesitated. This man must be very hard up, only he certainly did not give that impression. Still, "no money at all, except twopence!" Would it be safe to try to get the half-crown into his pocket? That was what she wanted to do, but felt she might easily blunder over it. If she was to achieve it, she must be quick, for the public within hearing was already feeling in its pocket, in order to oblige with change for half-a-crown. She *was* quick.

"*You* send it *me* in stamps," she said, pressing the coin on him. "Take it, and I'll get my card for the address. It will be one-and-eleven exactly, because of the postage. It ought to be a penny for stationery, too. . . . Oh, well! never mind, then. . . ."

She had got the card, and the man, demurring to the stationery suggestion, and, indeed, hesitating whether to take the coin at all, looked at the card with a little surprise on his face. He read it:

MRS. NIGHTINGALE.

MISS ROSALIND NIGHTINGALE.

KRAKATOA, GLENMOIRA ROAD,
SHEPHERD'S BUSH, W.

"I'm not Mrs. Nightingale," said the girl. "That's my mother."

"Oh no!" said he. "It wasn't that. It was only that I knew the name once—years ago."

The link in the dialogue here was that she had thought the surprise was due to his crediting her with matrimony and a visiting-card daughter. She was just thinking could she legitimately inquire into the previous Nightingale, when he said some more of his own accord, and saved her the trouble.

"Rosalind Nightingale was the name," said he. "Do you know any relation——"

"Only my mother," answered the girl, surprised. "She's Rosalind, too, like me. I mean, *I'm* Rosalind. I am always called Sally, though."

The man was going to answer when, as luck would have it, the card slipped from his fingers and fluttered down. In pursuing it he missed the half-crown, which the young lady released, fancying he was about to take hold of it, and stooped to search for it where it had rolled under the seat.

"How idiotic of me!" said he.

"Next station Uxbridge Road," thus the guard proclaimed; and then, seeing the exploration that was going on after the half-crown, he added: "I should let it go at that, mister, if I was you."

The man asked why?

"There was a party tried that game last week. He's in the horspital now." This was portentous and enigmatical. The guard continued: "If a party gets electrocuted, it's no concern of the employees on the line. It lies between such parties and the Company. I shouldn't myself, if I was you! But it's between you and the Company. I wash *my* hands."

"If the wires are properly insulated"—this was from an important elderly gentleman, of a species invariable under the circumstances—"*if* the wires are properly insulated, there is not the slightest cause for apprehension of any sort or kind."

"Very good!" said the guard gloomily. "Then all I say is, insoolate 'em yourselves. Don't try to put it on me! Or else keep your hands well outside of the circuit." But the elderly gentleman was not ready to acquiesce in the conditions pointed at.

"I repeat," said he, "that the protection of the public is, or ought to be, amply secured by the terms of the Company's charter. If any loophole exists for the escape of the electric current,

all I can say is, the circumstances call for public inquiry. The safety of the public is the concern of the authorities."

"Then," said the guard pointedly, "if I was the public, I should put my hands in my pocket, and not go fishing about for ambiguous property in corners. There!—what did I tell you? Now you'll say that was me, I suppose?"

The thing that hadn't been the guard was a sudden crackle that leaped out in a blue flame under the seat where the man's hand was exploring for the half-crown. It was either that, or another like it, at the man's heel. Or both together. A little boy was intensely delighted, and wanted more of the same sort. The elderly gentleman turned purple with indignation, and would at once complain to the authorities. They would take the matter up, he doubted not. It was a disgrace, etc., etc., etc.

Rosalind, or Sally, Nightingale showed no alarm. Her merry eyebrows were as merry as ever, and her smile was as unconscious a frame to her pearly teeth as ever, when she turned to the mother of the delighted little boy and spoke.

"There now! It's exactly like that when I comb my hair in very dry weather." And the good woman was able to confirm this from her own experience, narrating (with needless details) the strange phenomena attendant on the head of a young person in quite a good situation at Woollamses, and really almost a lady, stating several times what she had said to the young person, Miss Ada Taylor, and what answer she had received. She treated the matter entirely with reference to the bearings of the electric current on questions of social status.

But the man did not move, remaining always with his arm under the seat. Rosalind, or Sally, thought he had run the half-crown home, but in some fixed corner from which detachment was for a moment difficult. Wondering why the moment should last so long, she spoke.

"Have you got it?" said she.

But the man spoke never a word, and remained quite still.