

### CHAPTER III

KRAKATOA VILLA, AND HOW THE ELECTROCUTED TRAVELLER WENT THERE IN A CAB. A CURIOUS WELCOME TO A PERFECT STRANGER. THE STRANGER'S LABEL. A CANCELLED MEMORY. BACK LIKE A BAD SHILLING

KRAKATOA was a semi-detached villa, a few minutes' walk from Shepherd's Bush Station. It looked like a showily dressed wife of a shabby husband; for the semi-detached other villa next door had been standing to let for years, and its compo front was in a state of decomposition from past frosts, and its paint was parched and thin in the glare of the present June sun, and peeling and dripping spiritlessly from the closed shutters among the dead flies behind the cracked panes of glass that had quite forgotten the meaning of whitening and water, and that wouldn't hack out easy by reason of the putty having gone 'ard. One knew at a glance that if the turncock was to come, see, and overcome the reluctance of the allotted cock-to-be-turned, the water would burst out at every pore of the service-pipes in that house, except the taps; and would know also that the adept who came to soften their hearts and handles would have to go back for his tools, and would be a very long time away.

Krakatoa, on the other hand, was resplendent with stone-colour, and smelt strongly of it. And its door you could see through the glass of into the hall, when its shutters were not thumb-screwed up over the panes, was painted a green that staggered the reason, and smelt even more strongly than the stone-colour. And all the paint was so thick that the beadings on the door were dim memories, and all the execution on the sculptured goblets on pedestals flanking the steps in the front garden was as good as spoiled. And the paint simmered in the sun, and here and there it blistered and altogether suggested that Krakatoa, like St. Nicholas, might have halved its coats with the beggar next door—given him, suppose, one flat and one

round coat. Also, that either the job had been 'urried, and not giv' proper time to dry, or that the summer had come too soon, and we should pay for it later on, you see if we didn't!

The coatless and woe-begone villa next door had almost lost its name, so faded was the lettering on the gate-post that was putting out its bell-handle to the passer-by, even as the patient puts out his tongue to the doctor. But experts in palimpsests, if they had penetrated the superscriptions in chalk and pencil of idle authorship, would have found that it was The Retreat. Probably this would have been revealed even if the texts had been merely Bowdlerised with Indian-rubber or a sponge, because there were a good many objectionable passages.

But The Retreat *was* a retreat, and smelt strong of the Hermits, who were cats. Krakatoa was not a volcano, except so far as eruptions on the paint went. But then it had become Krakatoa through a mistake; for the four coats of paint at the end of the first seven years, as per agreement, having completely hidden the first name, Saratoga, and the builders' retention of it having been feeble—possibly even affected by newspaper posters, for it was not long after the date of the great eruption—the new name had crept in in the absence of those who could have corrected it, but had gone to Brighton to get out of the smell of the paint.

When they returned, Mr. Prichard, the builder, though shocked and hurt at the discovery that the wrong name had been put up, was strongly opposed to any correction or alteration, especially as it would always show if altered back. You couldn't make a job of it; not to say a proper job. Besides, the names were morally the same, and it was absurd to allow a variation in the letters to impose on our imagination. The two names had been applied to very different turns-out abroad, certainly; but then they did all sorts of things abroad. If Saratoga, why not Krakatoa? Mr. Prichard was entrenched in a stronghold of total ignorance of literary matters, and his position, that mere differences of words ought not to tell upon a healthy mind, was difficult to shake, especially as he had the coign of vantage. He had only to remain inanimate, and what could a (presumably) widow lady with one small daughter do against him? So at the end of the first seven years, what had been Saratoga became Krakatoa, and remained so.

And it was in the back garden of the again newly painted villa, seven years later, that the lady of the house, who was watering the garden in the cool of the afternoon, asked her excited daughter, who had just come home in a cab, what on earth could have prompted her to do such a mad thing, such a perfectly *insane* thing! We shall see what it was immediately.

"Oh, Sally, Sally!" exclaimed that young person's still young and very handsome mother. "What *will* the child do next?"

"Oh, mamma, mamma!" answers Sally, just on the edge of a burst of tears; "what *was* I to do? What *could* I do? It was all my fault from the beginning. You *know* I couldn't leave him to be taken to the police-station, or the hospital, or——"

"Yes, of course you could! Why not?"

"And not know what became of him, or anything? Oh, mother!"

"You silly child! Why on earth couldn't you leave him to the railway people?"

"And run away and leave him alone? Oh, *mother!*"

"But you don't even know his name."

"Mamma, dear, how *should* I know his name? Don't you see, it was just like this." And then Miss Sally Nightingale repeats, briefly and rapidly, for the second time, the circumstances of her interview in the railway-carriage and its tragic ending. Also their sequel on the railway platform, with the partial recovery of the stunned or stupefied man, his inability to speak plainly, the unsuccessful search in his pockets for something to identify him, and the final decision to put him in a cab and take him to the workhouse infirmary, pending discovery of his identity. The end of her story has a note of relief in it:

"And it was then I saw Dr. Vereker on the platform."

"Oh, you saw Dr. Vereker?"

"Of course I did, and he came with me. He's always so kind, you know, and he knew the station people, so . . ."

"Where is he now?"

"Outside in the cab. He stopped to see after the man. We couldn't both come away, so I came to tell you."

"You stupid chit! why couldn't you tell me at first? There, don't cry and be a goose!"

But Sally disclaims all intention of crying. Her mother discards the watering-pot and an apron, and suppresses appearances of gardening; then goes quickly through the house, passes down the steps between the scarlet geraniums in the over-painted goblets, through the gate on which Saratoga ought to be, and Krakatoa is, written, and finds a four-wheeled cab awaiting developments. One of its occupants alights and meets her on the pavement. A rapid colloquy ensues in undertones, ending in the slightly raised voice of the young man, who is clearly Dr. Vereker.

"Of course, you're perfectly right—perfectly right. But you'll have to make my peace with Miss Sally for me."

"A chit of a girl like that! Fancy a responsible man like you letting himself be twisted round the finger of a young monkey. But you men are all alike."

"Well, you know, really, what Miss Sally said was quite true—that it was only a step out of the way to call here. And she had got this idea that it was all her fault."

"Was it?"

"I can only go by what she says." The girl comes into the conversation through the gate. She may perhaps have stopped for a word or two with cook and a house-and-parlourmaid, who are deeply interested, in the rear.

"It *was* my fault," she said. "If it hadn't been for me, it would never have happened. Do see how he is now, Dr. Vereker."

It is open to surmise that the first strong impulse of generosity having died down under the corrective of a mother, our young lady is gradually seeing her way to interposing Dr. Vereker as a buffer between herself and the subject of the conversation, for she does not go to the cab-door to look in at him. The doctor does. The mother holds as aloof as possible, not to get entangled into any obligations.

"Get him away to the infirmary, or the station at once," she says. "That's the best thing to be done. They'll take care of him till his friends come to claim him. Of course, they'll come. They always do." The doctor seems to share this confidence, or affects to do so.

"Sure to. His friends or his servants," says he. "But he

can't give any account of himself yet. Of course, I don't know what he'll be able to do to-morrow morning."

He resumes his place in the cab beside its occupant, who, except for an entire want of animation, looks much like what he did in the railway-carriage—the same strong-looking man with well-marked cheek-bones, very thick brown hair and bushy brows, a skin rather tanned, and a scar on the bridge of the nose; very strong hands with a tattoo-mark showing on the wrist and an abnormal crop of hair on the back, running on to the fingers, but flawed by a scar or two. Add to this the chief thing you would recollect him by, an Elizabethan beard, and you will have all the particulars about him that a navy-blue serge suit, with shirt to match, allows to be seen of him. But you will have an impression that could you see his skin beyond the sun-mark limit on his hands and neck, you would find it also tattooed. Yet you would not at once conclude he was a sailor; rather, your conclusion might go on other lines, but always assigning to him a rough adventurous outdoor life.

When the doctor got into the cab and shut the door himself, he took too much for granted. He assumed the driver, without whom, if your horse has no ambition at all beyond tranquillity and an empty nosebag, your condition is that of one camping out; or as one in a ship moored alongside in dock, the kerbstone playing the part of the quay. Boys will then accumulate, and undervalue your appearance and belongings. And impossible persons, with no previous or subsequent existence, will endeavour to see their way to the establishment of a claim on you. And you will be rather grateful than otherwise that a policeman without active interests should accrue, and communicate to them the virus of dispersal, however long its incubation may be. You will then probably do as Dr. Vereker did, and resent the driver's disappearance. The boys, mysteriously in his, each other's, and the policeman's confidence (all to your exclusion), will be able to quicken his movements, and he will come trooping from the horizon, on or beyond which is Somebody's Entire.

All this came to pass in due course, and the horse, deprived of his nosebag, returned to his professional obligations. But it was a shabby horse in a shabby cab, to which he imparted movement by falling forwards and saving himself just before he

reached the ground. His reins were visibly made good with stout pack-thread, and he had a well-founded contempt for his whip, which seemed to come to an end too soon, and always to hit something wooden before it reached any sensitive part of his person. But he did get off at last, and showed that, as Force is a mode of motion, so Weakness is a mode of slowness, and one he took every advantage of.

The mother and daughter stood looking after the vanishing label, that stated that the complication of inefficiencies in front of it was one of twelve thousand and odd—pray Heaven, more competent ones!—in the Metropolis, and had nearly turned to go into the house, when the very much younger sister (that might have been) addressed the very much, but not impossibly, older one thus:

"Mamma, he said he knew somebody of our name!"

"Well, Miss Fiddlestick!"—with an implication of what of that? Were there not plenty of Nightingales in the world? Miss Sally is perceptive about this.

"Yes, but he said Rosalind."

"Where?"

"He didn't say where. That's all he said—Rosalind."

As the two stand together watching the retreating cab we are able to see that our first impression of them, derived perhaps from their relative ages only, was an entirely false one as far as size went. The daughter is nearly as tall as her mother, and may end by being as big a woman when she has completely graduated, taken her degree, in womanhood. But for all that we, who have looked at both faces, know that when they turn round we shall see on the shoulders of the one youth, inexperience, frankness, and expectation of things to come; on those of the other a head that keeps all the mere physical freshness of the twenties, if not quite the bloom of the teens, but—expressed Heaven knows how!—experience, reserve, and retrospect on things that have been once and are not, and that we have no right to assume to be any concern of ours. Equally true of all faces of forty, do we understand you to say? Well, we don't know about that. It was all very strong in this face.

We can look again, when they turn round. But they don't; for number twelve thousand and odd has come to a standstill,

and its energumenon has come down off its box, and is "fiddlin' at something on the 'orse's 'ed." So cook says, evidently not impressed with that cab. The doctor looks out and confers; then gets out and comes back towards the house. The girl and her mother walk to meet him.

"Never saw such a four-wheeler in my life! The harness is tied up with string, and the rein's broken. The idiot says if he had a stout bit of whipcord, he could make it square." No sooner have the words passed the doctor's lips than Miss Sally is off on a whipcord quest.

"I wish the child wouldn't always be in such a hurry," says her mother. "Now she won't know where to get it."

She calls after her ineffectually. The doctor suggests that he shall follow with instructions. Yes, suppose he does? There is precisely the thing wanted in the left-hand drawer of the table in the hall—the drawer the handle comes off. This seems unpromising, but the doctor goes, and transmission of messages ensues, heard within the house.

Left alone, Mrs. Nightingale, the elder Rosalind, seems reflective. "A funny thing, too!" she says aloud to herself. She is thinking, clearly, of how this man in the cab, who can't give any account of himself, once knew a Rosalind Nightingale.

Probably the handle has come off the drawer, for they are a long time over that string. Curiosity has time to work, and has so much effect that the lady seems to determine that, after all, she would like to see the man. Now that the cab is so far from the door, even if she spoke to him, she would not stand committed to anything. It is all settled, arranged, ratified, that he shall go to the police-station, or the infirmary, "or somewhere."

When the string, and Dr. Vereker, and Sally the daughter come out of the house, both exclaim. And the surprise they express is that the mother of the latter should have walked all the way after the cab, and should be talking to the man in it! It is not consistent with her previous attitude.

"Now, isn't that like mamma?" says Sally. If so, why be so astonished at it?—is a question that suggests itself to her hearer. But self-confutation is not a disorder for his treatment. Besides, the doctor likes it, in this case. His own surprise at mamma's conduct is unqualified by any intimate acquaintance

with her character. She may be inconsistency itself, for anything he knows.

"Is she going to turn the cab round and bring him to the house, after all?" It looks like it.

"I'm so glad," Sally replies to the doctor.

"I hope you won't repent it in sackcloth and ashes."

"I shan't. Why do you think I shall?"

"How do you know you won't?"

"You'll see!" Sally pinches her red lips tight over her two rows of pearls, and nods confirmation. Her dark eyes look merry under the merry eyebrows, and the lip-pinch makes a dimple on her chin—a dimple to remember her by. She is a taking young lady, there is no doubt of it. At least, the doctor has none.

"Yes, Sally, it's all quite right." Thus her mother, arriving a little ahead of the returning cab. "Now, don't dispute with me, child, but do just as I tell you. We'll have him in the breakfast-room; there's fewer steps." She seems to have made up her mind so completely that neither of the others interposes a word. But she replies, moved by a brain-wave, to a question that stirred in the doctor's mind.

"Oh yes; he has spoken. He spoke to me just now. I'll tell you presently. Now let's get him out. No, never mind calling cook. You take him on that side, doctor. . . . That's right!"

And then the man, whose name we still do not know, found himself half supported, half standing alone, on the pavement in front of a little white eligible residence smelling of new paint. He did not the least know what had happened. He had only a vague impression that if some one or something, he couldn't say what, would only give up hindering him, he would find something he was looking for. But how could he find it if he didn't know what it was? And that he was quite in the dark about. The half-crown and the pretty girl who had given it to him, the train-guard and his cowardice about responsibility, the public-spirited gentleman, the railway-carriage itself, to say nothing of all the exciting experiences of the morning—all, all had vanished, leaving behind only the trace of the impulse to search. Nothing else! He stood looking bewildered, then spoke thickly.

"I am giving trouble," said he. Then the two ladies and the gentleman, whom he saw dimly and did not know, looked at one another, each perhaps to see if one of the others would speak first. In the end the lady who was a woman nodded to the gentleman to speak, and then the lady who was a girl confirmed her by what was little more than an intention to nod, not quite unmixed with a mischievous enjoyment at the devolution of the duty of speech on the gentleman. It twinkled in her closed lips. But the gentleman didn't seem overwhelmed with embarrassment. He spoke as if he was used to things.

"You have had an accident, sir. . . . On the railway. . . . In the Twopenny Tube. . . . Yes, you'll remember all about it presently. . . . Yes, I'm a doctor. . . . Yes, we want you to come in and sit down and rest till you're better. . . . No, it won't be a long job. *You'll* soon come round. . . . What? . . . Oh no, no trouble at all! It's this lady's house, and she wants you to come in." The speaker seems to guess at the right meanings, as one guesses in the jaws of the telephone, perhaps with more confidence. But there was but little audible articulation on the other's part.

He seemed not to want much support—chiefly guidance. He was taken down the half-dozen steps that flanked a grass slope down to a stone paving, and through a door under the more numerous steps he had escaped climbing, and into a breakfast-room flush with the kitchen, opening on a small garden at the back. There was the marriage of Queen Victoria and Prince Albert over the chimney-piece, and a tortoiseshell cat with a collar on the oilskin cover of a square table, who rose as though half resenting strange visitors; then, after stretching, decided on some haven less liable to disturbance, and went through the window to it without effort, emotion, or sound. There was a clock under a glass cover on the chimney-piece whose works you could see through, with a fascinating ratchet movement of perfect grace and punctuality. Also a vertical orange-yellow glass vase, twisted to a spiral, and full of spills. Also the leaning tower of Pisa, done small in alabaster. He could see all these things quite plainly, and but that his tongue seemed to have struck work, could have described them. But he could not make himself out, nor how and why he came to be there at all. Where

ought he to have been, he asked himself? And, to his horror, he could not make that out either. Never mind. Patience was the word, clearly. Let him shut his eyes as he sat there, in the little breakfast-room, with the flies continually droning in the ceiling, and an especially large bluebottle busy in the window, who might just as easily have gone out and enjoyed the last hour of a long evening in a glorious sunshine, but who mysteriously preferred to beat himself for ever against a closed pane of glass, a self-constituted prisoner between it and a gauze blind—let him shut his eyes, and try to think out what it all meant, what it was all about.

All that he was perfectly certain of, at that moment, was that he was awake, with a contused pain all over, and a very stiff left hand and foot. And that, knowing he had been insensible, he was striving hard to remember what something was that had happened just before he became insensible. He had nearly got it, once or twice. Yes, now he *had* got it, surely! No, he hadn't. It was gone again.

A mind that is struggling to remember some particular thing does not deal with other possibilities of oblivion. We all know the painful phenomenon of being perfectly aware what it is we are trying to remember, feeling constantly close to it, but always failing to grasp it. We know what it will sound like when we say it, what it will mean, where it was on the page we read it on. Oh dear yes!—quite plainly. The only thing we can't remember for the life of us is—what it *was!*

And while we are making stupendous efforts to recapture some such thing, does it ever occur to any of us to ask if we may not be mistaken in our tacit assumption that we are quite certain to remember everything else as soon as we try? That, in fact, it may be our memory-faculty itself that is in fault and that we are only failing to recall one thing because at the moment it is that one sole thing, and no other, that we are trying our brains against.

It was so in the pause of a few minutes in which this man we write of, left to himself and the ticking of the clock, and hearing, through the activity of the bluebottle and the monotony of the ceiling flies, the murmur of a distant conversation between his late companions, who for the moment had left him alone, tried

in vain to recover his particular thread of memory, without any uneasiness about the innumerable skeins that made up the tissue of his record of a lifetime.

When the young doctor returned, he found him still seated where he had left him, one hand over his eyes, the other on his knee. As he sat—for the doctor watched him from the door for a moment—he moved and replaced either hand at intervals, with implied distress in the movements. They gave the impression of constant attempt constantly baffled. The doctor, a shrewd-seeming young man with an attentive pale eye, and very fair hair, seemed to understand.

"Let me recommend you to be quiet and rest. Be quite quiet. You will be all right when you have slept on it. Mrs. Nightingale—that's the lady you saw just now; this is her house—will see that you are properly taken care of."

Then the man tried to speak; it was with an effort.

"I wish to thank—I must thank——"

"Never mind thanks yet. All in good time. Now, what do you think you can take—to eat or drink?"

"Nothing—nothing to eat or drink."

"Well, you know best. However, there's tea coming; perhaps you'll go so far as a cup of tea? You would be the better for it."

Rosalind junior, or Sally, slept in the back bedroom on the first-floor—that is to say, if we ignore the basement floor and call the one flush with the street-door step the ground-floor. We believe we are right in doing so. Rosalind senior, the mother, slept in the front one. It wasn't too late for tea, they had decided, and thereupon they had gone upstairs to revise and correct.

After a certain amount of slopping and splashing in the back room, uncorroborated by any in the front, Sally called out to her mother, on the disjointed lines of talk in real life:

"I like this soap! Have you a safety-pin?" Whereto her mother replied, speaking rather drowsily and perfunctorily:

"Yes, but you must come and get it."

"It's so nice and oily. It's not from Cattley's?"

"Yes, it is."

"I thought it was. Where's the pin?" At this point she came into her mother's room, covering her slightly *retroussé*

nose with her fresh-washed hands, to enjoy the aroma of Cattley's soap.

"In the little pink saucer. Only don't mess my things about."

"Headache, mammy dear?" For her mother was lying back on the bed, with her eyes closed. The speaker left her hands over her nostrils as she spoke, to do full justice to the soap, pausing an instant in her safety-pin raid for the answer:

"I've been feeling the heat. It's nothing. You go down, and I'll come."

"Have some eau-de-Cologne?" But, alas! there was no eau-de-Cologne.

"Never mind. You go down, and I'll follow. I shall be all right after a cup of tea." And Sally, after an intricate movement with a safety-pin, an openwork lace cuff that has lost a button, and a white wrist, goes down three accelerandos of stair-lengths, with landing pauses, and ends with a dining-room door staccato. But she isn't long gone, for in two minutes the door reopens, and she comes upstairs as fast, nearly, as she went down. In her hand she carries, visibly, Johann Maria Farina.

"Where on earth did you find that?" says her mother.

"The man had it. Wasn't it funny? He heard me say to Dr. Vereker that I was so sorry I'd not been able to eau-de-Cologne your forehead, and he began speaking and couldn't get his words. Then he got this out of his pocket. I remember one of the men at the station said something about his having a bottle, but I thought he meant a pocket-flask. He looks the sort of man that would have a pocket-flask and earrings."

Her mother doesn't seem to find this inexplicable, nor to need comment. Rather the contrary. Sally dabs her brow with eau-de-Cologne, beneficially, for she seems better, and says now go; she won't be above a couple of minutes. Nor is she, in the sense in which her statement has been accepted, for she comes downstairs within seven by the clock with the dutiful ratchet movement.

When she came within hearing of those in the room below, she heard a male voice that was not Dr. Vereker's. Yes, the man (whom we still cannot speak of by a name) was saying something—slowly, perhaps—but fairly articulately and intel-