

CHAPTER VII

CONCERNING PEOPLE'S PASTS, AND THE SEPARATION OF THE SHEEP FROM THE GOATS. OF YET ANOTHER MAJOR, AND HOW HE GOSSIPED AT THE HURKARU CLUB. SOME TRUSTWORTHY INFORMATION ABOUT AN ALLEGED DIVORCE

You who read this may have met with some cross-chance such as we are going to try to describe to you; possibly with the same effect upon yourself as the one we have to confess to in our own case—namely, that you have been left face to face with a problem to which you have never been able to supply a solution. You have given up a conundrum in despair, and no one has told you the answer.

Here are the particulars of an imaginary case of the sort. You have made acquaintance—made friends—years ago with some man or woman without any special introduction, and without feeling any particular curiosity about his or her antecedents. No inquiry seemed to be called for; all concomitants were so very usual. You may have felt a misgiving as to whether the easy-going ways of your old papa, or the innocent Bohemianisms of his sons and daughters will be welcome to your new friend, whom you credit with being a little old-fashioned and strait-laced, if anything. But it never occurs to you to doubt or investigate; why should you, when no question is raised of any great intimacy between you and the So-and-sos, which may stand for the name of his or her family. They ask no certificate from you, of whom they know just as little. Why should you demand credentials of a passer-by because he is so obliging as to offer to lend you a Chinese vocabulary or Whitaker? Why should your wife try to go behind the cheque-book and the prayer-book of a married couple when all she has had to do with the lady was, suppose, to borrow a square bottle of her, marked off in half-inch lengths, to be shaken before taken? Why not accept her unimpeachable Sunday morning as sufficient warranty

for talking to her on the beach next day, and finding what a very nice person she is? Because it would very likely be at the seaside. But suppose any sort of introduction of this sort—you know what we mean!

Well, the So-and-sos have slipped gradually into your life; let this be granted. We need not imagine, for our purpose, any extreme approaches of family intimacy, any love affairs or deadly quarrels. A tranquil intercourse of some twenty years is all we need, every year of which has added to your conviction of the thorough trustworthiness and respectability of the So-and-sos, of their readiness to help you in any little difficulty, and of the high opinion which the rest of the world has of Mr. and Mrs. So-and-so—the world which knew them when it was a boy, and all their connexions and antecedents, which, you admit, you didn't. . . .

And then, after all these years, it is suddenly burst upon you that there was a shady story about So-and-so that never was cleared up—something about money, perhaps; or, worse still, one of those stories your informant really doesn't like to be responsible for the particulars of; you must ask Smith yourself. Or your wife comes to you in fury and indignation that such a scandalous falsehood should have got about as that Clara So-and-so was never married to So-and-so at all till ever so long after Fluffy or Topsy or Croppy or Poppy was born! We take any names at random of this sort, merely to dwell on your good lady's familiarity with the So-and-so family.

Well, then—there you are! And what can you make of it? There you are face to face with the fact that a man who was a black sheep twenty or thirty years ago has been all this time making believe to be a white sheep so successfully as never was. Or, stranger still, that a woman who has brought up a family of model daughters—daughters whom it would be no exaggeration to speak of as on all fours with your own, and who is quite one of the nicest and most sympathetic people your wife has to go to in trouble—this woman actually—*actually*—if this tale is true, was guilty in her youth . . . there—that will do! Suppose we say she was no better than she should be. She hadn't even the decency to be a married woman before she did it, which always makes it so much easier to talk to strange ladies and girls

about it. You can say all the way down a full dinner-table that Lady Polly Andrews got into the Divorce Court without doing violence to any propriety at all. But the story of Mrs. So-and-so's indiscretion while still Miss Such-and-such must be talked of more guardedly.

And all the while behold the subjects of these stories, in whom, but for this sudden revelation of a shady past, you can detect no moral difference from your amiable and respectable self! They puzzle you, as they puzzle us, with a doubt whether they really are the same people; whether they have not changed their identity since the days of their delinquency. If they really are the same, it almost throws a doubt on how far the permanent unforgiveness of sins is expedient. We of course refer to Human Expediency only—the construction of a working hypothesis of Life, that would favour peace on earth and good-will towards men; that would establish a *modus vivendi*, and enable us to be jolly with these reprobates—at any rate, as soon as they had served their time and picked their oakum. We are not intruding on the province of the Theologian—merely discussing the problem of how we can make ourselves pleasant to one another all round, until that final separation of the sheep from the goats, when, however carefully they may have patched up their own little quarrels, they will have to bid each other farewell reluctantly, and make up their minds to the permanent endurance of Heaven and Hell respectively.

We confess that we ourselves think there ought to be a Statute of Limitations, and that after a certain lapse of time any offence, however bad, against morality might be held not to have been committed. If we feel this about culprits who tempted us, at the time of their enormity, to put in every honest hand a whip to lash the rascal naked the length of a couple of lamp-posts, how much more when the offence has been one which our own sense of moral law (a perverted one, we admit) scarcely recognises as any offence at all. And how much more yet, when we find it hard to believe that they—actually *they themselves*, that we know now—can have done the things imputed to them. If the stories are really true, were they not possessed by evil spirits? Or have they since come to be possessed by better ones than their normal stock-in-trade?

What is all this prosy speculation about? Well, it's about our friend in the last chapter, Sally's mother. At least, it is suggested by her. She is one of those perplexing cases we have hinted at, and we acknowledge ourselves unable to account for her at the date of the story, knowing what we do of her twenty years previously. It's little enough, mind, and much of it inferential. Suppose, instead of giving you our inferences, we content ourselves with passing on to you the data on which we found them. Maybe you will see your way to some different life-history for Sally's mother.

The first insight we had into her past was supplied by a friend of Sally's "old fossil," who was himself a Major, but with a difference. For he was really a Major, whereas the fossil was only called so by Krakatoa Villa, being in truth a Colonel. This one was Major Roper, of the Hurkaru Club, an old schoolfellow of ours, who was giving us a cup of coffee and a cigar at the said Club, and talking himself hoarse about Society. When the Major gets hoarse his voice rises to a squeak, and his eyes start out of his head, and he appears to swell. I forget how Mrs. Nightingale came into the conversation, but she did, somehow.

"She's a very charming woman, that," squeaked the Major—"a *very* charming woman! I don't mind tellin' *you*, you know, that I knew her at Madras—ah! before the divorce. I wouldn't tell Horrocks, nor that dam young fool Silcox, but I don't mind tellin' *you*! Only, look here, my dear boy, don't you go puttin' it about that *I* told you anythin'. You know I make it a rule—a guidin' rule—*never to say anythin'*. You follow that rule through life, my boy! Take the word of an old chap that's seen a deal of service, and just you *hold your tongue*! You make a point—you'll find it pay——" An asthmatic cough came in here.

"There was a divorce, then?" we said. Terms had to be made with the cough, but speech came in the end.

"Oh yes, of course—of course! Don't mind repeatin' that—thing was in the papers at the time. What I was suggestin' holdin' your tongue about was that story about Penderfield and her. . . . Well, as I said just now, I don't mind repeatin' it to you; you ain't Horrocks nor little Silcox—you can keep your tongue in your head. Remember, *I* know nothing; I'm only

tellin' what was said at the time. . . . Now, whatever was her name? Was it Rayner, or was it Verschoyle? Pelloo! . . . Pelloo! . . ." The Major tried to call the attention of a man who was deep in an Oriental newspaper at the far end of the next room. But when the Major overstrains his voice, it misses fire like a costermonger's, and only a falsetto note comes on a high register. When this happens he is wroth.

"It's that dam noise they're all makin'," he says, as soon as he has become articulate. "That's the man I want, behind the 'Daily Sunderbund.' If it wasn't for this dam toe, I'd go across and ask him. No, don't you go. Send one of these dam jumpin' frogs—idlin' about!" He requisitions a passing waiter, gripping him by the arm to give him instructions. "Just—you—touch the General's arm, and ketch his attention. Say Major Roper." And he liquidates his obligations to a great deal of asthmatic cough, while the jumping frog does his bidding.

The General (who is now Lord Pellew of Cutch, by-the-bye) came with an amiable smile from behind the journal, and ended a succession of good-evening nods to newcomers by casting an anchor opposite the Major. The latter, having by now taken the surest steps towards bringing the whole room into his confidence, stated the case he sought confirmation for.

Oh yes, certainly; the General was in Umballa in '80; remembered the young lady quite well, and the row between Penderfield and his wife about her. As for Penderfield, everybody remembered *him!* *De mortuis nil*, etc.—of course, of course. For all that, he was one of the damnest scoundrels that ever deserved to be turned out of the service. Ought to have been cashiered long ago. Good job he's gone to the devil! Yes, he was quite sure he was remembering the right girl. No, no, he wasn't thinking of Daisy Neversedge—no, nor of little Miss Wrennick: same sort of story, but he wasn't thinking of them at all. Only the name wasn't either Rayner or Verschoyle. General Pellew stood thoughtfully feeling about in a memory at fault, and looking at an unlighted cigar he rolled in his fingers, as though it might help if caressed. Then he had a flash of illumination. "Rosalind Graythorpe," he said.

There we had it, sure enough! The Major see-sawed in the air with a finger of sudden corroboration. "Rosalind Gray-

thorpe," he repeated triumphantly, and then again, "Ros-a-lind Graythorpe," dwelling on the syllables, and driving the name home, as it were, to the apprehension of all within hearing. It was so necessary to a complete confidence that every one should know whom he was holding his tongue about. Where would be the merit of discretion else? But the enjoyment of details should be *sotto voce*. The General dropped his voice to a good sample, suggesting a like course to the more demonstrative secrecy of the Major.

"I remember the whole story quite well," said he. "The girl was going out by herself to marry a young fellow up the country at Umballa, I think. They were *fiancés*, and on the way the news came of the outbreak of cholera. So she got hung up for a while at Penderfield's—sort of cousin, I believe, him or his wife—till the district was sanitary again. Bad job for her, as it turned out! Nobody there to warn her what sort of fellow Penderfield was—and if there had been she wouldn't have believed 'em. She was a madcap sort of a girl, and regularly in the hands of about as bad a couple as you'll meet with in a long spell—India or anywhere! They used to say out there that the she Penderfield winked at all her husband's affairs as long as he didn't cut across *her* little arrangements—did more than wink, in fact—lent a helping hand; but only as long as she could rely on his remaining detached, as you might say. The moment she suspected an *entichement* on her husband's part she was up in arms. And he was just the same about her. I remember Lady Sharp saying that if Penderfield had suspected his wife of caring about any of her co-respondents he would have divorced her at once. They were a rum couple, but their attitude to one another was the only good thing about them." The General lighted his cigar, and seemed to consider this was chapter one. The Major appended a foot-note, for our benefit.

"*Leave be* was the word—the word for Penderfield. *You'll* understand that, sir. No *meddlin'!* A good-lookin' Colonel's wife in garrison has her choice, good Lard! Why, she's only got to hold her finger up!" We entirely appreciated the position, and that a siren has a much easier task in the entanglement of a confiding dragoon than falls to the lot of Don Giovanni in the reverse case. But we were more interested in the par-

ticular story of Mrs. Nightingale than in the general ethics of profligacy.

"I suppose," we suggested, "that the young woman threatened to be a formidable rival, as there was a row?" Each of the officers nodded at the other, and said that was about it. The Major then started on a little private curriculum of nods on his own account, backed by a half-closed eye of superhuman subtlety, and added once or twice that that *was* about it. We inferred from this that the row had been volcanic in character. The Major then added, repeating the air-sawing action of his forefinger admonitorily, "But mind you, *I* say nothin'. And my recommendation to you is to say nothin' neither."

"The rest of the story's soon told," said the General, answering our look of inquiry. "Miss Graythorpe went away to Umballa to be married. It was all gossip, mind you, about herself and Penderfield. But gossip always went one way about any girl he was seen with. I have my own belief; so has Jack Roper." The Major underwent a perfect convulsion of nods, winks, and acquiescence. "Well, she went away, and was married to this young shaver, who was very little over twenty. He wasn't in the service—civil appointment, I think. How long was it, Major, before they parted? Do you recollect?"

"Week—ten days—month—six weeks! Couldn't say. They didn't part at the church door; that's all I could say for certain. Tell him the rest."

"They certainly parted very soon, and people told all sorts of stories. The stories got fewer and clearer when it came out that the young woman was in the family way. No one had any right *then* to ascribe the child that was on its road to any father except the young man she had fallen out with. But they did—it was laid at Colonel Penderfield's door, before there was any sufficient warrant. However, it was all clear enough when the child was born."

"When was the divorce?"

"He applied for a divorce a twelvemonth after the marriage. The child was then spoken of as being four months old. My impression is he did not succeed in getting a divorce."

"Not he," said the Major, overtopping the General's quiet, restrained voice with his falsetto. "I recollect *that*, bless you!

The Court commiserated him, but couldn't give him any relief. So he made a bolt of it. And he's never been heard of since, as far as I know."

"What did the mother do? Where did she go?" we asked.

"Well, she might have been hard put to it to know what to do. But she met with old Lund—Carrington Lund, you know, not Beauchamp; he'd a civil appointment at Umritsur—comes here sometimes. You know him? She's his Rosey he talks about. He was an old friend of her father, and took her in and protected her—saw her through it. She came with him to England. I was with them on the boat, part of the way. Then she took the name of Macnaghten, I believe. The young husband's name I can't remember the least. But it wasn't Macnaghten."

The Major squeaked in again:

"No—nor hers neither! Nightingale, General—that's the name she goes by. Friend of this gentleman. Very charmin' person indeed! Introdoce you? And a very charmin' little daughter, goin' nineteen." The two officers interchanged glances over our young friend Sally. "She was a nice baby on the boat," said the General; and the Major chuckled wheezily, and hoped she didn't take after her father.

We left him to the tender mercies of gout and asthma, and the enjoyment of a sherry-cobbler through a straw, looking rather too fat for his snuff-coloured trousers with a cord outside, and his flowered silk waistcoat; but very much too fat for the straw, the slenderness of which was almost painful by contrast.

Perhaps you will see from this why we hinted at the outset of this chapter why Mrs. Nightingale was a conundrum we had given up in despair, of which no one had told us the answer. We wanted your sympathy, you see, and to get it have given you an insight into the way our information was gleaned. Having given you this sample, we will now return to simple narrative of what we know of the true story, and trouble you with no further details of how we came by it.