CHAPTER IX

HOW THOSE GIRLS DO CHATTER OVER THEIR MUSIC! MRS. NIGHTINGALE'S RESOLUTION. BUT, THE RISK! A HARD PART TO PLAY. THERE WAS ONLY MAMMA FOR THE GIRL! THE GARDEN OF LONG AGO

Two parts in a sestet, played alone, may be a maddening torture to a person whose musical imagination is not equal to supplying the other four. Perhaps you have heard Haydn, Op. 1704, and rejoiced in the logical consecutiveness of its fugues, the indisputableness of its well-classified statements, the swift pertinence of the repartees of the first violin to the second, the apt *résumé* and orderly reorganization of their epigrammatic interchanges by the 'cello and the double-bass, the steady typewritten report and summary of the whole by the pianoforte, and the regretful exception to so many points taken by the clarionet. If so, you have no doubt felt, as we have, a sense of perfect satisfaction at faultless musical structure, without having to surrender your soul unconditionally to the passionate appeal of a Beethoven, or to split your musical brains in conjectures about what Volkanikoffsky is driving at. You will find at the end that you have passed an hour or so of tranquil enjoyment, and are mighty content with yourself, the performers, and every one else.

But if you only hear the two parts, played alone, and your mental image of all the other parts is not strong enough to prevent your hearing the two performers count the bars while the non-performers don't do anything at all, you will probably go away and come back presently, or go mad.

Nobody else was there when Sally and Lætitia Wilson were counting four, and beginning too soon, and having to go back and begin all over again, and missing a bar, and knocking down their music-stands when they had to turn over quick. So nobody went mad. Mamma had gone to an anti-vaccination meeting, and Athene had gone to stay over Bank Holiday at Leighton Buzzard, and the boys had gone to skate, and papa was in his

study and didn't matter, and they had the drawing-room to themselves. Oh dear, how very often they did count four, to be sure!

Sally was *distraite*, and wasn't paying proper attention to the music. Whenever a string had to be tightened by either, Sally introduced foreign matter. Lætitia was firm and stern (she was twenty-four, if you please!), and wouldn't respond. As thus, in a tightening-up pause:

"I like him awfully, you know, Tishy. In fact, I love him. It's a pleasure to hear him come into the house. Only—one's *mother*, you know! It's the *oddity* of it!"

"Yes, dear. *Now*, are you ready? . . . It only clickets down because you will *not* screw in; it's no use turning and leaving the key sloppy. . . ."

"I know, Tishy dear—teach your granny! There, I think that's right now. But it *is* funny when it's one's mother, isn't it?"

"One—two—three—four! There—you didn't begin! Remember, you've got to begin on the demisemiquaver at the end of the bar—only not too staccato, remember—and allow for the pause. Now—one, two, three, four, and you begin—in the *middle* of four—*not* the end. Oh dear! Now once more . . ." etc.

You will at once see from this that Sally had lost no time in finding a confidante for the fossil's communication.

An hour and a half of resolute practising makes you not at all sorry for an oasis in the counting, which you inaugurate (or whatever you do when it's an oasis) by smashing the top coal and making a great blaze. And then you go ever so close, and can talk.

"Are you sure it isn't Colonel Lund's mistake? Old gentlemen get very fanciful." Thus Miss Wilson. But it seems Sally hasn't much doubt. Rather the other way round, if anything!

"I thought it might be, all the way to Norland Square. Then I changed my mind coming up the hill. Of course, I don't know about mamma till I ask her. But I expect the Major's right about Mr. Fenwick."

"But how does *he* know? How do you know?"

"I don't know." Sally tastes the points of a holly-leaf with

her tongue-tip, discreetly, to see how sharp they are, and cogitates. "At least," she continues, "I *do* know. He never takes his eyes off mamma from the minute he comes into the house."

"Oh!"

"Besides—lots of things! Oh no; as far as that goes, I should say *he* was spooney."

"I see. You're a vulgar child, all the same! But about your mother—that's the point."

The vulgar child cogitates still more gravely.

"I should say *now*," she says, after thinking it over, "that—only I never noticed it at the time, you know——"

"That what?"

"That mamma knows Mr. Fenwick is spooney, and looks up at times to see that he's going on."

Lætitia seems to receive this idea with some hesitation or reserve. "Looks up at times to see if he's going on?" she repeats inquiringly.

"Yes, of course—like we should. Only I didn't say 'see if.' I said 'see that.' It makes all the difference."

Miss Wilson breaks into a laugh. "And there you are all the time looking as if butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, and as grave as a judge."

Sally has to acquiesce in being kissed by her friend at this point; but she curls up a little as one who protests against being patronised. "We-e-e-ell!" she says, lengthening out the word, "why not? I don't see anything in *that!*"

"Oh no, dear—*that's* all right! Why shouldn't it be?"

But this isn't candid of Lætitia, whose speech and kiss had certainly appeared to impute suppressed insight, or penetration, or sly-pussness, or something of that sort to her young friend. But with an implied claim to rights of insight, on her own account, from seniority. Sally is *froissée* at this, but not beyond jerking the topic into a new light.

"Of course, it's their being grown up that makes one stare so. If it wasn't for that . . ." But this gives away her case, surrenders all claim to her equality with Lætitia's twenty-four years. The advantage is caught at meanly.

"That's only because you're a baby, dear. Wait till you're

ten years older, and thirty-eight won't seem so old. I suppose your mother's about that?"

"Mother? Why, she's nearly thirty-nine!"

"And Mr. Fenwick?"

"Oh, *he's* forty-one. *Quite!* Because we talked it all over, and made out they were over eighty between them."

"Who talked it over?"

"Why, him and her and me, of course. Last night."

"Who did you have, Sally dear?"

"Only ourselves, and Dr. Prosy and his Goody mother."

"I thought Mr. Fenwick——"

"I counted him in with us—mother and me and the Major."

"Oh, you counted him in?"

"Why shouldn't I count him in, if I like?"

"Why not? And you do like?" There is an appearance of irritating sagacity about Sally's friend. "What did Dr. Vereker say, Sally dear?"

"Doc-tor Vereker! Dr. Prosy. Prosy's not a referee—it was no concern of his! Besides—they'd gone."

"Who'd gone?"

"Dr. Prosy and his old hen of a mother. Well, Tishy dear, she *is* like that. Comes wobbling down on you as if you were a chicken! I hope you don't think mother and I and Mr. Fenwick would talk about how old we were added together, with old Goody Prosy in it!"

"Of course not, dear!"

"Oh, Tishy dear, how aggravating you are! Now do please don't be penetrating. You know you're trying to get at something; and there's nothing to get at. It was perfectly natural. Only, of course, we should never dream of talking about how old before people and their gossipy old mothers."

"Of course not, dear!"

"There, now! You're being imperturbable! I knew you would. But you may say what you like—there really was nothing in it. Nothing whatever that time! However, of course mother does like Mr. Fenwick very much—everybody knows that."

Lætitia says time will show, and Sally says, "Show what?" For the remark connects with nothing in the conversation. Its

maker does not reply, but retires into the fastnesses of a higher philosophy, unknown to the teens, but somehow attainable in the early twenties. She comes down, however, to ask after Dr. Vereker. Sally has as good as held her tongue about him. Have they quarrelled?

"My dear Tishy! The idea! A *perfect stranger!*"

"I thought you were such good friends."

"I've nothing against Dr. Vereker. But fancy quarrelling with him! Like bosom friends. Kissing and making it up. What next!" Lætitia seems to have discovered that Sally, subjected to a fixed amused look, is sure to develop, and maintains one; and Sally follows on:

"One has to be on an intimate footing to fall out. Besides, people shouldn't be hen's sons. Not if they expect that sort of thing!"

"Which sort?"

"You know perfectly well, Tishy dear! And they shouldn't be worthy, either, people shouldn't. I'm not at all sure it isn't his worthiness, just as much as his mother. I *could* swallow his mother, if it came to that!"

Lætitia, without relaxing the magnetism of her look, is replacing a defective string. But a stimulating word will keep Sally up to the mark. It would be a pity she should die down, having got so far.

"Not at all sure *what* isn't his worthiness!"

"Now, Tishy dear, what nonsense! As if you didn't understand! You may just as well be penetrating outright, if you're going to go on like that. All I know is that, worthiness or no, if Dr. Vereker expects I'm going to put him on a quarrelling footing, he's mistaken, and the sooner he gives up the idea the better. I suppose he'll be wanting me to cherish him next."

And then what does that irritating Lætitia Wilson do but say suddenly, "I'm quite ready for the scherzo, dear, if you are." Just as if Sally had been talking all this for her own private satisfaction and amusement! And she knew perfectly well, Lætitia did, that she had been eliciting, and that she meant to wait a day or two, and begin again ever so far on, and make believe Sally had said heaps of things. And Sally had really said nothing—*nothing!*

However, Miss Wilson was certainly a very fine violin figure, and really striking in long sostenuto notes, with a fine throat and handsome fingers on her left hand with broad bones, and a handsome wrist on her bowing-arm where it was wanted. Only now, of course, she hadn't got her Egyptian bracelet that looked so well, and her hair wasn't done in a coronet, but only just twisted up anyhow. Besides, when it's a difficult scherzo and you take it quick, your appearance of having the concentration of Bonaparte and Julius Cæsar, and the alacrity of a wild cat, doesn't bring out your good points. Give us an *andante maestoso* movement, or a *diminuendo rallentando* that reaches the very climax and acme of slowness itself just before the applause comes! It was rather as a meditation in contrasts, though, that Sally thought thus to herself; for detached musical jerks of diabolical rapidity, that have to be snapped at with the punctuality of the mosquito slayer, don't show your rounded lines to advantage, and make you clench your teeth and glare horribly.

Our story is like the scherzo in one respect: it has to be given in detached jerks—literary, not musical—and these jerks don't come at any stated intervals at all. The music was bad enough—so Sally and Lætitia thought—but the chronicle is more spasmodic still. However, if you want to know its remaining particulars, you will have to brace yourself up to tolerating an intermittent style. It is the only one our means of collecting information admits of.

This little musical interlude, and the accidental chat of our two young performers, gives us a kind of idea of what was the position of things at Krakatoa Villa six months after Fenwick made his singular reappearance in the life of Mrs. Nightingale. We shall rely on your drawing all our inferences. There is only one belief of ours we need to lay stress upon; it is that the lady's scheme to do all she could to recapture and hold this man who had been her husband was no mere slow suggestion of the course of events in that six months, but a swift and decisive resolution—one that, if not absolutely made at once, paused only in the making until she was quite satisfied that the disappearance of Fenwick's past was an accomplished fact. Once satisfied of that, he became to her simply the man she had loved twenty years

ago—the man who did not, could not, forgive her what seemed so atrocious a wrong, but whom she could forgive the unforgiveness of; and this all the more if she had come to know of the ruinous effect her betrayal of him had had—must have had—upon his after-life. He was this man—this very man—to all appearance with a mysterious veil drawn, perhaps for ever, over the terrible close of their brief linked life and its hideous cause—over all that she would have asked and prayed should be forgotten. If only this oblivion could be maintained!—that was her fear. If it could, what task could be sweeter to her than to make him such amends as lay in her power for the wrong she had done him—how faultfully, who shall say? And if, in late old age, no dawn of memory having gleamed in his ruined mind, she came to be able to speak to him and tell him his own story—the tale of the wreck of his early years—would not that almost, *almost*, carry with it a kind of compensation for what she had undergone?

But her terror of seeing a return of memory now was a haunting nightmare to her. She could only soothe and alleviate her anxiety by suggesting efforts at recollection to Fenwick, and observing with concealed satisfaction how utterly useless they all were. She felt guilty at heart in being so happy at his ill-success, and had to practise an excusable hypocrisy, an affectation of disappointment at his repeated failures. On one particular occasion a shudder of apprehension passed through her; she thought he had got a clue. If he did, what was to prevent his following it up? She found it hard to say to him how sorry she was this clue led to nothing, and to forecast from it encouragement for the future. But she said to herself after that, that she was a good actress, and had played her part well. The part was a hard one.

For what came about was this. It chanced one evening, some three months after the railway adventure, when Fenwick had become an accepted and constant visitor at Krakatoa Villa, that as he took a very late leave of Sally and her mother, the latter came out with him into the always quiet road, while Sally ran back into the house to direct a letter he was to post, but which had been forgotten for the moment, just as he was departing.

They had talked a great deal, and with a closer familiarity

than ever before, of the problem of Fenwick's oblivion. Both ladies had gone on the lines of suggesting clues, trying to recall to him the things that *must* have been in his life as in others. How about his parents? Well, he remembered that, as a fact, he had a father and mother. It was *themselves* he could not recollect. How about his schooldays? No, that was a blank. He could not even remember having been flogged. Yet the idea of school was not unfamiliar; how, otherwise, could he laugh as he did at the absurdity of forgetting all about it, especially being flogged? But his brothers, his sisters, how *could* he forget *them?* He *did,* although in their case, as in that of his parents, he somehow knew that some definite identities had existed that he had forgotten. But any effort to recall any specific person came to nothing, or else he only succeeded in reviving images manifestly confused with characters in fiction or history. Then Sally, who was rather incredulous about this complete vacuity of mind, had said to him: "But come now, Mr. Fenwick, you don't mean to say you don't know if you ever had a sweetheart?" And he had replied with a laugh: "My dear Miss Sally, I'm sure I must have had plenty of sweethearts. Perhaps it's because I had so many that I have forgotten them all—all—all! They are all gone with the rest. I can do sums, and can speak French, but what school I learned to keep accounts at I can't tell you; and as to where I lived (as I must have done) among French people to speak French, I can tell no more than Adam." And then he had become rather reserved and silent till he got up to go, and they had not liked to press him for more. The pained look they had often been distressed to see came on his face, and he pressed his fingers on his eyelids as though shutting out the present world might help him to recall the past; then with a rough head-shake of his thick hair, like a big dog, and a brushing of it about with both hands, as though he would rouse this useless head of his to some sort of action, he put the whole thing aside, and talked of other matters till he left the house.

But when he and Mrs. Nightingale found themselves alone in the road, enjoying the delicious west wind that meant before the morning to become an equinoctial gale, and blow down chimney-pots and sink ships, he turned to her and went back to what they had been talking of. She could see the fine strong markings of his

face in the moonlight, the great jaw and firm lips, the handsome nose damaged by a scar that lay true across the bridge of it, and looked white in the gleam of the moon, the sad large eyelids and the grave eyes that had retaken the look he had shaken off. She could note and measure every change maturity had stamped upon him, and could see behind it the boy that had come to meet her at the station at Umballa twenty years before—had met her full of hope, met her to claim his reward after the long delay through the hideous days of the pestilence, to inaugurate the anticipated hours of happiness he had trembled to dream of. And the worst of the cholera wards that had filled the last months of his life with horror had held nothing for him so bad as the tale she had to tell or conceal. She could see back upon it as they stood there in the moonlight. Do not say she was not a strong woman.

"Do you know, Mrs. Nightingale," Fenwick said, "it's always a night of this sort that brings back one's youth? You know what I mean?"

"I think I understand what you mean, Mr. Fenwick. You mean if"—she hesitated a moment—"if you *could* recollect."

He nodded a complete yes.

"Just that," said he. "I don't know if it's the millions of dry leaves sweeping about, or the moon scudding so quick through the clouds, or the smell of the Atlantic, or the bark coming off the plane-trees, or the wind blowing the roads into smooth dust-drifts and hard clear-ups you could eat your dinner off—I don't know what it is, but something or another on a night of this sort does always seem to bring old times back, when, as you say, they can be got back on any terms." He half-laughed, not in earnest. She found something to say, also not very much in earnest.

"Because we remember nights of the sort when we were small, and that brings them back."

"Come, I say now, Mrs. Nightingale! As if we couldn't remember all sorts of nights, and nothing comes back about them. It's this particular sort of night does the job."

"Did you think you remembered something, Mr. Fenwick?" There was anxiety in her voice, but no need to conceal it. It would as readily pass muster for anxiety that he *should* have remembered something as that he shouldn't.

"I can hardly go so far as that. But that joke of your little pussycat about the sweethearts got mixed with the smell of the wind and the chrysanthemums and dahlias and sunflowers." He pressed his fingers hard on his eyes again. "Do you know, there's pain in it—worse than you'd think! The half-idea that comes is not painful in itself—rather the contrary—but it gives my brain a twist at the point at which I can recall no more. Yes, it's painful!"

"But there *was* a half-idea? Forgive me if it gives you pain, and don't try. Only I'm not sure you ought not to try when the chance comes, for your own sake."

"Oh, I don't mind trying. This time it was something about a front garden and a girl and a dog-cart." He had not taken his hands from his eyes. Now he did so, brushing them on his hair and forehead as before. "I get no nearer," said he.

"A front garden and a girl and a dog-cart," thus Miss Sally saucily, coming out with the letter. "Did you have a very touching parting, Mr. Fenwick? Now, mind you don't forget to post it. I wouldn't trust you!" He took the letter from her, but seemed too *distrait* to notice her little piece of levity; then, still speaking as if in distress or pain, he said:

"It must have been some front garden, long ago. This one brought it back—this and the leaves. Only there was nothing for the dog-cart."

"And only mamma for the girl"—thus Sally the irrepressible. And then mamma laughed, but not Mr. Fenwick at all. Only Sally thought her mother's laugh came hard, and said to herself, now she should catch it for chaffing! However, she didn't catch it, although the abruptness with which her mother said good-night and went back into the house half confirmed her impression that she should.

On the contrary, when she followed her a few minutes later, having accompanied Fenwick to near the road end, and scampered back to the house, turning to throw Parthian good-nights after him, she found her mother pale and thoughtful, and surely the lips and hands she used to kiss her with were cold. She wasn't even sure that wasn't a tear. Perhaps it was.

For mamma had had a bad ten minutes—scarcely a *mauvais quart d'heure*—and even that short interim had given her time

to see that this kind of thing would be incessant with her recovered husband, granting that she could recover him. Only of that she felt nearly secure—unaccountably, perhaps; certainly not warrantably. But how to bear this kind of thing through a life?—that was the question.

What was this kind of thing, this bad ten minutes, that had made her tremble, and turn white, and glad to get away, and be alone a minute before Sally came up jubilant? But oh, how glad, for all that, to get at her daughter's lips to kiss!—only not too hard, so as to suggest reflection and analysis.

What had upset Mrs. Nightingale was a counter-memory of twenty years ago, a clear and full and vivid recollection of the garden and the girl and the dog-cart. And then also there "had only been mamma for the girl." But oh, the relation the lassie who said those words bore to those past days, her place in the drama that filled them out! Little wonder her mother's brain reeled.

She could see it all vividly now, all over again. A glorious night like this; a dazzling full moon sailing in the blue beyond the tumbled chaos of loose cloud so near the earth; the riot of the wind-swept trees fighting to keep a shred of their old green on their bareness, making new concessions to the blast, and beating their stripped limbs together in their despair; the endless swirl of leaves at liberty, free now at last to enjoy a short and merry life before becoming food for worms. She could see the face she had just parted from, but twenty years younger—the same bone-structure with its unscarred youth upon it, only a lesser beard with a sunnier tinge, but all the thickness of the hair. She could remember the voices in the house, the farewells to the young man who was just starting for India, and how she slipped down to say a last good-bye on her own account, and felt grateful to that old Dean Ireson (the only time in her life) for begging her mother (who, of course, was the Rosalind Nightingale Fenwick spoke of in the train) on no account to expose herself to the night-air. Why, she might have come down, too, into the garden, and spoiled it all! And then she could remember—oh, how well!—their last words in the windy garden, and the horse in the dog-cart, fresh from his stall, and officiously anxious to catch the train—as good as saying so, with flings and stamps.

And how little she cared if the groom *did* hear him call her Rosey, for that was his name for her.

"Now, Gerry, remember, I've made you *no* promises; but I'll play fair. If I change my mind, I'll write and tell you. And you may write to me."

"Every day?"

"Silly boy, be reasonable! Once a month! You'll see, you'll get tired of it."

"Come, Rosey, I say! The idea!"

"Yes, you will! Now go! You'll lose the train."

"Oh, Rosey dearest!"

"Yes, what?—you'll lose the train."

"Oh, my dearest, I *can't!* Just think—I may never see you again!"

"You *must* go, Gerry dear! And there's that blockhead of a boy outside there."

"Never mind him; he's nobody! Only one more. . . . Yes, *dearest love*, I'm really going. . . . Good-bye! good-bye! God bless you!"

And then how she stood there with the memory of his lips dying on hers, alone by the gate, in the wild wind, and heard the sharp regular trot of the horse lessen on the hard road and die away, and then the running of a train she thought was his, and how he would surely miss it, and have to come back. And it *would* be nice just to see him again! But he was gone, for all that, and he was a dear good boy. And she recollected going to her bedroom to do up her hair, which had all come down, and hiding her face on her pillow in a big burst of tears.

Her mind harked back on all this as he himself, the same but changed, stood there in the moonlight striving to recollect it all, and mysteriously failing. But at least, he *did* fail, and that was something. But oh, what a wrench it gave to life, thought, reason, to all her heart and being, to have that unconscious chit cut in with "only mamma for the girl!" What and whence was this little malaprop? Her overwrought mind shut away this question—almost in the asking it—with "Dearer to me, at least, than anything else in this world, unless——" and then shut away the rest of the answer.

But she was glad to get at Sally, and feel her there, though

she could not speak freely to her—nor, indeed, speak at all. And as soon as the tension died down, she went back as to a source of peace to the failure of his powers of memory, obvious, complete. All her hopes lay in that. Where would they be if the whole past were suddenly sprung on him? He *might* be ready to bury bygones, but——

She woke next day fairly at ease in her mind, but feeling as one does after any near-run escape. And then it was she said to herself that she was a good actress. But the part *was* hard to act.

The relations between Fenwick and the Nightingales, mother and daughter, seem to us to have been acquiring cohesion at the time of the foregoing interview. It is rather difficult to say why. But it serves to pave the way to the state of things that Sally accepted as the "spooneyness" of Fenwick, and her mother's observation of his "going on," without the dimmest idea of the underlying motives of the drama. Another three months, bringing us on to these discriminations of Sally's, may also have brought about appearances that justified them.

CHAPTER X

THE DANGERS OF AN UNKNOWN PAST. NETTLE-GRASPING, AND A RECURRENCE. WHO AMONG US COURTS CATECHISM ABOUT HIMSELF? A UNIVERSALLY PROVIDED YOUNG MAN. HOW ABOUT THE POOR OLD FURNITURE?

We defy the acutest of psychologists to estimate precisely the hold love has on a man who is diagnosed, in the language of the vulgar child Sally, as "spooney." Probably no patient has ever succeeded in doing this himself. It is quite another matter when the eruption has broken out, when the crater is vomiting flames and the lava is pouring down on the little homesteads at the mountain's base, that may stand in the metaphor for all that man's duties and obligations. By that time he *knows*. But, while still within the "spooney" zone he knows no more than you or I (or that most important *she*) what the morrow means to bring. Will it be a step on or a step back? An altogether new *she*, or the fires of the volcano, let loose beyond recall?

Fenwick was certainly not in a position to gauge his own feelings towards Mrs. Nightingale. All previous experience was cut away from him, or seemed so. He might have been, for anything he knew, a married man with a family, a devoted husband. He might have been recently wedded to an adoring bride, and she might now be heart-broken in her loneliness. How could he tell? The only thing that gave him courage about this was that he *could* remember the fact that he had had parents, brothers, sisters. He could not recollect *anything whatever* about sweetheart, wife, or child. Unearthly gusts of half-ideas came to him at times, like that of the girl and the dog-cart. But they only gave him pain, and went away unsolved, leaving him sick and dizzy.

His situation was an acutely distressing one. He was shackled and embarrassed, so to speak, by what he knew of his relations to existence. At any moment a past might be sprung on him,