"Mr. Fenwick's a man, and you asked him."

"Mr. Fenwick's a man on other lines—absolutely other. He doesn't come in really." Her mother repeats the last four words, not exactly derisively—rather, if anything, her accent and her smile may be said to caress her daughter's words as she says them. She is such a silly, but such a dear little goose—that seems the implication.

"We-e-ll," says Sally, as she has said before, and we have tried to spell her. "I don't see anything in that, because, look how reasonable! Mr. Fenwick's . . . Mr. Fenwick's . . . why, of course, entirely different. I say, mother dearest. . . ."

"What, kitten?"

"What were you and Mr. Fenwick talking about so seriously in the back drawing-room?" The two are upstairs in the front bedroom at this minute, by-the-bye.

"Did you hear us, darling?"

"No, because of the row. But one could tell, for all that." Then Sally sees in an instant that it is something her mother is not going to tell her about, and makes immediate concession. "Where was the Major going that he couldn't come?" she asks. "He generally makes a point of coming when it's music."

"I fancy he's dining at the Hurkaru," says her mother. But she has gone back into her preoccupation, and from within it externalises an opinion that we should be better in bed, or we shall never be up in the morning.

CHAPTER XII

WHAT FENWICK AND SALLY'S MOTHER HAD BEEN SAYING IN THE BACK DRAWING-ROOM. OP. 999. BACK IN THAT OLD GARDEN AGAIN, AND HOW GERRY COULD NOT SWIM. THE OLD TARTINI SONATA

As soon as ever Mr. Bradshaw touched his violin, and before ever he began to play his Hungarian Dance on all four strings at once, Mrs. Nightingale and Mr. Fenwick went away into the back drawing-room, not to be too near the music. Because there was a fire in both rooms.

In the interval of time that had passed since Christmas Sally had contrived to "dismiss from her mind" Colonel Lund's previsions about her mother and Mr. Fenwick. Or they had given warning, and gone of their own accord. For by now she had again fallen into the frame of mind which classified her mother and Fenwick as semi-elderly people, and, so to speak, out of it all. So her mind assented readily to distance from the music as a sufficient reason for a secession to the back room. Non-combatants are just as well off the field of battle.

But a closer observer than Sally at this moment would have noticed that chat in an undertone had already set in in the back drawing-room even before the Hungarians had stopped dancing. Also that the applause that came therefrom, when they did stop, had a certain perfunctory air, as of plaudits something else makes room for, and comes back again after. Not that she would have "seen anything in it" if she had, because, whatever her mother said or did was, in Sally's eyes, right and normal. Abnormal and bad things were conceived and executed outside the family. Nor, in spite of the *sotto voce,* was there anything Sally could not have participated in, whatever exception she might have taken to something of a patronising tone, inexcusable towards our own generation even in the most semi-elderly people on record.

Her mother, at Sally's latest observation point, had taken

the large armchair quite on the other side of the rug, to be as far off the music as possible. Mr. Fenwick, in reply to a flying remark of her own, she being at the moment a music-book seeker, wouldn't bring the other large armchair in front of the fire and be comfortable, thank you. He liked this just as well. Sally had then commented on Mr. Fenwick's unnatural love of uncomfortable chairs "when he wasn't walking about the room." She fancied, as she passed on, that she heard her mother address him as "Fenwick," without the "Mr." So she did.

"You are a restless man, Fenwick! I wonder were you so before the accident? Oh dear! there I am on that topic again!" But he only laughed.

"It doesn't hurt *me,*" he said. "That reminds me that I wanted to remind *you* of something you said you would tell me. You know—that evening the kitten went to the music-party—something you would tell me some time."

"I know; I'll tell you when they've got to their music, if there isn't too much row. Don't let's talk while this new young man's playing; it seems unkind. It won't matter when they're all at it together." But in spite of good resolutions silence was not properly observed, and the perfunctory pause came awkwardly on the top of a lapse. Fenwick then said, as one who avails himself of an opportunity:

"No need to wait for the music; they can't hear a word we say in there. We can't hear a word *they* say."

"Because they're making such a racket." Mrs. Nightingale paused with a listening eye, trying to disprove their inaudibility. The examination confirmed Fenwick. "I like it," she continued —"a lot of young voices. It's much better when you don't make out what they say. When you can't hear a word, you fancy some sense in it." And then went on listening, and Fenwick waited, too. He couldn't well fidget her to keep her promise; she would do it of herself in time. It might be she preferred talking under cover of the music. She certainly remained silent till it came; then she spoke.

"What was it made me say that to you about something I would tell you? Oh, I know. You said, perhaps if you knew your past, you would not court catechism about it. And I said that, knowing mine, *I* should not either. Wasn't that it?"

She fixed her eyes on him as though to hold him to the truth. Perhaps she wanted his verbal recognition of the possibility that she, too, like others, might have left things in the past she would like to forget on their merits—cast-off garments on the road of life. It may have been painful to her to feel his faith in herself an obstacle to what she wished at least to hint to him, even if she could not tell him outright. She did not want too much divine worship at her shrine—a ready recognition of her position of mortal frailty would be so much more sympathetic, really. A feeling perhaps traceably akin to what many of us have felt, that if our father the devil—"auld Nickie Ben"—would only tak' a thought and mend, as he aiblins might, he would be the very king of father confessors. If details had to be gone into, we should be sure of *his* sympathy.

"Yes, that was it. And I suppose I looked incredulous." Thus Fenwick.

"You looked incredulous. I would sooner you should believe me. Would you hand me down that fire-screen off the chimney-piece? Thank you." She was hardening herself to the task she had before her. He gave her the screen, and as he resumed his seat drew it nearer to her. Mozart's Op. 999 had just started, and it was a little doubtful if voices could be heard unless, in Sally's phrase, they were close to.

"I shall believe you. Does what you were going to tell me relate to——"

"Go on."

"To your husband?"

"Yes." The task had become easier suddenly. She breathed more freely about what was to come. "I wish you to know that he may be still living. I have heard nothing to the contrary. But I ought to speak of him as the man who was my husband. He is no longer that." Fenwick interposed on her hesitation.

"You have divorced him?" But she shook her head—shook a long negative. And Fenwick looked up quickly, and uttered a little sharp "Ah!" as though something had struck him. The slow head-shake said as plain as words could have said it, "I wish I could say yes." So expressive was it that Fenwick did not even speculate on the third alternative—a separation

without a divorce. He saw at once he could make it easier for her if he spoke out plain, treating the bygone as a thing that *could* be spoken of plainly.

"He divorced you?" She was very white, but kept her eyes steadily fixed on him over the fire-screen, and her voice remained perfectly firm and collected. The music went on intricately all the while. She spoke next.

"To all intents and purposes. There was a technical obstacle to a legal divorce, but he tried for one. We parted sorely against my will, for I loved him, and now it is over nineteen years since I saw him last, or heard of him or from him. But he was absolutely blameless. Unless, indeed, it is to be counted blame to him that he could not bear what no other man could have borne. I cannot possibly give you all details. But I wish you to hear this that I have to tell you from myself. It is painful to me to tell, but it would be far worse that you should hear it from any one else. I feel sure it is safe to tell you; that you will not talk of it to others—least of all to that little chick of mine."

"You may trust me—indeed, you may—without reserve. I see you wish to tell me no more, so I will not ask it."

"And blame me as little as possible?"

"I cannot blame you."

"Before you say that, listen to as much as I can tell you of the story. I was a young girl when I went out alone to be married to him in India. We had parted in England eight months before, and he had remained unchanged—his letters all told the same tale. I quarrelled with my mother—as I now see most unreasonably—merely because she wished to marry again. Perhaps she was a little to blame not to be more patient with a headstrong, ill-regulated girl. I was both. It ended in my writing out to him in India that I should come out and marry him at once. My mother made no opposition." She remained silent for a little, and her eyes fell. Then she spoke with more effort, rather as one who answers her own thoughts. "No, I need say nothing of the time between. It was no excuse for the wrong I did *him*. I can tell you what that was. . . ." It did not seem easy, though, when it came to actual words. Fenwick spoke into the pause.

"Why tell me now? Tell me another time."

"I prefer now. It was this way: I kept something back from him till after we were married—something I should have told him before. Had I done so, I believe to this moment we should never have parted. But my concealment threw doubt on all else I said. . . . I am telling more than I meant to tell." She hesitated again, and then went on. "That was my wrong to him—the concealment. But, of course, it was not the ground of the divorce proceedings." Fenwick stopped her again.

"Why tell me any more? You are being led on—are leading yourself on—to say more than you wish."

"Well, I will leave it there. Only, Fenwick, understand this: my husband was young and generous and noble-hearted. Had I trusted him, I believe all might have gone well, even though he . . ." She hesitated again, and then cancelled something unsaid. "The concealment was my fault—the mistrust. That was all. Nothing else was my *fault.*" As she says the words in praise of her husband she finds it a pleasure to let her eyes rest on the grave, handsome, puzzled face that, after all, really is *his.* She catches herself wondering—so oddly do the undercurrents of mind course about—where he got that sharp white scar across his nose. It was not there in the old days.

She looks at him until he, too, looks up, and their eyes meet. "Well, then," she says, "I will tell you no more. Blame me as little as possible." And to this repetition of her previous words he says again, "I cannot blame you," very emphatically.

But Mrs. Nightingale felt perplexed at his evident sincerity; would rather he should have indulged in truisms, we were not all of us perfect, and so forth. When she spoke again, some bars of the music later, she took for granted that his mind, like hers, was still dwelling on his last words. She felt half sorry she had, so to speak, switched off the current of the conversation.

"If you will think over what I have told you, Fenwick, you will see that you cannot help doing so."

"How can that be?"

"Surely! My husband sought to divorce me, and was himself absolutely blameless. How can you do otherwise than blame me?"

"Partly—only partly—because I see you are keeping back

something—something that would exonerate you. I cannot believe you were to blame."

"Listen, Fenwick! As I said, I cannot tell you the whole; and the Major, who is the only man alive who knows all the story, will, I know, refuse to tell you anything, even if you ask him, and that I wish you not to do."

"I should not dream of asking him."

"Well, he would refuse. I know it. But I want you to know all I can tell you. I do not want any groundless excuses made for me. I will not accept any absolution from any one on a false pretence. You see what I mean."

"I see perfectly. I am not sure, though, that you see my meaning. But never mind that. Is there anything further you would really like me to know?"

She waited a little, and then answered, keeping her eyes always fixed on Fenwick: "Yes, there is."

But at this moment the first movement of Op. 999 came to a perfect and well thought out conclusion, bearing in mind everything that had been said on six pages of ideas faultlessly interchanged by four instruments, and making due allowance for all exceptions each had courteously taken to the other. But Op. 999 was going on to the second movement directly, and only tolerated a pause for a few string-tightenings and trial-squeaks, to get in tune, and the removal of a deceased fly from a piano-candle. The remark from the back-room that we could hear beautifully in here seemed to fall flat, the second violin merely replying "All right!" passionlessly. The instruments then asked each other if they were ready, and answered yes. Then some one counted four suggestively, for a start, and life went on again.

Mrs. Nightingale and Fenwick sat well on into the music before either spoke. He, resolved not to seem to seek or urge any information at all; all was to come spontaneously from her. She, feeling the difficulty of telling what she had to tell, and always oppressed with the recollection of what it had cost her to make her revelation to this selfsame man nineteen years ago. She wished he would give the conversation some lift, as he had done before, when he asked if what she had to tell referred to her husband. But, although he would gladly have repeated his assistance, he could see his way to nothing, this time, that

seemed altogether free from risk. How if he were to blunder into ascribing to her something more culpable than her actual share in the past? She half guessed this; then, seeing that speech must come from herself in the end, took heart and faced the position resolutely. She always did.

"You know this, Fenwick, do you not, that when there is a divorce, the husband takes the children from their mother—always, when she is in the wrong; too often, when she is blameless. I have told you I was the one to blame, and I tell you now that though my husband's application for a divorce failed, from a technical point of law, all things came about just as though he had succeeded. Don't analyse it now; take it all for granted—you understand?"

"I understand. Suppose it so! And then?"

"And then this. That little monkey of mine—that little unconscious fiddling thing in there"—and as Mrs. Nightingale speaks, the sound of a caress mixes with the laugh in her voice; but the pain comes back as she goes on—"My Sallikin has been mine, all her life! My poor husband never saw her in her childhood." As she says the word *husband* she has again a vivid *éclat* of the consciousness that it is he—himself—sitting there beside her. And the odd thought that mixes itself into this, strange to say, is—"The pity of it! To think how little he has had of Sally in all these years!"

He, for his part, can for the moment make nothing of this part of the story. He can give his head the lion-mane shake she knows him by so well, but it brings him no light. He is reduced to mere slow repetition of her data; his hand before his eyes to keep his brain, that has to think, clear of distractions from without.

"Your husband never saw her. She has been yours all her life. Had she been your husband's child, he would have exercised his so-called rights—his *legal* rights—and taken her away. Are those the facts—so far?"

"Yes—go on. No—stop; I will tell you. At the beginning of this year I should have been married exactly twenty years. Sally is nineteen—you remember her birthday?"

"Nineteen in August. Now, let me think!" Just at this moment the second movement of Op. 999 came to an end, and

gave an added plausibility to the blank he needed to ponder in. The viola in the next room looked round across her chair-back, and said, "I say, mother"—to a repetition of which Mrs. Nightingale replied what did her daughter say? What she said was that her mother and Mr. Fenwick were exactly like the canaries. They talked as hard as they could all through the music, and when it stopped they shut up. Wasn't that true? To which her mother answered affirmatively, adding, "You'll have to put a cloth over us, chick, and squash us out."

Fenwick was absorbed in thought, and did not notice this interlude. He did not speak until the music began again. Then he said abruptly:

"I see the story now. Sally's father was not . . ."

"Was not my husband." There is not a trace of cowardice or hesitation in her filling out the sentence. There is pain, but that again dies away in her voice as she goes on to speak of her daughter. "I do not connect him with her now. She is—a thing of itself—a thing of herself! She is—she is Sally. Well, you see what she is."

"I see she is a very dear little person." Then he seems to want to say something and to pause on the edge of it; then, in answer to a "yes" of encouragement from her, continues, "I was going to say that she must be very like him—like her father."

"Very like?" she asks—"or very unlike? Which did you mean?"

"I mean very like as to looks. Because she is so unlike you."

"She is like enough to him, as far as looks go. It's her only fault, poor chick, and *she* can't help it. Besides, I mind it less now that I have more than half forgiven him, for her sake." The tone of her voice mixes a sob and a laugh, although she utters neither, and is quite collected. "But she is quite unlike him in character. Sally is not an angel—oh dear, no!" The laugh predominates. "But——"

"But what?"

"She is not a devil." And as she said this the pain was all back again in the dropped half-whisper in which she said it. And in that moment Fenwick made his guess of the whole story, which maybe went nearer than we shall do with the information

we have to go upon. In this narrative, as we tell it now, that story is *known* only to its chief actor, and to her old friend who is now dining at the Hurkaru Club.

The third movement of Op. 999 was not a very long one, and, coming to an end at this point, seemed to supply a reason for silence that was not unwelcome in the back drawing-room. The end of a trying conversation had been attained. Both speakers could now affect attention to what was going on in the front. This had taken the form of a discussion between Mr. Julius Bradshaw and Miss Lætitia Wilson, who was anxious to transfer her position of first violin to that young gentleman. We regret to have to report that Miss Sally's agreement with her friend about the desirability had been *sotto voce*'d in these terms: "Yes, Tishy dear! Do make the shop-boy play the last movement." And Miss Wilson had then suggested it, saying there was a bit she knew she couldn't play. "And you expect *me* to!" said the owner of the Strad, "when I haven't so much as looked at it for three years past." To which Miss Sally appended a marginal note, "Stuff and nonsense! Don't be affected, Mr. Bradshaw." However, after compliments, and more protestations from its owner, the Strad was brought into hotchpot, and Lætitia abdicated.

"Won't you come and sit in here, to be away from the music?" said the back-drawing-room. But Lætitia wanted to see Mr. Bradshaw's fingering of that passage. We are more interested in the back drawing-room.

Like many other athletic men—and we have seen how strongly this character was maintained in Fenwick—he hated armchairs. Even in the uncomfortable ones—by which we mean the ones *we* dislike—his restless strength would not remain quiet for any length of time. At intervals he would get up and walk about the room, exasperating the sedate, and then making good-humoured concession to their weakness. Mrs. Nightingale could remember all this in Gerry the boy, twenty years ago.

If it had not been for that music, probably he would have walked about the room over that stiff problem in dates he had just grappled with. As it was, he remained in his chair to solve it—that is, if he did solve it. Possibly, the moment he saw some-

thing important turned on the date of Sally's birth, he jumped across the solution to the conclusion it was to lead to. Given the conclusion, the calculation had no interest for him.

But the story his mind constructed to fit that conclusion stunned him. It knitted his brows and clenched his teeth for him. It made the hand that had been hanging loose over the uncomfortable chair-back close savagely on something—a throat, perhaps, that his imagination supplied? How like he looked, thought his companion, to himself on one occasion twenty years ago! But his anger now was on her behalf alone; it was not so in that dreadful time she hoped he might never recollect. If only his memory of all the past might remain as now, a book with a locked clasp and a lost key!

She watched him as he sat there, and saw a calmer mood come back upon him. Each wanted a *raison d'être* for a silent pause, and neither was sorry for the desire each might ascribe to the other of hearing the last movement of the music undisturbed. Op. 999 was prospering, there was no doubt of it! Lætitia Wilson was a very fair example of a creditable career at the R.A.M. But she was not quite equal to this unfortunate victim of a too nervous system, who could play like an angel for half an hour, mind you—not more. This was his half-hour; and it was quite reasonable for Fenwick to take for granted that his hostess would like to pay attention to it, or *vice-versa*. So both sat silent.

But as she sat listening to Op. 999, and watching wonderingly the strange victim of oblivion, of whom she knew—scarcely acknowledging it always, though—that she had once for a short time called him husband, her mind went back to an old time when he and she were young: before the tragic memory that she sometimes thought might have been lived down had come into her life and his. And a scene rose up before her out of that old time—a scene of young men, almost boys, and girls who but the other day were in the nursery, playing lawn-tennis in a happy garden, with never a thought for anything in this wide world but themselves, and each other, and the scoring, and how jolly it would be in the house-boat at Henley to-morrow. And then this garden-scene a little later in the moonrise, and herself and one of the players, who was Gerry—this very man—

left by the other two to themselves, on a garden-seat his arm hung over, just as it did now over that chair-back. How exactly he sat then as he sat now, his other hand in charge of the foot he had crossed on his knee, just as now, to keep it from a slip along his lawn-tennis flannels! How well she could remember the tennis-shoe, with its ribbed rubber sole, in place of that highly-polished calf thing! And she could remember every word they said, there in the warm moonlight.

"What a silly boy you are!"

"I don't care. I shall always say exactly the same. I can't help it."

"All silly boys say that sort of thing. Then they change their minds."

"I never said it to any girl in my life but you, Rosey. I never thought it. I shall never say it again to any one but you."

"Don't be nonsensical!"

"I'm *not!* It's *true.*"

"Wait till you've been six months in India, Gerry."

And then the recollection of what followed made it seem infinitely strange to her that Fenwick should remain, as he had remained, immovable. If the hand she could remember so well, for all it had grown so scarred and service-worn and hairy, were to take hers as it did then, as they sat together on the garden-seat, would it shake now as formerly? If his great strong arm her memory still felt round her were to come again now, would she feel in it the tremor of the passion he was shaken by then; and in caresses such as she half reproved him for, but had no heart to resist, the reality of a love then young and strong and full of promise for the days to come? And now—what? The perished trunk of an uprooted tree: the shadow of a half-forgotten dream.

As he sat silent, only now and then by some slight sign, some new knitting of the brow or closing of the hand, showing the tension of the feeling produced by the version his mind had made of the story half told to him—as he sat thus, under a kind of feint of listening to the music, the world grew stranger and stranger to his companion. She had fancied herself strong enough to tell the story, but had hardly reckoned with his possible likeness to himself. She had thought that she could