

gale. . . . No; I should not like Mr. Fenwick to go away anywhere. No more would you. I want him here, for us. So do you!"

"I should be very sorry indeed for Mr. Fenwick to go away. We should miss him badly. But fancy what his wife must be feeling, if he has one. I can sympathize with her." It really was a relief to say anything so intensely true.

Did the reality with which she spoke impress Sally more than the mere words, which were no more than "common form" of conversation? Probably, for something in them brought back her conference with the Major on Boxing Day morning when her mother was at church. What was that she had said to him when she was sitting on his knee improving his whiskers?—that if she, later on, saw reason to suppose his suspicions true, she would ask her mother point-blank. Why not? And here she was with the same suspicions, quite, quite independent of the Major. And see how dark it was in both rooms! One could say anything. Besides, if her mother didn't want to answer, she could pretend to be asleep. She wouldn't ask too loud, to give her a chance.

"Mother darling, if Mr. Fenwick was to make you an offer, how should you like it?"

"Oh dear! *What's* the child saying? What is it, Sallykin? I was just going off."

Now, obviously, you can ask a lady Sally's question in the easy course of flowing chat, but you can't drag her from the golden gates of sleep to ask it. It gets too official. So Sally backed out, and said she had said nothing, which wasn't the case. The excessive readiness with which her mother accepted the statement looks, to us, as if she had really been awake and heard.

CHAPTER XIV

HOW MILLAIS' "HUGUENOT" CAME OF A WALK IN THE BACK GARDEN.
AND HOW FENWICK VERY NEARLY KISSED SALLY

IN spite of Colonel Lund's having been so betimes in his forecastings about Mrs. Nightingale and Fenwick (as we must go on calling him for the present), still, when one day that lady came, about six weeks after the nocturne in our last chapter, and told him she must have his consent to a step she was contemplating before she took it, he felt a little shock in his heart—one of those shocks one so often feels when one hears that a thing he has anticipated without pain, even with pleasure, is to become actual.

But he replied at once, "My dear! Of course!" without hearing any particulars; and added: "You will be happier, I am sure. Why should I refuse my consent to your marrying Fenwick? Because that's it, I suppose?" That was it. The Major had guessed right.

"He asked me to marry him, last night," she said, with simple equanimity and directness. "I told him yes, as far as my own wishes went. But I said I wouldn't, if either you or the kitten forbade the banns."

"I don't think we shall, either of us." It was a daughter's marriage-warrant he was being asked to sign; a document seldom signed without a heartache, more or less, for him who holds the pen. But his *cœur navré* had to be concealed, for the sake of the applicant; no wet blanket should be cast on her new happiness. He kissed her affectionately. To him, for all her thirty-nine or forty birthdays, she was still the young girl he had helped and shielded in her despair, twenty years ago, he himself being then a widower, near forty years her senior. "No, Rosa dear," continued the Major. "As far as I can see, there can be no objection but one—you know!"

"The one?"

"Yes. It is all a *terra incognita*. He *may* have a wife elsewhere, seeking for him. Who can tell?"

"It is a risk to be run. But I am prepared to run it"—she was going to add "for his sake," but remembered that her real meaning for these words would be, "for the sake of the man I wronged," and that the Major knew nothing of Fenwick's identity. She had not been able to persuade herself to make even her old friend her confidant. Danger lay that way. She *knew* silence would be safe against anything but Fenwick's own memory.

"Yes, it is a risk, no doubt," the Major said. "But I am like him. I cannot conceive a man forgetting that he had a wife. It seems an impossibility. He has talked about you to me, you know."

"In connexion with his intention about me?"

"Almost. Not quite definitely, but almost. He knew I understood what he meant. It seemed to me he was fidgeting more about his having so little to offer in the way of worldly goods than about any possible wife in the clouds."

"Dear fellow! Just fancy! Why, those people in the City would take him into partnership to-morrow if he had a little capital to bring in. They told him so themselves."

"And you would finance him? Is that the idea? Well, I suppose as I'm your trustee, if the money was all lost, I should have to make it up, so it wouldn't matter."

"Oh, Major dear! is *that* what being a trustee means?"

"Of course, my dear Rosa! What did you think it meant?"

"Do you know, I don't know what I *did* think; at least, I thought it would be very nice if you were my trustee."

The conversation has gone off on a siding, but the Major shunts the train back. "That was what you and little fiddle-stick's-end were talking about till three in the morning, then?"

"Oh, Major dear, did you hear us? And we kept you awake? What a *shame!*"

For on the previous evening, Sally being out musicking and expected home late, Fenwick and Mrs. Nightingale had gone out in the back-garden to enjoy the sweet air of that rare phenomenon—a really fine spring night in England—leaving the Major

indoors because of his bronchial tubes. The late seventies shrink from night air, even when one means to be a healthy octogenarian. Also, they go away to bed, secretively, when no one is looking—at least, the Major did in this case. Of course, he was staying the night, as usual.

So, in the interim between the Major's good-night and Sally's cab-wheels, this elderly couple of lovers (as they would have worded their own description) had the summer night to themselves. As the Major closed his bedroom window, he saw, before drawing down the blind, that the two were walking slowly up and down the gravel path, talking earnestly. No impression of mature years came to the Major from that gravel path. A well-made, handsome man, with a bush of brown hair and a Raleigh beard, and a graceful woman suggesting her beauty through the clear moonlight—that was the implication of as much as he could see, as he drew the inference a word of soliloquy hinted at, "Not Millais' Huguenot, so far!" But he evidently expected that grouping very soon. Only he was too sleepy to watch for it, and went to bed. Besides, would it have been honourable?

"It's no use, Fenwick," she said to him in the garden, "trying to keep off the forbidden subject, so I won't try."

"It's not forbidden by me. Nothing could be, that *you* would like to say."

Was that, she thought, only what so many men say every day to so many women, and mean so little by? Or was it more? She could not be sure yet. She glanced at him as they turned at the path-end, and her misgivings all but vanished, so serious and resolved was his quiet face in the moonlight. She was half-minded to say to him, "Do you mean that you love me, Fenwick?" But, then, was it safe to presume on the peculiarity of her position, of which he, remember, knew absolutely nothing.

For with her it was not as with another woman, who expects what is briefly called "an offer." In *her* case, the man beside her was her husband, to whose exorcism of her love from his life her heart had never assented. While, in his eyes, she differed in no way in her relation to him from any woman, to whom a man, placed as he was, longs to say that she is what he wants most of all mortal things, but stickles in the telling of it, from sheer cowardice; who dares not risk the loss of what share he has in

her in the attempt to get the whole. *She* grasped the whole position, *he* only part of it.

"I am glad it is so," she decided to say. "Because each time I see you, I want to ask if nothing has come back—no trace of memory?"

"Nothing! It is all gone. Nothing comes back."

"Do you remember that about the tennis-court? Did it go any further, or die out completely?"

He stopped a moment in his walk, and flicked the ash from his cigar; then, after a moment's thought, replied:

"I am not sure. It seemed to get mixed with my name—on my arm. I think it was only because tennis and Fenwick are a little alike." His companion thought how near the edge of a volcano both were, and resolved to try a crucial experiment. Better an eruption, after all, or a plunge in the crater, than a life of incessant doubt.

"You remembered the name Algernon clearly?"

"Not *clearly*. But it was the only name with an 'A' that felt right. Unless it was Arthur, but I'm sure my name never was Arthur!"

"Sally thought it was hypnotic suggestion—thought I had laid an unfair stress upon it. I easily might have."

"Why? Did you know an Algernon?"

"My husband's name was Algernon." She herself wondered how any voice that spoke so near a heart that beat as hers did at this moment could keep its secret. Yet it betrayed nothing, and so supreme was her self-control that she could say to herself, even while she knew she would pay for this effort later, that the pallor of her face would betray nothing either; he would put that down to the moonlight. She *was* a strong woman. For she went steadily on, to convince herself of her own self-command: "I knew him very little by that name, though. I always called him Gerry."

He merely repeated the name thrice, but it gave her a moment of keen apprehension. Any stirring of memory over it might be the thin end of a very big wedge. But if there was any, it was an end so thin that it broke off. Fenwick looked round at her.

"Do you know," he said, "I rather favour the hypnotic suggestion theory. For the moment you said the name Gerry, I fancied

I too knew it as the short for Algernon. Now, that's absurd! No two people ever made Gerry out of Algernon. It's always Algy."

"Always. Certainly, it would be odd."

"I am rather inclined to think," said Fenwick, after a short silence, "that I can understand how it happened. Only then, perhaps, my name may not be Algernon at all. And here I have been using it, signing with it, and so on."

"What do you understand?"

"Well, I suspect this. I suspect that you did lay some kind of stress, naturally, on your husband's name, and also on its abbreviation. It affected me somehow with a sense of familiarity."

"Is it so *very* improbable that you were familiar with the name Gerry too? It might be——"

"Anything might be. But surely we almost know that two accidental adoptions of Gerry as a short for Algernon would not come across each other by chance, as yours and mine have done."

"What is 'almost knowing'? But tell me this. When I call you Gerry—Gerry . . . there!—does the association or impression repeat itself?" She repeated the name once and again, to try. There was a good deal of nettle-grasping in all this. Also a wish to clinch matters, to drive the sword to the hilt; to put an end, once and for all, to the state of tension she lived in. For surely, if anything could prove his memory was really gone, it would be this. That she should call him by his name of twenty years ago—should utter it to him, as she could not help doing, in the tone in which she spoke to him then, and that her doing so should arouse no memory of the past—surely this would show, if anything could show it, that that past had been finally erased from the scroll of his life. She had a moment only of suspense after speaking, and then, as his voice came in answer, she breathed again freely. Nothing could have shown a more complete unconsciousness than his reply, after another moment of reflection:

"Do you know, Mrs. Nightingale, that convinces me that the name Algernon *was* produced by your way of saying it. It *was* hypnotic suggestion! I assure you that, however strange you may think it, every time you repeat the name Gerry, it seems more familiar to me. If you said it often enough, I have no doubt I should soon be believing in the diminutive as devoutly

as I believe in the name itself. Because I am quite convinced of Algernon Fenwick. Continually signing *per-pro's* has driven it home." He didn't seem quite in earnest over his conviction, though—seemed to laugh a little about it.

But a sadder tone came into his voice after an interval in which his companion, frightened at her own temerity, resolved that she would not call him Gerry again. It was sailing too near the wind. She was glad he went back from this side-channel of their talk to the main subject.

"No, I have no hope of getting to the past through my own mind. I feel it is silence. And that being so, I should be sorry that any illumination should come to me out of the past, throwing light on records my mind could not read—I mean, any proof positive of what my crippled memory could not confirm. I would rather remain quite in the dark—unless, indeed——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless the well-being of some others, forgotten with my forgotten world, is involved in—dependent on—my return to it. That would be shocking—the hungry nestlings in the deserted nest. But I am so convinced that I have only forgotten a restless life of rapid change—that I *could* not forget love and home, if I ever had them—that my misgivings about this are misgivings of the reason only, not of the heart. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly. At least, I think so. Go on."

"I cannot help thinking, too, that a sense of a strong link with a forgotten yesterday would survive the complete effacement of all its details in the form of a wish to return to it. I have none. My to-day is too happy for me to wish to go back to that yesterday, even if I could, without a wrench. I feel a sort of shame in saying I should be sorry to return to it. It seems a sort of . . . a sort of disloyalty to the unknown."

"You might long to be back, if you could know. Think if you could see before you now, and recognise the woman who was once your wife." There was nettle-grasping in this.

"It is a mere abstract idea," he replied, "unaccompanied by any image of an individual. I perceive that it is dutiful to recognise the fact that I should welcome her *if* she appeared as a reality. But it is a large *if*. I am content to go on without an hypothesis—that is really all she is now. And my belief that,

if she had ever existed, I should not be *able* to disbelieve in her, underlies my acceptance of her in that character."

Mrs. Nightingale laughed. "We are mighty metaphysical," said she. "Wouldn't it depend entirely on what she was like, when all's said and done? I believe I'm right. We women are more practical than men, after all."

"You make game of my metaphysics, as you call them. Well, I'll drop the metaphysics and speak the honest truth." He stopped and faced round towards her, standing on the garden path. "Only, you must make me one promise."

She stopped also, and stood looking full at him.

"What promise?"

"If I tell you all I think in my heart, you will not allow it to come between me and you, to undermine the only strong friendship I have in the world, the only one I know of."

"It shall make no difference between us. You may trust me."

They turned and walked again slowly, once up and down. Then Fenwick's voice, when he next spoke, had an added earnestness, a growing tension, with an echo in it, for her, of the years gone by—a ring of his young enthusiasm, of his passionate outburst in the lawn-tennis garden twenty years ago. He made no more ado of what he had to say.

"I can form no image in my mind, try how I may, of any woman for whose sake I would give up one hour of the precious privilege I now enjoy. I have no right to—to assess it, to make a definition of it. But I *have* it now. I could not resume my place as the husband of a now unknown wife—you know what I mean—and not lose the privilege of being near *you*. It may be—it is conceivable, I mean; no more—that a revelation to me of myself, a light thrown on what I am, would bring me what would palliate the wrench of losing what I have of you. It *may* be so—it *may* be! All I know is—all I can say is—that I can now *imagine* nothing, no treasure of love of wife or daughter, that would be a make-weight for what I should lose if I had to part from you." He paused a moment, as though he thought he was going beyond his rights of speech, then added more quietly: "No; I can imagine *no* hypothetical wife. And as for my hypothetical daughter, I find I am always utilising Sally for her."

Mrs. Nightingale murmured in an undertone the word "Sally-kin," as she so often did when her daughter was mentioned, with that sort of caress in her voice. This time it was caught by a sort of gasp, and she remained silent. What Sally *was* had crossed her mind—the strange relation in which she stood to Fenwick, born in *his* wedlock, but no daughter of his. And there he was, as fond of the child as he could be.

Fenwick may have half misunderstood something in her manner, for when he spoke again his words had a certain aspect of recoil from what he had said, at least of consideration of it in some new light.

"When I speak to you as freely as this, remember the nature of the claim I have to do so—the only apology I can make for taking an exceptional licence."

"How do you mean?"

"I mean I do not count myself as a man—only a sort of inexplicable waif, a kind of cancelled man. A man without a past is like a child, or an idiot from birth, suddenly endowed with faculties."

"What nonsense, Fenwick! You have brooded and speculated over your condition until you have become morbid. Do now, as Sally would say, chuck the metaphysics."

"Perhaps I was getting too sententious over it. I'm sorry, and please I won't do so any more."

"Don't then. And now you'll see what will happen. You will remember everything quite suddenly. It will all come back in a flash, and oh, how glad you will be! And think of the joy of your wife and children!"

"Yes, and suppose all the while I am hating them for dragging me away from you—"

"From me and Sally?"

"I wasn't going to say Sally, but I don't want to keep her out. You and Sally, if you like. All I know is, if their re-appearance were to bring with it a pleasure I cannot imagine—because I cannot imagine *them*—it w*o*u*ld* cut across my life, as it is now, in a way that would drive me *mad*. Indeed it would. How could I say to myself—as I say now, as I dare to say to you, knowing what I am—that to be here with you now is the greatest happiness of which I am capable."

"All that would change if you recovered them."

"Yes—yes—maybe! But I shrink from it; I shrink from *them*! They are strangers—nonentities. You are—you are—oh, it's no use—" He stopped suddenly.

"What am I?"

"It's no use beating about the bush. You are the centre of my life as it is, you are what I—all that is left of me—love best in the world! I cannot *now* conceive the possibility of anything but hatred for what might come between us, for what might sever the existing link, whatever it may be—I care little what it is called, so long as I may keep it unbroken. . . ."

"And I care nothing!" It was her eyes meeting his that stopped him. He could read the meaning of her words in them before they were spoken. Then he replied in a voice less firm than before:

"Dare we—knowing what I am, knowing what may come suddenly, any hour of the day, out of the unknown—*dare* we call it love?" Perhaps in Fenwick's mind at this moment the predominant feeling was terror of the consequences to her that marriage with him might betray her into. It was much stronger than any misgiving (although a little remained) of her feelings toward himself.

"What else can we call it? It is a good old word." She said this quite calmly, with a very happy face one could see the flush of pleasure and success on even in the moonlight, and there was no reluctance, no shrinking in her, from her share of the outcome the Major had not waited to see. "Millais' Huguenot" was complete. Rosalind Graythorpe, or Palliser, stood there again with her husband's arm round her—her husband of twenty years ago! And in that fact was the keynote of what there was of unusual—of unconventional, one might almost phrase it—in her way of receiving and requiting his declaration. It hardly need be said that *he* was unconscious of any such thing. A man whose soul is reeling with the intoxication of a new-found happiness is not overcritical about the exact movement of the hand that has put the cup to his lips.

The Huguenot arrangement might have gone on in the undisturbed moonlight till the chill of the morning came to break it up if a cab-wheel *crescendo* and a *strepitoso* peal at the bell had

not announced Sally, who burst into the house and rushed into the drawing-room tumultuously, to be corrected back by a serious word from Ann, the door-opener, that Missis and Mr. Fenwick had stepped out in the garden. Ann's parade of her conviction that this was *en règle*, when no one said it wasn't, was suggestive in the highest degree. Professional perjury in a law-court could not have been more self-conscious. Probably Ann knew all about it, as well as cook. Sally saw nothing. She was too full of great events at Ladbroke Grove Road—the sort of events that are announced with a preliminary, What *do* you think, N or M? And then develop the engagement of O to P, or the jilting of Q by R.

There was just time for a dozen words between the components of the Millais group in the moonlight.

"Shall we tell Sally?" It was the Huguenot that asked the question.

"Not just this minute. Wait till I can think. Perhaps I'll tell her upstairs. Now say good-bye before the chick comes, and go." And the chick came on the scene just too late to criticise the *pose*.

"I say, mother!" this with the greatest *empressement* of which humanity and youth are capable. "I've got something I *must* tell you!"

"What is it, kitten?"

"Tishy's head-over-ears in love with the shop-boy!"

"Sh-sh-sh-shish! You noisy little monkey, do consider! The neighbours will hear every word you say." So they will, probably, as Miss Sally's voice is very penetrating, and rings musically clear in the summer night. Her attitude is that she doesn't care if they do.

"Besides they're only cats! And *nobody* knows who Tishy is, or the shop-boy. I'll come down and tell you all about it."

"We're coming up, darling!" You see, Sally had manifested down into the garden from the landing of the stair, which was made of iron openwork you knocked flower-pots down and broke, and you have had to have a new one—that, at least, is how Ann put it. On the stair-top Mrs. Nightingale stems the torrent of her daughter's revelation because it's so late and Mr. Fenwick must get away.

"You must tell him all about it another time."

"I don't know whether it's any concern of his."

"Taken scrupulous, are we, all of a sudden?" says Fenwick, laughing. "That cock won't fight, Miss Pussy! You'll have to tell me all about it when I come to-morrow. Good-night, Mrs. Nightingale." A sort of humorous formality in his voice makes Sally look from one to the other, but it leads to nothing. Sally goes to see Fenwick depart, and her mother goes upstairs with a candle. In a minute or so Sally pelts up the stairs, leaving Ann and the cook to thumbscrew on the shutter-panels of the street door, and make sure that housebreaker-baffling bells are susceptible.

"Do you know, mamma, I really *did* think—what do you think I thought?"

"What, darling?"

"I thought Mr. Fenwick was going to kiss me!" In fact, Fenwick had only just remembered in time that family privileges must stand over till after the revelation.

"Should you have minded if he had?"

"*Not a bit!* Why should *anybody* mind Mr. Fenwick kissing them? You wouldn't yourself—you know you wouldn't! Come now, mother!"

"I shouldn't distress myself, poppet!" But words are mere wind; the manner of them is everything, and the foreground of her mother's manner suggests a background to Sally. She has smelt a rat, and suddenly fixes her eyes on a tell-tale countenance fraught with mysterious reserves.

"Mother, you *are* going to marry Mr. Fenwick!" No change of type could do justice to the emphasis with which Sally goes straight to the point. Italics throughout would be weak. Her mother smiles as she fondles her daughter's excited face.

"I am, darling. So you may kiss him yourself when he comes to-morrow evening."

And Tishy's passion for the shop-boy had to stand over. But, as the Major had said, the mother and daughter talked till three in the morning—well, past two, anyhow!