

CHAPTER XVI

OF A WEDDING PARTY AND AN OLD MAN'S RETROSPECT. A HOPE OF RETRIBUTIVE JUSTICE HEREAFTER. CHARLEY'S AUNT, AND PYRAMUS AND THISBE. HOW SALLY TRIED TO PUMP THE COLONEL AND GOT HALF A BUCKETFUL

AND thus it came about that Rosalind Palliser (*née* Graythorpe) stood for the second time at the altar of matrimony with the same bridegroom under another name. The absence of bridesmaids pronounced and accented the fact that the bride was a widow, though, as there were very few of the congregation of St. Satisfax who did not know her as such, the announcement was hardly necessary. Discussion of who her late husband was, or was not, had long since given way to a belief that he was a bad lot, and that the less that was said about him the better. If any one who was present at the wedding was still constructing theories about his identity—whether he had divorced his wife, was divorced himself, or was dead—certainly none of those theories connected themselves with the present bridegroom. As for Sally, her only feeling, over and above her ordinary curiosity about her father, was a sort of paradoxical indignation that his intrusion into her mother's life should have prevented her daughter figuring as a bridesmaid. It would have been so jolly! But Sally was perfectly well aware that widows, strong-nerved from experience, stand in no need of official help in getting their "things" on, and acquiesced perforce in her position of a mere unqualified daughter.

The Major—that is to say, Colonel Lund—stayed on after the wedding, under a sort of imputation of guardianship necessary for Sally—an imputation accepted by her in order that the old boy should not feel lonesome, far more than for any advantage to herself. She wasn't sure it did him any good though, after all, for the wedding-party (if it could be called one, it was

so small), having decided that its afternoon had been completely broken into, gave itself up to dissipation, and went to see "Charley's Aunt." The old gentleman did not feel equal to this, but said if Sally told him all about it afterwards it would be just as good, and insisted on her going. He said he would be all right, and she kissed him and left him reading "Harry Lorrequer," or pretending to.

The wedding-party seemed to have grown, thought the Major, in contact with the theatrical world when, on its return, it filled the summer night with sound, and made the one-eyed piebald cat who lived at The Retreat foreclose an interview with a peevish friend acrimoniously. Perhaps it was only because the laughter and the jests, the good-nights mixed with echoes of "Charley's Aunt," and reminders of appointments for the morrow, broke in so suddenly on a long seclusion that the Major seemed to hear so many voices beyond his expectation.

The time had not hung heavy on his hands though—at least, no heavier than time always hangs on hands that wore gloves with no fingers near upon eighty years ago. The specific gravity of the hours varies less and less with loneliness and companionship as we draw nearer to the last one of all—the heaviest or lightest, which will it be? The old boy had been canvassing this point with another old boy, a real Major, our friend Roper, at the Hurkaru Club not long before, and, after he had read a few pages of "Harry Lorrequer" he put his spectacles in to keep the place, and fell back into a maze of recurrence and reflection.

Was he honest, or was it affectation, when he said to that pursy and purple old warrior that if the doctor were to tell him he had but an hour to live he should feel greatly relieved and happy? Was his heart only pretending to laugh at the panic his old friend was stricken with at the mere mention of the word "death"—he who had in his time faced death a hundred times without a qualm? But then that was military death, and was his *business*. Death the civilian, with paragraphs in the newspapers to say "the worst" was feared, and the fever being kept down, and the system being kept up, and smells of carbolic acid and hourly bulletins—that was the thing he shrank from. Why, the Major could remember old Jack Roper at Delhi, in the Mutiny, going out in the darkness to capture those

Sepoy guns—what was that place called—Ludlow Castle?—and now! . . .

“Oh dammy, Colonel! Why, good Lard! who’s dyin’ or goin’ to die? Time enough to talk about dyin’ when the cap fits. You take my advice, and try a couple of Cockle’s anti-bilious. My word for it, it’s liver! . . .” And then old Jack followed this with an earthquake-attack of coughing that looked very much as if the cap was going to fit. But came out of it incorrigible, and as soon as he could speak endorsed his advice with an admonitory forefinger: “You do as I tell you, and try ’em.”

But the fossil, who was ten years his senior, answered his own question to himself in the affirmative as he sat there listening to the distant murmur of wheels on the Uxbridge Road and the music of the cats without. Yes, he was quite honest about it. He had no complaint to make of life, for the last twenty years at any rate. His dear little *protégée*—that was how he thought of Sally’s mother—had taken good care of that. But he had some harsh indictments against earlier years—or rather *had* had. For he had dismissed the culprits with a caution, and put the records on a back-shelf.

He could take them down now and look at them without flinching. After all, he was so near the end! What did it matter?

There they all were, the neglected chronicles, each in its corner of his mind. Of his school-days, a record with all the blots and errors worked into the text and made to do duty for ornaments. Not a blemish unforgiven. It is even so with us, with you; we all forgive our schools. Of his first uniform and his first love, two records with a soil on each. For a chemical brother spilt sulphuric acid over the first, and the second married a custom-house officer. Of his first great cloud—for, if he did not quite forget his first love, he soon got a second and even a third—a cloud that came out of a letter that reached him in camp at Rawal Pindi, and told him that his father, a solicitor of unblemished character till then, had been indicted for fraudulent practices, and would have to stand his trial for misdemeanour. Of a later letter, even worse, that told of his acquittal on the score of insanity, and of how, when he went back two years

after on his first leave, he went to see his father in an asylum; who did not know him and called him “my lord,” and asked him to “bring his case before the house.” Then of a marriage, like a dream now, with a wife who left him and a child that died; and then of many colourless years of mere official routine, which might have gone on till he fell down in harness, but for the chance that threw in his way the daughter of an old friend in sore trouble and alone. Not until her loneliness and want of a protector on her voyage home suggested it did the harness come off the old horse. And then, as we have seen, followed the happiest fourth part of his life, as he accounted it, throughout which he had never felt so willing to die as he had done before. Rosalind Graythorpe grew into it as a kind of adopted daughter, and brought with her the morsel of new humanity that had become Sally—that would be back in an hour from “Charley’s Aunt.”

And now Rosy had found a guardian, and was provided for. It would be no way amiss now for the Major to take advantage of death. There is so much to be said for it when the world has left one aching!

His confidence that his *protégée* had really found a haven was no small compliment to Fenwick. For the latter, with his strange unknown past, had nothing but his personality to rely on; and the verdict of the Major, after knowing him twelve months, was as decisive on this point as if he had known him twelve years. “He may be a bit hot-tempered and impulsive,” said he to Sally. “But I really couldn’t say, if I were asked, *why* I think so. It’s a mere idea. Otherwise, it’s simply impossible to help liking him.” To which Sally replied, borrowing an expression from Ann the housemaid, that Fenwick was a cup of tea. It was metaphorical and descriptive of invigoration.

But the Major’s feeling that he was now at liberty to try Death after Life, to make for port after stormy seas, had scarcely a trace in it of dethronement or exclusion from privileges once possessed. It was not his smallest tribute to Fenwick that he should admit the idea to his mind at all—that he might have gained a son rather than lost a daughter. At least, he need not reject that view of the case, but it would not do to build on it.

Unberufen! The Major tapped three times on the little table where the lamp stood and "Harry Lorrequer" lay neglected. He pulled out his watch, and decided that they would not be very long now. He would not go to bed till he had seen the kitten—he usually spoke of her so to her mother. He had to disturb the kitten's cat, who was asleep on him, to get at the watch; who, being selfish, made a grievance of it, and went away piqued after stretching. Well, he was sorry of course, but it would have had to come, some time. And he hadn't moved for ever so long!

"I wonder," half said, half thought he to himself, "I wonder who or what he really is? . . . If only we could have known! . . . Was I right not to urge delay? . . . Only Rosey was so confident. . . . *Could* a woman of her age feel so sure and be misled?"

It was *her* certainty that had dragged his judgment along a path it might otherwise have shrunk from. He could not know her reasons, but he felt their force in her presence. Now she was gone, he doubted. Had he been a fool after all?

"Well—well; it can't be altered now. And she would have done it just the same whatever I said. . . . I suppose she was like that when she was a girl. . . . I wish I had even seen that husband of hers. . . . So odd they should both be Algernon! Does he know, I wonder, that the other was Algernon?" For the Major had religiously adhered to his promise not to say anything to Fenwick about the old story. He knew she had told it, or would tell it in her own time.

Then his thoughts turned to revival of how and where he found her first, and, as it all came back to him, you could have guessed, had you seen his face, that they had lighted on the man who was the evil cause of all, and the woman who had abetted him. The old hand on the table that had little more strength in it than when it wore a hedger's glove near eighty years ago, closed with the grip of all the force it had, and the lamp-globe rang as the tremor of his arm shook the table.

"Oh, I pray God there is a hell," came audibly from as kind a heart as ever beat. "*How* I pray God there is a hell!" Then the stress of his anger seemed to have exhausted him, for he lay back in his armchair with his eyes closed. In a few moments

he drew a long breath, and as he wiped the drops from his brow, said aloud to himself: "I wish the kitten would come." He seemed happier only from speaking of her. And then sat on and waited—waited as for a rescue—for Sally to come and fill up the house with her voice and her indispensable self.

Something of an inconsistency in the attitude of his mind may have struck across the current of his reflections—something connected with what this indispensable thing actually was and whence—for his thoughts relented as the image of her came back to him. Where would those eyes be, conspirators with the lids above them and the merry fluctuations of the brows; where would those lips be, from which the laughter never quite vanished, even as the ripple of the ocean's edge tries how small it can get but never dies outright; where the great coils of black hair that would not go inside any ordinary oilskin swimming-cap; where the incorrigible impertinence and flippancy be we never liked to miss a word of; where, in short, would Sally be if she had never emerged from that black shadow in the past?

Easy enough to say that, had she not done so, something else quite as good might have been. Very likely. How can we limit the possible to the conditional-præter-pluperfect tense? But then, you see, it wouldn't have been Sally! That's the point.

Sally's mother had followed such thoughts to the length of almost forgiving the author of her troubles. But she could not forgive him considered also as the author of her husband's. The Major could not find any forgiveness at all, though the thought of Sally just sufficed to modify the severity of his condemnation. Leniency dawned.

"Yes—yes; I was wrong to say that. But I couldn't help it." So said the old man to himself, but quite as though he spoke to some one else. He paused a little, then said again: "Yes, I was wrong. But oh, what a damned scoundrel! And *what* a woman!" Then, as though he feared a return of his old line of thought, "I wish Sally would come." And a dreadful half-thought came to him, "Suppose there were a fire at the theatre, and I had to wire . . . why—that would be worst of all!"

So, almost without a pause between, he had prayed for a hell to punish a crime, and for the safety of the treasured thing that was its surviving record—a creature that but for that crime would never have drawn breath.

His reading-lamp had burned out its young enthusiasm, and was making up its mind to go out, only not in any hurry. It would expire with dignity and leave a rich inheritance of stench. Meanwhile, its decadence was marked enough to frank the Major in neglecting "Harry Lorrequer" for the rest of the time, and also served to persuade him that he had really been reading. Abstention from a book under compulsion has something of the character of perusal. Gibbon could not have collected his materials on those lines, certainly. But the Major felt his conscience clearer from believing that he meant to go on where he had been obliged to stop. He cancelled "Harry Lorrequer," put him back in the bookcase to make an incident, then began actively waiting for the return of the playgoers. Reference to his watch at short intervals intensified their duration, added gall to their tediousness. But so convinced was he that they "would be here directly" that it was at least half-an-hour before he reconsidered this insane policy and resumed his chair with a view to keeping awake in it. He was convinced he was succeeding, had not noticed he was dozing, when he was suddenly wrenched out of the jaws of sleep by the merry voices of the home-comers and the loss of the piebald cat's temper as aforesaid.

"Oh, Major dear, you haven't gone to bed! You will be so tired! Why didn't you go?"

"I've been very happy, chick. I've been reading 'Harry Lorrequer.' I like Charles Lever, because I read him when I was a boy. What's o'clock?" He pulled out his watch with a pretence, easy of detection, that he had not just done so ten minutes before. It was a lie about "Harry Lorrequer," you see, so a little extra didn't matter.

"It's awfully late!" Sally testified. "Very nearly as late as it's possible to be. But now we're in for it, we may as well make it a nocturnal dissipation. Ann!—don't go to bed; at least, not before you've brought some more fresh water. This will take years to hot up. Oh, Major, Major, why *didn't* you

make yourself some toddy? I never go out for five minutes but you don't make yourself any toddy!"

"I don't want it, dear child. I've been drinking all day—however, of course, it was a wedding. . . ."

"But you must have some now, anyhow. Stop a minute, there's some one coming up the doorsteps and Ann's fastened up. . . . No, it's not the policeman. I know who it is. Stop a minute." And then presently the Major hears Sally's half of an interview, apparently through a keyhole. "I shan't open the door . . . two bolts and a key and a chain—the idea! What is it? . . . My pocky-anky? . . . Keep it, it won't bite you . . . send it to the wash! . . . No, really, do keep it if you don't mind—keep it till Brahm's on Thursday. Remember! Good-night." But it isn't quite good-night, for Sally arrests departure. "Stop! What a couple of idiots we are! . . . What for?—why—because you might have stuffed it in the letter-box all along." And the incident closes on the line indicated.

"It was only my medical adviser," Sally says, returning with explanations. "Found my wipe in the cab."

"Dr. Vereker?"

"Yes. Dr. Him. Exactly! We bawled at each other through the keyhole like Pyramus and Trilby——" She becomes so absorbed in the details of the toddy that she has to stand a mere emendation over until it is ready. Then she completes: "I mean Thisbe. I wonder where they've got to?"

"Pyramus and Thisbe?"

"No, mother and her young man. . . . No, I won't sit on you. I'll sit here; down alongside—so! Then I shan't shake the toddy overboard."

Her white soft hand is so comforting as it lies on the Major's on the chair-arm that he is fain to enjoy it a little, however reproachful the clock-face may be looking. You can pretend your toddy is too hot, almost any length of time, as long as no one else touches the tumbler; also you can drink as slow as you like. No need to hurry. Weddings don't come every day.

"Was it very funny, chick?"

"Oh, wasn't it! But didn't mamma look *lovely*? . . . I've seen it twice before, you know." This last is by way of apology for giving the conversation a wrench. But the Major didn't

want to talk over the wedding—seemed to prefer “Charley’s Aunt.”

“He dresses up like his aunt, doesn’t he?”

“Oh yes—it’s glorious fun! But *do* say you thought mamma looked lovely.”

“Of course she did. She always does. But had the others seen ‘Charley’s Aunt’ before?”

“Tishy and her Bradshaw? Oh yes—at least, I suppose so.”

“And Dr. Vereker?”

“Oh, of course *he* had—twice at least. The times we saw it, mother and I. He went too. . . . We-e-e-ell, there’s nothing in that!” (We can only hope again our spelling conveys the way the word *well* was prolonged.)

“Nothing at all. Why should there be? What a nice fellow Vereker is!”

“My medical adviser? Oh, *he’s* all right. Never mind him; talk about mother.”

“They must be very nearly at Rheims by now.” This is mere obedience to orders on the Major’s part. He feels no real interest in what he is saying.

“How rum it must be!” says Sally, with grave consideration. And the Major’s “What?” evolves that “it” means marrying a second husband.

“Going through it all over again when you’ve done it once before,” continues this young philosopher. The Major thinks of asking why it should be rummer the second time than the first, but decides not to, and sips his toddy, and pats the hand that is under his. In a hazy, fossil-like way he perceives that to a young girl’s mind the “rumness” of a second husband is exactly proportionate to the readiness of its acceptance of the first. Unity is just as intrinsic a quality of a first husband as the colour of his eyes or hair. Moreover, he is expected to out-live you. Above all, he is perfectly natural and a matter of course. We discern in all this a sneaking tribute to an idea of a hereafter; but the Major didn’t go so far as that.

“She looked very jolly over it,” said he, retreating on generalities. “So did he.”

“Gaffer Fenwick? I should think so indeed! Well he might!” Then, after a moment’s consideration: “He looked like my idea

of Sir Richard Grenville. It’s only an idea. I forget what he did. Elizabethan johnny.”

“What do you call him? Gaffer Fenwick? You’re a nice, respectable young monkey! Well, he’s not half a bad-looking fellow; well set up.” But none of this, though good in itself, is what Sally sat down to talk about. A sudden change in her manner, a new earnestness, makes the Major stop an incipient yawn he is utilising as an exordium to a hint that we ought to go to bed, and become quite wakeful to say: “I will tell you all I can, my child.” For Sally has thrust aside talk of the day’s events, making no more of the wedding ceremony than of “Charley’s Aunt,” with: “*Why* did my father and mother part? You *will* tell me now, won’t you, Major dear?”

Lying was necessary—inevitable. But he would minimise it. There was always the resource of the legal fiction; all babes born in matrimony are legally the children of their mother’s husband, *quand-même*. He must make that his sheet-anchor.

“You know, Sallykin, your father and mother fell out before you were born. And the first time I saw your mother—why, bless my soul, my dear! you were quite a growing girl—yes, able to get a staff-officer’s thumb in your mouth, and bite it. Indeed, you did! It was General Pellew; they say he’s going to be made a peer.” The Major thinks he sees his way out of the fire by sinking catechism in reminiscences. “I can recollect it all as if it were yesterday. I said to him, ‘Who’s the poor pretty little mother, General?’ Because he knew your mother, and I didn’t. ‘Don’t you know?’ said he. ‘She’s Mrs. Graythorpe.’ I asked about her husband, but Pellew had known nothing except that there was a row, and they had parted.” The Major’s only fiction here was that he substituted the name Graythorpe for Palliser. “Next time I saw her we picked up some acquaintance, and she asked if I was a Lincolnshire Lund, because her father always used to talk of how he went to Lund’s father’s, near Crowland, when he was a boy. ‘Stop a bit,’ said I; ‘what was your father’s name?’ ‘Paul Nightingale,’ says she.” Observe that nothing was untrue in this, because Rosey always spoke and thought of Paul Nightingale as her father.

“That was my grandfather?” Sally was intent on accumulating facts—would save up analysis till after. The Major took

advantage of a slight choke over his whiskey to mix a brief nod into it; it was a lie—but, then, he himself couldn't have said which was nod and which was choke; so it hardly counted. He continued, availing himself at times of the remains of the choke to help him to slur over difficult passages.

"He was the young brother of a sort of sweetheart of mine—a silly boyish business—a sort of calf-love. She married and died. But he was her great pet, a favourite younger brother. One keeps a recollection of this sort of thing."—The Major makes a parade of his powers of oblivion, and his failure to carry it out sits well upon him.—"Of course, my romantic memories"—the Major smiles derision of Love's young dream—"had something to do with my interest in your mother, but I hope I should have done the same if there had been no such thing. Well, the mere fact of your father's behaviour to your mother. . . ." He stopped short, with misgivings that his policy of talking himself out of his difficulties was not such a very safe one, after all. Here he was, getting into a fresh mess, gratuitously!

"Mamma won't talk about that," says Sally, "so I suppose I'm not to ask *you*." The Major must make a stand upon this, or the enemy will swarm over his entrenchments. Merely looking at his watch and saying it's time for us to be in bed will only bring a moment's respite. There is nothing for it but decision.

"Sally dear, your mother does not tell you because she wishes the whole thing buried and forgotten. Her wishes must be my wishes. . . ."

He would like to stop here—to cut it short at that, at once and for good. But the pathetic anxiety of the face from which all memories of "Charley's Aunt" have utterly vanished is too much for his fortitude; and, at the risk of more semi-fibs, he extenuates the sentence.

"One day your mother may tell you all about it. She is the proper person to tell it—not me. Neither do I think I know it all to tell."

"You know if there was or wasn't a divorce?" The Major feels very sorry he didn't let it alone.

"I'll tell you that, you inquisitive chick, if you'll promise on honour not to ask any more questions."

"I promise."

"Honour bright?"

"Honest Injun!"

"That's right. Now I'll tell you. There was no divorce, but there was a suit for a divorce, instituted by him. He failed to make out a case." Note that the expression "your father" was carefully excluded. "She was absolutely blameless—to my thinking, at least. Now that's plenty for a little girl to know. And it's high time we were both in bed and asleep."

He kisses the grave, sad young face that is yearning to hear more, but is too honourable to break its compact. "They'll be at Rheims by now," says he, to lighten off the conversation.