

CHAPTER XVII

SALLY'S LARK. AND HOW SHE TOOK HER MEDICAL ADVISER INTO HER CONFIDENCE AFTER DIVINE SERVICE

THOUGH Sally cried herself to sleep after her interview with her beloved but reticent old fossil, nevertheless, when she awoke next morning and found herself mistress of the house and the situation, she became suddenly alive to the advantages of complete independence. She was an optimist constitutionally; for it is optimism to decide that it is "rather a lark" to breakfast by yourself when you have just dried the tears you have been shedding over the loss of your morning companion. Sally came to this conclusion as she poured out her tea, after despatching his toast and coffee to the Major in his own room. He sometimes came down to breakfast, but such a dissipation as yesterday put it out of the question on this particular morning.

The lark continued an unalloyed, unqualified lark quite to the end of the second cup of tea, when it seemed to undergo a slight clouding over—a something we should rather indicate by saying that it slowed down passing through a station, than that it was modulated into a minor key. Of course, we are handicapped in our metaphors by an imperfect understanding of the exact force of the word "lark" used in this connexion.

The day before does not come back to us during our first cup at breakfast, whether it be tea or coffee. A happy disposition lets what we have slept on sleep, till at least it has glanced at the weather, and knows that it is going to be cooler, some rain. Then memory revives, and all the chill inheritance of overnight. We pick up the thread of our existence, and draw our finger over the last knots, and then go on where we left off. We remember that we have to see about this, and we mustn't be late at that, and that there's an order got to be made out for the stores. There wasn't in Sally's case, certainly, because it was Sunday; but there was tribulation awaiting her as soon as she could recol-

lect her overdue analysis of the Major's concealed facts. She had put it off till leisure should come; and now that she was only looking at a microcosm of the garden seen through the window, and reflected upside down in the tea-urn, she had surely met with leisure. Her mind went back tentatively on the points of the old man's reminiscences, as she looked at her own thoughtful face in the convex of the urn opposite, nursed in two miniature hands whose elbows were already becoming unreasonably magnified, though really they were next to nothing nearer.

Just to think! The Major had actually been in love when he was young. More than once he must have been, because Sally knew he was a widower. She touched the shiny urn with her finger, to see how hideously it swelled in the mirror. You know what fun that is! But she took her finger back, because it was too hot, though off the boil.

There was a bluebottle between the blind and the window-pane, as usual; if he was the same bluebottle that was there when Fenwick was first brought into this room, he had learned nothing and forgotten nothing, like the old *régime* in France. He only knew how to butt and blunder resonantly at the glass; but he could do it as well as ever, and he seemed to have made up his mind to persevere. Sally listened to his monotone, and watched her image in the urn.

"I wish I hadn't promised not to ask more," she thought to herself. "Anyhow, Tishy's wrong. Nobody ever was named Palliser—that's flat! And if there was a divorce-suit ever so, I don't care! . . ." She had to stop thinking for a moment, to make terms with the cat, who otherwise would have got her claws in the beautiful white damask, and ripped.

"Besides, if my precious father behaved so badly to mamma, how could it be *her* fault? I don't *believe* in mother being the *least* wrong in anything, so it's no use!" This last filled out a response to an imaginary indictment of an officious Crown-Prosecutor. "I know what I should like! I should like to get at that old Scroope, or whatever his name is, and get it all out of him. I'd give him a piece of my mind, gossipy old humbug!" It then occurred to Sally that she was being unfair. No, she wouldn't castigate old Major Roper for tattling, and at the same time cross-examine him for her own purposes. It would be

underhand. But it would be very easy, if she could get at him, to make him talk about it. She rehearsed ways and means that might be employed to that end. For instance, nothing more natural than to recur to the legend of how she bit General Pellew's finger; that would set him off! She recited the form of speech to be employed. "Do you know, Major Roper, I'm told I once bit a staff-officer's finger off," etc. Or would it be better not to approach the matter with circumspection, but go straight to the point—"You must have met my father, Major Roper, etc.," and then follow on with explanations? Oh dear, how difficult it was to settle! If only there were any one she could trust to talk to about it! Really, Tishy was quite out of the question, even if she could take her mind off her Bradshaw for five minutes, which she couldn't.

"Of course, there's Prosy, if you come to that," was the conclusion reached at the end of a long avenue of consideration, on each side of which referees who might have been accepted, but had been rejected, were supposed to be left to their disappointment. "Only, fancy making a confidant of old Prosy! Why, he'd feel your pulse and look at your tongue, just as likely as not."

But Dr. Vereker, thus dismissed to the rejected referees, seemed not to care for their companionship, and to be able to come back. At any rate, Miss Sally ended up a long cogitation with, "I've a great mind to go and talk to Prosy about it, after all! Perhaps he would be at church."

Now, if this had been conversation instead of soliloquy, Sally's constitutional frankness would have entered some protest against the assumption that she intended to go to church as a matter of course. As she was her only audience, and one that knew all about the speaker already, she slurred a little over the fact that her decision to attend church was influenced by a belief that probably Dr. Vereker would be there. If she chose, she should deceive herself, and consult nobody else. She looked at her watch, as the open-work clock with the punctual ratchet-movement had stopped, and was surprised to find how late she was. "Comes of weddings!" was her comment. However, she had time to wind the clock up and set it going when she came downstairs again ready for church.

St. Satisfax's Revd. Vicar prided himself on the appropriateness of his sermons; so, this time, as he had yesterday united a distinguished and beautiful widow to her second husband, he selected for his text the parable of the widow's son. True, Mrs. Nightingale had no son, and her daughter wasn't dead, and there is not a hint in the text that the widow of Nain married again, or had any intention of doing so. On the other hand, the latter had no daughter, presumably, and her son was alive. And as to marrying again, why, there was the very gist and essence of the comparison, if you chose to accept the cryptic suggestions of the Revd. Vicar, and make it for yourself. The lesson we had to learn from this parable was obviously that nowadays widows, however good and solvent, were mundane, and married again; while in the City of Nain, nineteen hundred years ago, they (being in Holy Writ) were, as it were, Sundane, and didn't. The delicacy of the reverend suggestion to this effect, without formal indictment of any offender, passes our powers of description. So subtle was it that Sally felt she had nothing to lay hold of.

Nevertheless, when the last of the group that included herself and the doctor, and walked from St. Satisfax towards its atomic elements' respective homes, had vanished down her turning—it was the large Miss Baker, as a matter of fact—then Sally referred to the sermon and its text, jumping straight to her own indictment of the preacher.

"Why shouldn't my mother marry again if she likes, Dr. Vereker—especially Mr. Fenwick?"

"Don't you think it possible, Miss Sally, that the parson didn't mean anything about your mother—didn't connect her in his mind with——"

"With the real widow in the parable? Oh yes, he did, though! As if mother was a real widow!"

Now, the doctor had heard from his own widowed mother the heads of the gossip about the supposed divorce. He had pooh-poohed this as mere tattle—asked for evidence, and so on. But, having heard it, it was not to be wondered at that he put a false interpretation on Sally's last words. They seemed to acknowledge the divorce story. He felt very unsafe, and could only repeat them half interrogatively, "As if Mrs. Nightingale

was a real widow?" But with the effect that Sally immediately saw clean through him, and knew what was passing in his mind.

"Oh no, Dr. Vereker! I wasn't thinking of *that*." She faced round to disclaim it, turning her eyes full on the embarrassed doctor. Then she suddenly remembered it was the very thing she had come out to talk about, and felt ashamed. The slightest possible flush, that framed up her smile and her eyes, made her at this moment a bad companion for a man who was under an obligation not to fall in love with her—for that was how the doctor thought of himself. Sally continued: "But I wish I had been, because it would have done instead."

The young man was really, at the moment, conscious of very little beyond the girl's fascination, and his reply, "Instead of what?" was a little mechanical.

"I mean instead of explaining what I wanted you to talk about special. But when I spoke, you know, just now about a real widow, I meant a real widow that—that *wids*—you know what I mean. Don't laugh!"

"All right, Miss Sally. I'm serious." The doctor composes a professional face. "I know perfectly what you mean." He waits for the next symptom.

"Now, mother never did wid, and never will wid, I hope. She hasn't got it in her bones." And then Miss Sally stopped short, and a little extra flush got time to assert itself. But a moment after she rushed the position without a single casualty. "I want to know what people say, when I'm not there, about who my father was, and why he and mother parted. And I'm sure you can tell me, and will. It's no use asking Tishy Wilson any more about it." Observe the transparency of this young lady. She wasn't going to conceal that she had talked of it to Tishy Wilson—not she!

Dr. Vereker, usually reserved, but candid withal, becomes, under the infection of Sally's frankness, candid and unreserved.

"People haven't talked any nonsense to *me*; I never let them. But my mother has repeated to me things that have been said to her. . . . She doesn't like gossip, you know!" And the young man really believes what he says. Because his mother has been his religion—just consider!

"I know she doesn't." Sally analyses the position, and decides on the fib in the twinkling of an eye. She is going to make a son break a promise to his mother, and she knows it. So she gives him this as a set-off. "But people *will* talk to her, of course! Shall I get *her* to tell *me*?"

The doctor considers, then answers:

"I think, Miss Sally—unless you particularly wish the contrary—I would almost rather not. Mother believed the story all nonsense, and was very much concerned that people should repeat such silly tattle. She would be very unhappy if she thought it had come to your ears through her repeating it in confidence to me."

"Perhaps you would really rather not tell it, doctor." Disappointment is on Sally's face.

"No. As you have asked me, I prefer to tell it. Only you won't speak to her at all, will you?"

"I really won't. You may trust me."

"Well, then, it's really very little when all's said and done. Somebody told her—I won't say who it was—you don't mind?" Sally didn't—"told her that your father behaved very badly to your mother, and that he tried to get a divorce from her and failed, and that after that they parted by mutual consent, and he went away to New Zealand when you were quite a small baby."

"Was that quite all?"

"That was all mother told me. I'm afraid I rather cut her short by saying I thought it was most likely all unfounded gossip. Was any of it true? But I've no right to ask questions. . . ."

"Oh, Dr. Vereker—no! That wouldn't be fair. Of course, when you are asked to tell, you are allowed to ask. Every one always is. Besides, I don't mind a bit telling you all I know. Only you'll be surprised at my knowing so very little."

And then Sally, with a clearness that did her credit, repeated all the information she had had—all that her mother had told her—what she had extracted from Colonel Lund with difficulty—and lastly, but as the merest untrustworthy hearsay, the story that had reached her through her friend Lætitia. In fact, she went the length of discrediting it altogether, as "Only Goody

Wilson, when all was said and done." The fact that her mother had told her so little never seemed to strike her as strange or to call for comment. It was right that it should be so, because it was in her mother's jurisdiction, and what she did or said was right. Cannot most of us recall things unquestioned in our youth that we have marvelled at our passive acceptance of since? Sally's mother's silence about her father was ingrained in the nature of things, and she had never speculated about him so much as she had done since Professor Wilson's remark across the table had led to Lætitia's tale about Major Roper and the tiger-shooting.

Sally's version of her mother's history was comforting to her hearer on one point: it contained no hint that the fugitive to Australia was not her father. Now, the fact is that the doctor, in repeating what his mother had said to him, had passed over some speculations of hers about Sally's paternity. No wonder the two records confirmed each other, seeing that the point suppressed by the doctor had been studiously kept from Sally by all her informants. He, for his part, felt that the bargain did not include speculations of his mother's.

"Well, doctor?" Thus Sally, at the end of a very short pause for consideration. Vereker does not seem to need a longer one. "You mean, Miss Sally, do I think people talk spitefully of Mrs. Nightingale—I suppose I must say Mrs. Fenwick now—behind her back? Isn't that the sort of question?" Sally, for response, looks a little short nod at the doctor, instead of words. He goes on: "Well, then, I don't think they do. And I don't think you need fret about it. People will talk about the story of the quarrel and separation, of course, but it doesn't follow that anything will be said against either your father or mother. Things of this sort happen every day, with fault on neither side."

"You think it was just a row?"

"Most likely. The only thing that seems to me to tell against your father is what you said your mother said just now—something about having forgiven him for your sake." Sally repeats her nod. "Well, even that might be accounted for by supposing that he had been very hot-tempered and unjust and violent. He was quite a young chap, you see. . . ."

"You mean like—like supposing Jeremiah were to go into a

tantrum now and flare up—he does sometimes—and then they were both to miff off?"

"Something of that sort. Very likely they would have understood each other better if they had been a little older and wiser. . . ."

"Like us?" says Sally, with perfect unconsciousness of one aspect of the remark. "And then they might have gone on till now." Regret that they did not do so is on her face, till she suddenly sees a new contingency. "But then we shouldn't have had Jeremiah. I shouldn't have fancied that at all." She doesn't really see why the doctor smiled at this, but adds a grave explanation: "I mean, if I'd tried both, I might have preferred my step." But there they were at Glenmoira Road, and must say good-bye till Brahms on Thursday.

Only, the doctor did (as a matter of history) walk down that road with Sally as far as the gate with Krakatoa Villa on it, and got home late for his mid-day Sunday dinner, and was told by his mother that he might have considered the servants. She herself was, meekly, out of it.