

CHAPTER XXII

IT WAS THAT MRS. NIGHTINGALE'S FAULT. A SATISFACTORY CHAP, GERRY! A TELEGRAM AND A CLOUD. BRONCHITIS AND ASTHMA AND FOG. SALLY GOES TO MAYFAIR. THE OLD SOLDIER HAS NOTICE TO QUIT

THE most deeply-rooted instinct of mankind is the one that prompts it to lay the blame on some one else. Mankind includes womankind, and woman includes (for we believe she is still living) the Dragon of the last chapter. As it did not occur to this good lady that her own attitude of estrangement from Lætitia had anything to answer for in the rash and premature development of the latter's love-affair, she cast about for a scapegoat, and found one in the person of Rosalind Fenwick. Some one had schemed the whole business, clearly, and who else could it be but that woman? Of course, Lætitia herself was simply the victim of a plot—she was young and inexperienced; people's daughters are.

But nothing in the nefarious business had escaped the watchful eye of the Dragon. At the time of the very first appearance of "that Mrs. Nightingale" on the scene she had pointed out her insidious character, and forewarned North and North-west Kensington of what was to be expected from a person of her antecedents. It was true no one knew anything about these latter; but, then, that was exactly the point.

"It's useless attempting to find excuses for that woman. Clarissa," she had said. "It's always the same story with people of that sort. Whenever they have no proper introduction, they always turn out schemers and matchmakers. I detected her, and said so at once. It is easy for your father to pretend he has forgotten. He always does. My consolation is that I did my duty. And then, of course, it all turns out as I said. Anybody could have known what sort of person she was with half an eye!"

"And what sort of person is she?" asked Clarissa coldly. She had not forgotten the vaccination from the calf.

"The sort of person you would expect. Unless, Clarissa, you are going to take a leaf out of your father's book, and make believe you do not understand what is transparently on the surface. What interest can Major Roper have in inventing the story, I should like to know?"

"How does he come to know so much about it? Who told him?"

"Who *told* him? Why, of course that very old gentleman—what's his name?—*you* know——" Mrs. Wilson tries if she can't recollect with a quick vibration of a couple of fingers to back up her brain. "Colonel Dunn!"

"Major Lund?"

"Lunn or Dunn. Yes, I remember now; it's Lunn, because the girl said when she was a child she thought Sally Lunn had something to do with both. You may depend on it, I'm right. Well, Major Roper's his most intimate friend. They belong to the same club."

The ladies then lost sight of their topic, which lapsed into a rather heated discussion of whether the very old gentleman was a Colonel or a Major. As we don't want to hear them on this point, we may let them lapse too.

It may have been because of some home anxieties—notably about the Major, whose bronchitis had been bad—that Rosalind Fenwick continued happily unconscious of having incurred any blame or taken any responsibility on herself in connexion with the Ladbroke Grove row, as Sally called it. If she *had* known of it, very likely it would not have troubled her, for she was really too contented with her own condition and surroundings to be concerned about externals. Whatever troubles she had were connected with the possibility, which always seemed to grow fainter, of a revival of her husband's powers of memory. Sometimes whole weeks would pass without an alarm. Sometimes some little stirring of the mind would occur twice in the same day; still, the tendency seemed to be, on the whole, towards a more and more complete oblivion.

But the fact is that so long as she had the Major invalided at Krakatoa Villa (for he was taken ill there, and remained on her

hands many weeks before he could return to his lodgings) she had the haziest impressions of the outside world. Sally talked about "the row" while they were nursing the old boy, but really she heeded her very little. Then, when the invalid was so far reinstated that he was fit to be moved safely, Sally went away too, for a change.

The respite to old Colonel Lund was not to be for long. But the rest, alone with her husband, was not unwelcome to Rosalind.

"I can never have been one-tenth as happy, Rosey darling," said he to her one day, "as I have been in the last six months. I should recollect all about it if I had."

"You're a satisfactory chap to deal with, Gerry—I must say that for you. You always beam, come what may. Even when you fly out—which you do, you know—it's more like a big dog than a wasp. You were always . . ." Now, Rosalind was going to say "always like that"; it was a mistake she was constantly in danger of. But she stopped in time, and changed her speech to "You're not without your faults, you know! You never can come to an anchor, and be quiet. You sit on the arms of chairs, and your hands are too big and strong. No; you needn't stop. Go on!" We like leaving the words to elucidate the concurrent action. "And you don't smell much of tobacco."

Fenwick, however, had noticed the kink in the thread, and must needs wind it back to get a clear line. "I was always what?" said he. His wife saw a way out.

"Always good when your daughter was here to manage you." It wasn't so satisfactory as it might have been, but answered in dealing with a mind so unsuspecting. Sally's having spent Christmas and stayed on a little at a friend's in the country lent plausibility to a past tense which might else have jarred.

"I don't want the kitten all to myself, you know," said Fenwick. "It wouldn't be fair. After all, she *was* yours before she was mine."

There was not a tremor in the hand that lay in his, the one that was not caressing her cheek; not a sign of flinching in the eyes that turned round on him; not a trace of hesitation in the voice that said, with concession to a laugh in it: "Yes, she *was* mine before she was yours." Such skill had grown in this life of nettle-grasping!—indeed, she hardly felt the sting now. This

time she was able to go on placidly, in the unconnected way of talk books know not, and life well knows:

"Do you know what the kitten will be next August?"

"Yes; twenty-one."

"It's rather awful, isn't it?"

"Which way do you mean? It's awful because she isn't *fiancée*, or awful because she might be at any minute?"

"You've picked up her way of going to the point, Gerry. I never said anything about her being *fiancée*."

"No, but you meant it."

"Of course I did! Well, then, because she might be any minute. I'm very glad she *isn't*. Why, you know I *must* be!"

"I am, anyhow!"

"Just think what the house would be without her!"

"The best place in the world still for me." She acknowledges this by a kiss on his hairy hand, which he returns *via* her forehead; then goes on: "All the same, I'll be hanged if I know what we should do without our kitten. But has anything made you afraid?"

"Oh no; nothing at all! Certainly; no, nothing. Have you noticed anything?"

"Oh dear, no! For anything I can see, she may continue a—a sort of mer-pussy to the end of time." Both laugh in a way at the name he has made for her; then he adds: "Only . . ."

"Only what?"

"Nothing I could lay hold of."

"I wonder whether you're thinking of the same thing as I am?" Very singularly, it does not seem necessary to elucidate the point. They merely look at each other, and continue looking as Fenwick says:

"They *are* a funny couple, if that's it!"

"They certainly *are*," she replies. "But I *have* thought so, for all that!" And then both look at the fire as before, this being, of course, in the depth of winter. Rosalind speaks next.

"There's no doubt about *him*, of course! But the chick would have told me at once if . . ."

"If there had been anything to tell. No doubt she would."

"Of course, it's absurd to suppose he could see so much of her as he does, and not . . ."

"Perfectly absurd! But then, you know, that young fiddler was very bad, indeed, about the chick until he made her acquaintance."

"So he was." Thoughtfully, as one who weighs.

"The kitten met him with a sort of stony geniality that would have knocked the heart out of a Romeo. If Juliet had known the method, she could have nipped Shakespeare in the bud."

"She *didn't* want to. Sally *did*."

"But then Shakespeare might have gone on and written a dry respectable story—not a love-story; an esteem story—about how Juliet took an interest in Romeo's welfare, and Romeo posted her letters for her, and presented her with a photograph album, and so on. And how the families left cards."

"But it isn't exactly stony geniality. It's another method altogether with the doctor—a method the child's invented for herself."

Fenwick repeats, "A method she's invented for herself. Exactly. Well, we shall have her back to-morrow. What time does she come?" And then her mother says, interrupting the conversation: "What's that?"

"What's what?"

"I thought I heard the gate go."

"Not at this time of night." But Fenwick is wrong, for in a moment comes an imperious peal at the bell. A pair of boots, manifestly on a telegraph-boy's cold feet, play a devil's tattoo on the sheltered doorstep. They have been inaudible till now, as the snow is on the ground again at Moira Villas. In three minutes the boots are released, and they and their wearer depart, callously uninterested in the contents of the telegram they have brought. If we were a telegraph-boy, we should always be yearning to know and share the joys and sorrows of our employers. This boy doesn't, to judge by the way he sings that he is "Only the Ghost of a Mother-in-law," showing that he goes to the music-halls.

Less than ten minutes after the telegraph-boy has died away in the distance Rosalind and her husband are telling a cab to take them to 174, Ball Street, Mayfair.

It does so grudgingly, because of the state of the roads. It wants three-and-sixpence, and gets it, for the same reason. But it doesn't appear to be drawn by a logical horse who can deal with inferences, because it is anxious to know when its clients are going back, that it may call round for them.

For the telegram was that there was "no cause immediate apprehension; perhaps better come.—Major." As might have been expected from such a telegram about a man of his age, just after seeming recovery from an attack of bronchitis, the hours on earth of its subject were numbered. Fever may abate, temperature may be brought down to the normal, the most nourishing possible nourishment may be given at the shortest possible intervals, but the recoil of exhaustion will have its way when there is little or nothing left to exhaust. Colonel Lund had possibly two or three years of natural life before him, disease apart, when a fierce return of the old enemy, backed by the severity of a London winter, and even more effectually by its fog, stopped the old heart a few thousand beats too soon, and ended a record its subject had ceased to take an interest in a few paragraphs short of the normal *finis*.

We allow our words to overtake our story in this way because we know that you know—you who read—exactly what follows telegrams like the one that came to Mrs. Fenwick. If you are new and young, and do not know it yet, you will soon. However, we can now go back.

When the economical landlady (a rather superior person) who had opened the street-door was preceding Rosalind up the narrow stairs, and turning up gas-jets from their reserve of darkness-point, she surprised her by saying she thought there was the Major coming downstairs. "Yes, madam; the Major—Major Roper," she continued, in reply to an expression of astonishment. Rosalind had forgotten that Colonel Lund was, outside her own family, "the Colonel."

It was Major Roper whom we have seen at the Hurkaru Club, as purple as ever and more asthmatic—in fact, the noise that was the Major coming downstairs was also the noise of the Major choking in the fog. It came slowly down, and tried hard to stop, in order that its source might speak intelligibly to the visitors. What time the superior person stood and grudged the

gas. In the end, speech of a sort was squeezed out slowly, as the landlady, stung to action by the needless gas-waste, plucked the words out of the speaker's mouth at intervals, and finished them up for him. The information came piecemeal; but in substance it was that he had the day before found his old friend coughing his liver up in this dam fog, and had taken on himself to fetch the medical man and a nurse; that these latter, though therapeutically useless, as is the manner of doctors and nurses, had common-sense enough to back him (Roper) in his view that Mrs. Fenwick ought to be sent for, although the patient opposed their doing so. So he took upon himself to wire. There wasn't any occasion whatever for alarm, ma'am! Not the slightest. "You hear me, and mark what I say—an old stager, ma'am! Ever such a little common-sense, and half the patients would recover!" A few details of the rapid increase of the fever, of the patient's resistance to the sending of his message, and an indication of a curious feeling on the old Colonel's part that it wouldn't be correct form to go back to be nursed through a second attack when he had so lately got safe out of the first one. All this landed the speaker in something near suffocation, and made his hearers protest, quite uselessly, against his again exposing himself to the fog. Whereon the landlady, with a finger on the gas-tap, nodded toward the convulsed old officer to supply her speech with a nominative, and spoke. What she said was merely: "Hasn't been to bed." And then waited for Rosalind to go upstairs with such aggressive patience that the latter could only say a word or two of thanks to Major Roper and pass up. He, for his part, went quicker downstairs to avoid the thanks, and the gas-tap vigil came to a sudden end the moment Rosalind turned the handle of the door above. . . . Now, what is the object of all this endless detail of what might have been easily told in three words—well, in thirty, certainly?

Simply this: to show you why Fenwick, following on after some discussion with the cab below, was practically invisible to the asthmatic one, who passed him on the stairs just as the light above vanished. So he had no chance of recognizing the donor of his tiger's skin, which he might easily have done in open day, in spite of the twenty years between, for the old chap

was as sharp as a razor about people. He passed Fenwick with a good-evening, and Mr. Fenwick, he presumed, and his good lady was on ahead, as indicated by the speaker's thumb across his shoulder. Fenwick made all acknowledgments, and felt his way upstairs in the dark till the nurse with a hand-lamp looked over the banisters for him.

When Sally came back to Krakatoa Villa early next day she found an empty house, and a note signed Jeremiah that explained its emptiness. We had been sent for to the Major, and Sally wasn't to be frightened. He had had a better night than last night, the doctor and nurse said; and Sally might come on as soon as she had had a good lunch. Only she was on no account to fidget.

So she didn't fidget. She had the good lunch very early, left Ann to put back her things in the drawers, and found her way through the thickening fog to the Tube, only just anxious enough about the Major to feel, until the next station was Marble Arch, that London had changed and got cruder and more cold-hearted since she went away, and that the guard was chilly and callous about her, and didn't care how jolly a house-party she had left behind her at Riverfordhook. For it was that nice aunt of Tishy's that had asked her down for a few days, and the few days had caught on to their successors as they came, and become a fortnight. But he appeared to show a human heart, at least, by a certain cordiality with which he announced the prospect of Marble Arch, which might have been because it was Sally's station. Now, he had said Lancaster Gate snappishly, and Queen's Road with misgiving, as though he would have fain added D.V. if the printed regulations had permitted it. Also, Sally thought there was good feeling in the reluctance he showed to let her out, based entirely on nervousness lest she should slip (colloquially) between the platform.

You don't save anything by taking the pink 'bus, nor any 'bus for that matter, down Park Lane when the traffic tumbles down every half-minute, in spite of cinders lavished by the authority, and can't really see its way to locomotion when it gets up. So you may just as well walk. Sally did so, and in ten minutes reached the queer little purlieu teeming with the well-

connected, and named after the great Mysteries they are connected with, that lies in the angle of Park Lane and Piccadilly. Persons of exaggerated sense of locality or mature hereditary experience can make short cuts through this district, but the wayfarer (broadly speaking) had better not try, lest he be found dead in a mews by the Coroner, and made the subject of a verdict according to the evidence. Sally knew all about it of old, and went as straight through the fog as the ground-plan of the streets permitted to the house where her mother and a nurse were doing what might be done to prolong the tenancy of the top-floor. But both knew the occupant had received notice to quit. Only, it did seem so purposeless, this writ of ejectment and violent expulsion, when he was quite ready to go, and wanted nothing but permission.

CHAPTER XXIII

OF A FOG THAT WAS UP-TO-DATE, AND HOW A FIRE-ENGINE RELIEVED SALLY FROM A BOY. HOW SALLY GOT IN AT A GENTLEMEN'S CLUB, AND HOW VETERANS COULD RECOLLECT HER FATHER. BUT THEY KNOW WHAT SHE CAN BE TOLD, AND WHAT SHE CAN'T. HOW MAJOR ROPER WOULD GO OUT IN THE FOG

MRS. FENWICK was not sorry to break down a little, now that her daughter had come to break down on. She soon pulled together, however. Breaking down was not a favourite relaxation of hers, as we have seen. Her husband had, of course, left her to go to his place of business, not materially the worse for a night spent without closed eyes and in the anxiety of a sick-chamber.

"Oh, mother darling! you are quite worn out. How is he?"

"He's quiet now, kitten; but we thought the cough would have killed him in the night. He's only so quiet now because of the opiates. Only at his age——" Mrs. Fenwick stopped and looked at the nurse, whose shake of the head was an assent to the impossibility of keeping a patient of eighty alive on opiates. Then, having gone thus far in indicating the grim probabilities of the case, Sally's mother added, as alleviation to a first collision with Death: "But Dr. Mildmay says the inflammation and fever may subside, and then, if he can take nourishment——" but got no further, for incredulity of this sort of thing is in the air of the establishment.

Not, perhaps, on Sally's part. Young people who have not seen Death face-to-face have little real conception of his horrible unmasked intrusion into the house of Life. That house is to them almost as inviolable as the home of our babyhood was to the most of us, a sacred fane under the protection of an omnipotent high-priest and priestess—papa and mamma. Almost as inviolable, that is, when those who live in it are our friends. Of course, the people in the newspapers go dying—are even killed in railway accidents. This frame of mind will change for Sally when