

CHAPTER XXIV

HOW MAJOR ROPER MET THAT BOY, AND GOT UPSTAIRS AT BALL STREET.
AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN ASTHMA AND BRONCHITIS. HOW SALLY
PINIONED THE PURPLE VETERAN, AND THERE WAS NO BOY. HOW
THE GOVERNOR DONE HOARCKIN', AND GOT QUALIFIED FOR A SUBJECT
OF PSYCHICAL RESEARCH

OLD JACK's powers of self-delusion were great indeed if, when he started on his short journey, he really believed the fog had mended. At least, it was so dense that he might never have found his way without assistance. This he met with in the shape of a boy with a link, whom Sally at once identified from his description, given when the Major had succeeded in getting up the stairs and was resting in the sitting-room near the old sabre on the wall, wiping his eyes after his effort. Colonel Lund was half-unconscious after a bad attack, and it was best not to disturb him. Fenwick had not returned, and no one was very easy about him. But every one affirmed the reverse, and joined in a sort of Creed to the effect that the fog was clearing. It wasn't and didn't mean to for some time. But the unanimity of the creed fortified the congregation, as in other cases. No two believers doubted it at once, just as no two Alpine climbers, strung together on the moraine of a glacier, lose their foothold at the same time.

"I know that boy," said Sally. "His nose twists, and gives him a presumptuous expression, and he has a front tooth out and puts his tongue through. Also his trousers are tied on with strings."

"Everlastin' young beggar, if ever there was one," says the old soldier, in a lucid interval when speech is articulate. But he is allowing colloquialism to run riot over meaning. No everlasting person can ever have become part of the past if you think of it. He goes on to say that the boy has had twopence and is to come back for fourpence in an hour, or threepence if you can

see the gas-lamps, because then a link will be superfluous. Sally recognises the boy more than ever.

"I wonder," she says, "if he's waiting outside. Because the party of the house might allow him inside. Do you think I could ask, mother?"

"You might *try*, kitten," is the reply, not given sanguinely. And Sally goes off, benevolent. "Even when your trousers are tied up with string, a fog's a fog," says she to herself.

"I knoo our friend Lund first of all . . ." Thus the Major, nodding towards the bedroom door . . . "Why, God bless my soul, ma'am, I knew Lund first of all, forty-six years ago in Delhi. Forty—six—years! And all that time, if you believe me, he's been the same obstinate moole. Never takin' a precaution about anythin', nor listening to a word of advice!" This is about as far as he can go without a choke. Rosalind goes into the next room to get a tumbler of water. The nurse, who is sitting by the fire, nods towards the bed, and Rosalind goes close to it to hear. "What is it, dear?" She speaks to the invalid as to a little child.

"Isn't that Old Jack choking? I know his choke. What does he come out for in weather like this? What does he mean? Send him back. . . . No, send him in here." The nurse puts in a headshake as protest. But for all that, Sally finds, when she returns, that the two veterans are contending together against their two enemies, bronchitis and asthma, with the Intelligence Department sadly interrupted, and the enemy in possession of all the advantageous points.

"He oughtn't to try to talk," says Rosalind. "But he will." She and Sally and the nurse sit on in the fog-bound front room. The gas-lights have no heart in them, and each wears a nimbus. Rosalind wishes Gerry would return, aloud. Sally is buoyant about him; *he's* all right, trust *him!* What about the everlasting young beggar?

"I persuaded Mrs. Kindred," says Sally. "And we looked outside for him, and he'd gone."

"Fancy a woman being named Kindred!"

"When people are so genteel one can believe anything! But what do you think the boy's name is? . . . Chancellorship! Isn't that queer? She knows him—says he's always about in

the neighbourhood. He sleeps in the mews behind Great Toff House."

Her mother isn't listening. She rises for a moment to hear what she may of how the talk in the next room goes on; and then, coming back, says again she wishes Gerry was safe indoors, and Sally again says, "Oh, *he's* all right!" The confidence these two have in one another makes them a couple apart—a sort of league.

What Mrs. Fenwick heard a scrap of in the next room would have been, but for the alarums and excursions of the two enemies aforementioned, a consecutive conversation as follows:

"You're gettin' round, Colonel?"

"A deal better, Major. I want to speak to *you*."

"Fire away, old Cockywax! You remember Hopkins?—Cartwright Hopkins—man with a squint—at Mooltan—expression of his, 'Old Cockywax.'"

"I remember him. Died of typhoid at Burrampore. Now you listen to me, old chap, and don't talk—you only make yourself cough."

"It's only the dam fog. *I'm* all right."

"Well, shut up. That child in the next room—it's her I want to talk about. You're the only man, as far as I know, that knows the story. She doesn't. She's not to be told."

"Mum's the word, sir. Always say nothin', that's my motto. Penderfield's daughter at Khopal—at least, he was her father. One dam father's as good as another, as long as he goes to the devil." This may be a kind of disclaimer of inheritance as a factor to be reckoned with, an obscure suggestion that human parentage is without influence on character. It is not well expressed.

"Listen to me, Roper. You know the story. That's the only man I can't say God forgive him to. God forgive *me*, but I can't."

"Devil take me if I can! . . . Yes, it's all right. They're all in the next room. . . ."

"But the woman was worse. She's living, you know. . . ."

"I know—shinin' light—purifying society—that's her game! I'd purify *her*, if I had my way."

"Come a bit nearer—my voice goes. I've thought it all out. If the girl, who supposes herself to be the daughter of her

mother's husband, tries to run you into a corner—you understand?"

"I understand."

"Well, don't you undeceive her. Her mother has never told her *anything*. She doesn't suppose she had any hand in the divorce. She thinks his name was Graythorpe, and doesn't know he wasn't her father. Don't you undeceive her—promise."

But the speaker is so near the end of his tether that the Major has barely time to say, "Honour bright, Colonel," when the bronchial storm bursts. It may be that the last new anodyne, which is warranted to have all the virtues and none of the ill-effects of opium, had also come to the end of *its* tether. Mrs. Fenwick came quickly in, saying he had talked too much; and Sally, following her, got Major Roper away, leaving the patient to her mother and the nurse. The latter knew what it would be with all this talking—now the temperature would go up, and he would have a bad night, and what would Dr. Mildmay say?

Till the storm had subsided and a new dose of the sedative had been given, Sally and Old Jack stood waiting in sympathetic pain—you know what it is when you can do nothing. The latter derived some insignificant comfort from suggestions through his own choking that all this was due to neglect of his advice. When only moans and heavy breathing were left, Sally went back into the bedroom. Her mother was nursing the poor old racked head on her bosom, with the sword-hand of the days gone by in her own. She said without speaking that he would sleep presently, and the fewer in the room the better, and Sally left them so, and went back.

Yes, the Major would take some toddy before he started for home. And it was all ready, lemons and all, in the black polished wood cellaret, with eagles' claws for feet. Sally got the ingredients out and began to make it. But first she gently closed the door between the rooms, to keep the sound of their voices in.

"You really did see my father, though, Major?" There seemed to be a good deal of consideration before the answer came, not all to be accounted for by asthma.

"Yes—certainly—oh yes. I saw Mr. Graythorpe once or twice. Another spoonful—that's plenty." A pause.

"Now, don't spill it. Take care, it's very hot. That's right." Another pause. "Major Roper. . ."

"Yes, my dear. What?"

"Do tell me what he was like."

"Have you never seen his portrait?"

"Mother burnt it while I was small. She told me. Do tell me what you recollect him like."

"Fine handsome feller—well set up. Fine shot, too! Gad! that was a neat thing! A bullet through a tiger two hundred yards off just behind the ear."

"But I thought *his* name was *Harrisson*." The Major has got out of his depth entirely through his own rashness. Why couldn't he leave that tiger alone? Now he has to get into safe water again.

A good long choke is almost welcome at this moment. While it goes on he can herald, by a chronic movement of a raised finger, his readiness to explain all as soon as it stops. He catches at his first articulation, so that not a moment may be lost. There were *two* tigers—that's the explanation. *Harrisson* shot one, and *Graythorpe* the other. The cross-examiner is dissatisfied.

"Which was the one that shot the tiger two hundred yards off, just behind the ear?"

The old gentleman responds with a spirited decision: "Your father, my dear, your father. That tiger round at my rooms—show it you if you like—that skin was given me by a feller named *Harrisson*, in the *Commissariat*—quite another sort of *Johnny*. He was down with the *Central Indian Horse*—quite another place!" He dwells on the inferiority of this shot, the smallness of the skin, the close contiguity of its owner. A very inferior affair!

But, being desperately afraid of blundering again, he makes the fact he admits, that he had confoozed between the two cases, a reason for a close analysis of the merits of each. This has no interest for Sally, who, indeed, had only regarded the conversation, so far, as a stepping-stone she now wanted to leap to the mainland from. After all, here she is face-to-face with a man who actually knows the story of the separation, and can talk of it without pain. Why should she not get something from him, however little? You see, the idea of a something that

could not be told was necessarily foreign to a mind some some-things could not be told to. But she felt it would be difficult to account to Major Roper for her own position. The fact that she knew nothing proved that her mother and Colonel Lund had been anxious she should know nothing. She could not refer to an outsider over their heads. Still, she hoped, as Major Roper was deemed on all hands an arrant old gossip, that he might accidentally say something to enlighten her. She prolonged the conversation in this hope.

"Was that before I was born?"

"The tiger-shootin'? Well, reely, my dear, I shouldn't like to say. It's twenty years ago, you see. No, I couldn't say—couldn't say when it was." He is beginning to pack himself in a long woollen scarf an overcoat with fur facings will shortly cover in, and is, in fact, preparing to evacuate a position he finds untenable. "I must be thinkin' of gettin' home," he says. Sally tries for a word more.

"Was it before he and mother fell out?" It is on the Major's lips to say, "Before the proceedings?" but he changes the expression.

"Before the split? Well, no; I should say after the split. Yes—probably after the split." But an unfortunate garrulity prompts him to say more. "After the split, I should say, and before the——"—and then he feels he is in a quagmire, and flounders to the nearest land—"before your father went away to *Australia*." Then he discerns his own feebleness, recognising the platitude of this last remark. For nobody could shoot tigers in an Indian jungle after he had gone off to *Australia*. Clearly the sooner he gets away the better.

A timely choking-fit interposes to preserve its victim from further questioning. The patient in the next room is asleep or torpid, so he omits farewells. Sally's mother comes out to say good-night, and Sally goes down the staircase with him and his asthma, feeling that it is horrible and barbarous to turn him out alone in the dense blackness. Perhaps, however, the peculiar boy with the strange name will be there. That would be better than nothing. Sally feels there is something indomitable about that boy, and that fog nourishes and stimulates it.

But, alas!—there is no boy. And yet it certainly would be

fourpence if he came back. For, though it may be possible to see the street gas-lamps without getting inside the glass, you can't see them from the pavement. Nevertheless, the faith that "it" is clearing having been once founded, lives on itself in the face of evidence, even as other faiths have done before now. So the creed is briefly recited, and the Major disappears with the word good-night still on his lips, and his cough, gasp, or choke dies away in the fog as he vanishes.

Somebody is whistling "Arr-hyd-y-nos" as he comes from the other side in the darkness—somebody who walks with a swinging step and a resonant foot-beat, some one who cares nothing for fogs. Fenwick's voice is defiant of it, exhilarated and exhilarating, as he ceases to be a cloud and assumes an outline. Sally gives a kiss to frozen hair that crackles.

"What's the kitten after, out in the cold? How's the Major?"

"Which? *Our* Major? He's a bit better, and the temperature's lower." Sally believed this; a little thermometer thing was being wielded as an implement of optimism, and had lent itself to delusions.

"Oh, how scrunchy you are, your hands are all ice! Mamma's been getting in a stew about *you*, squire." On which Fenwick, with the slightest of whistles, passes Sally quickly and goes four steps at a time up the stairs, still illuminated by Sally's gas-waste. For she had left the lights at full cock all the way up.

"My dearest, you never got my telegram?" This is to Rosalind, who has come out on the landing to meet him. But the failure of the telegram—lost in the fog, no doubt—is a small matter. What shelves it is the patient grief on the tired, handsome face Fenwick finds tears on as he kisses it. Sally has the optimism all to herself now. Her mother knows that her old friend and protector will not be here long—that, of course, has been true some time. But there's the suffering, present and to come.

"We needn't stop the chick hoping a little still if she likes." She says it in a whisper. Sally is on the landing below; she hears the whispering, and half guesses its meaning. Then she suppresses the last gas-tap, and follows on into the front room, where the three sit talking in undertones for perhaps an hour.

Yes, that monotonous sound is the breathing of the patient in the next room, under the new narcotic which has none of the bad effects of opium. The nurse is there watching him, and wondering whether it will be a week, or twenty-four hours. She derives an impression from something that the fog really is clearing at last, and goes to the window to see. She is right, for at a window opposite are dimly visible, from the candles on either side of the mirror, two white arms that are "doing" the hair of a girl whose stays are much too tight. She is dressing for late dinner or an early party. Then the nurse, listening, understands that the traffic has been roused from its long lethargy. "I thought I heard the wheels," she says to herself. Then Sally also becomes aware of the sound in the traffic, and goes to *her* window in the front room.

"You see I'm right," she says. "The people are letting their fires out, and the fog's giving. Now I'm going to take you home, Jeremiah." For the understanding is that these two shall return to Krakatoa Villa, leaving Rosalind to watch with the nurse. She will get a chop in half an hour's time. She can sleep on the sofa in the front room if she feels inclined. All which is duty carried out or arranged for.

After her supper Rosalind sat on by herself before the fire in the front room. She did not want to be unsociable with the nurse; but she wanted to think, alone. A weight was on her mind; the thought that the dear old friend, who had been her father and refuge, should never know that she again possessed her recovered husband on terms almost as good as if that deadly passage in her early life had never blasted the happiness of both. He would die, and it would have made him so happy to know it. Was she right in keeping it back now? Had she ever been right?

But if she told him now, the shock of the news might hasten his collapse. Sudden news need not be bad to cause sudden death. And, maybe the story would be too strange for him to grasp. Better be silent. But oh! if he might have shared her happiness!

Drowsiness was upon her before she knew it. Better perhaps sleep a little now, while he was sleeping. She looked in at him, and spoke to the nurse. He lay there like a lifeless waxwork—blown through, like an apparatus out of order, to simulate

breath, and doing it badly. How could he sleep when now and then it jerked him so? He could, and she left him and lay down, and went suddenly to sleep. After a time that was a journey through a desert, without landmarks, she was as suddenly waked.

"What? . . . I thought you spoke. . . ." And so some one had spoken, but not to her. She started up, and went to where the nurse was conversing through the open window with an inarticulate person in the street below, behind the thick window-curtain she had kept overlapped, to check the freezing air.

"What is it?"

"It's a boy. I can't make out what he says."

"Let me come!" But Rosalind gets no nearer his meaning. She ends up with, "I'll come down," and goes. The nurse closes the window and goes back to the bedroom.

The street door opens easily, the Chubb lock being the only fastening. The moment Rosalind sees the boy near she recognises him. There is no doubt about the presumptuous expression, or the cause of it. Also the ostentatious absence of the front tooth, clearly accounting for inaudibility at a distance.

"What do you want?" asks Rosalind.

"Nothin' at all for myself. I come gratis, I did. There's a many wouldn't." He is not too audible, even now; but he would be better if he did not suck the cross-rail of the area paling.

"Why did you come?"

"To bring you the nooze. The old bloke's a friend of yours, missis. Or p'r'aps he ain't! I can mizzle, you know, and no harm done."

"Oh no, don't mizzle on any account. Tell me about the old bloke. Do you mean Major Roper?"

"Supposin' I do, why shouldn't I?" This singular boy seems to have no way of communicating with his species except through defiances and refutations. Rosalind accepts his question as an ordinary assent, and does not make the mistake of entering into argument.

"Is he ill?" The boy nods. "Is he worse?" Another nod. "Has he gone home to his club?" The boy evidently has a revelation to make, but would consider it undignified to make it except as a denial of something to the contrary. He sees his way after a brief reflection.

"He ain't gone. He's been took."

"He's been taken? How has he been taken?"

"On a perambulance. Goin' easy! But he didn't say nothin'. Not harf a word!"

"Had he fainted?" But this boy has another characteristic—when he cannot understand he will not admit it. He keeps silence, and goes on absorbing the railing. Rosalind asks further: "Was he dead?"

"It'd take a lawyer to tell that, missis."

"I can't stand here in the cold, my boy. Come in, and come up and tell us." So he comes up, and Rosalind speaks to the nurse in the other room, who comes; and then they turn seriously to getting the boy's story.

He is all the easier for examination from the fact that he is impressed, if not awed, by his surroundings. All the bounce is knocked out of him, now that his foot is no longer on his native heath, the street. Witness that the subject of his narrative, who would certainly have been the old bloke where there was a paling to suck, has become a simple pronoun, and no more!

"I see him afore, missis," he says. "That time wot I lighted him round for twopence. And he says to come again in three-quarters of an hour. And I says yes, I says. And he says not to be late. Nor yet I shouldn't, only the water run so slow off the main, and I was kep. . . . Yes, missis—a drorin' of it off in their own pails at the balkny house by the mooze, where the supply is froze. . . ."

"I see, you got a job to carry up pails of water from that thing that sticks up in the road?"

"Yes, missis; by means of the turncock. Sim'lar I got wet. But I didn't go to be late. It warn't much, in the manner of speakin'. I was on his 'eels, clost."

"You caught him?"

"Heard him hoarckin' in the fog, and I says to my mate—boy by the name of 'Ucklebridge, only chiefly called Slimy, to distinguish him—I says—I says that was my guv'nor, safe and square, by the token of the sound of it. And then I catches him up in the fog, follerin' by the sound. My word, missis, he was bad! Wanted to holler me over the coals, he did, for behind

my time. I could hear him wantin' to do it. But he couldn't come by the breath."

Poor Old Jack! The two women look at each other, and then say to the boy: "Go on."

"Holdin' by the palins, he was, and goin' slow. Then he choked it off like, and got a chanst for a word, and he says: 'Now, you young see-saw'—that's what he said, missis, 'see-saw'—'just you stir your stumps and cut along to the clubbus: and tell that dam red-faced fool Mulberry to look sharp and send one of the young fellers to lend an arm, and not to come hisself. And then he got out a little flat bottle of something short, and went for a nip; but the cough took him, and it sprouted over his wropper and was wasted."

The women look at each other again. The nurse sees well into the story, and says quickly under her breath to Rosalind: "He'd been told what to do if he felt it coming. A drop of brandy might have made the difference." The boy goes on as soon as he is waited for.

"Mr. Mulberry he comes runnin' hisself, and a couple more on 'em! And then they all calls me a young varmint by reason of the guv'nor having got lost. But a gentleman what comes up, he says all go opposite ways, he says, and you'll hear him in the fog. So I runs up a passage, and in the middle of the passage I tumbles over the guv'nor lyin' acrost the passage. Then I hollers, and then they come."

"Oh dear!" says Rosalind; for this boy had that terrible power of vivid description which flinches at no realism—*seems* to enjoy the horror of it; does not really. Probably it was only his intense anxiety to communicate *all*, struggling with his sense of his lack of language—a privilege enjoyed by guv'nors. But Rosalind feels the earnestness of his brief epic. He winds it up:

"But the guv'nor, he'd done hoarckin'. Nor he never spoke. The gentleman I told you, he says leave him lyin' a minute, he says, and he runs. Then back he comes with the apoartheary—him with the red light—and they rips the guv'nor's sleeves up, spilin' his coat. And they prokes into his arm with a packin'-needle. Much use it done! And then they says, it warn't the fog, and I called 'em a liar. 'Cos it's a clearin' off, they says. It warn't, not much. I see the perambulance come, and they

showed him in, and I hooked it off, and heard 'em saying where's that young shaver, they says; he'll be wanted for his testament. So I hooked it off."

"And where did you go?"

"To a wisit on a friend, I did. Me and Slimy—him I mentioned afore. And he says, he says, to come on here—on'y later. So then I come on here."

Rosalind finds herself, in the face of what she feels must mean Old Jack's sudden death, thinking how sorry she is she can command no pair of trousers of a reasonable size to replace this boy's drenched ones—a pair that would need no string. A crude brew of hot toddy, and most of the cake that had appealed to Major Roper in vain, and never gone back to the cellaret, were the only consolations possible. They seemed welcome, but under protest.

"Shan't I carry of 'em outside, missis?"

"On the stairs, then." This assent is really because both women believe he will be comfortabler there than in the room. "Where are you going to sleep?" Rosalind asks, as he takes the cake and tumbler away to the stairs. She puts a gas-jet on half-cock.

"Twopenny doss in Spur Street, off of 'Orseferry Road, Westminster." This identification is to help Rosalind, as she may not be able to spot this particular doss-house among all she knows.

"Do you always sleep there?"

"No, missis! Weather permitting, in our mooze—on the 'eap. The 'orse-keeper gives a sack in return for a bit of cleanin', early, before comin' away."

"What are you?" says Rosalind. She is thinking aloud more than asking a question. But the boy answers:

"I'm a wife, I am. Never learned no tride, ye see! . . . Oh yes; I've been to school—board-school scollard. But they don't learn you no tride. You parses your standards and chucks 'em." This incredible boy, who deliberately called himself a waif (that was his meaning), was it possible that he had passed through a board-school? Well, perhaps he was the highest type of competitive examinee, who can learn everything and forget everything.

"But you have a father?"

"I could show him you. But he don't hold with teachin' his sons trides, by reason of their gettin' some of his wiges. He's in the sanitary engineering himself, but he don't do no work." Rosalind looks puzzled. "That's his tride—sanitary engineering, lavatories, plumbin', and fittin'. Been out of work better than three years. He can jint you off puppies' tails, though, at a shillin'. But he don't only get a light job now and again, 'cos the tride ain't wot it was. They've been shearin' of 'em off of late years. Thank you, missis." The refreshments have vanished as by magic, and Rosalind gives the boy the rest of the cake and a coin, and he goes away presumably to the doss-house he smells so strong of, having been warmed, that a flavour of the heap in the mews would have been welcome in exchange. So Rosalind thinks as she opens the window a moment and looks out. She can quite see the houses opposite. The fog has cleared till the morning.

Perhaps it is the relenting of the atmospheric conditions, or perhaps it is the oxygen that the patient has been inhaling off and on, that has slightly revived him. Or perhaps it is the champagne that comes up through a tap in the cork, and reminds Rosalind's ill-slept brain of something heard very lately—what on earth exactly was it? Oh, she knows! Of course, the thing in the street the sanitary engineer's son drew the pails of water at for the house with the balcony. It is pleasanter to know; might have fidgeted her if she had not found out. But she is badly in want of sleep, that's the truth!

"I thought Major Roper was gone, Rosey." He can talk through his heavy breathing. It must be the purer air.

"So he is, dear. He went two hours ago." She sits by him, taking his hand as before. The nurse is, by arrangement, to take her spell of sleep now.

"I suppose it's my head. I thought he was here just now—just this minute."

"No, dear; you've mixed him up with Gerry, when he came in to say good-night. Major Roper went away first. It wasn't seven o'clock." But there is something excited and puzzled in the patient's voice as he answers—something that makes her feel creepy.

"Are you *sure*? I mean, when he came back into the room with his coat on."

"You are dreaming, dear! He never came back. He went straight away."

"Dreaming! Not a bit of it. You weren't here." He is so positive that Rosalind thinks best to humour him.

"I suppose I was speaking to Mrs. Kindred. What did he come back to say, dear?"

"Oh, nothing! At least, I had told him not to chatter to Sallykin about the old story, and he came back, I suppose, to say he wouldn't." He seemed to think the incident, as an incident, closed; but presently goes on talking about things that arise from it.

"Old Jack's the only one of them all that knew anything about it—that Sallykin is likely to come across. Pellew knew, of course; but he's not an old chatterbox like Roper."

Ought not Rosalind to tell the news that has just reached her? She asks herself the question, and answers it: "Not till he rallies, certainly. If he does not rally, why then——!" Why then he either will know or won't want to.

She has far less desire to tell him this than she has to talk of the identity of her husband. She would almost be glad, as he is to die—her old friend—that she should have some certainty beforehand of the exact time of his death, so that she might, only for an hour, have a companion in her secrecy. If only he and she might have borne the burden of it together! She reproached herself, now that it was too late, with her mistrust of his powers of retaining a secret. See how keenly alive he was to the need of keeping Sally's parentage in the dark! And *that* was what the whole thing turned on. Gerry's continued ignorance might be desirable, but was a mere flea-bite by comparison. In her strained, sleepless, overwrought state the wish that "the Major" should know of her happiness while they could still speak of it together grew from a passing thought of how nice it might have been, that could not be, to a dumb dominant longing that it should be. Still, after all, the only fear was that he should talk to Gerry; and how easy to keep Gerry out of the room! And suppose he did talk! Would Gerry believe him? There was risky ground there, though.

She was not sorry when no more speech came through the heavy breathing of the invalid. He had talked a good deal, and a semi-stupor followed, relieving her from the strong temptation she had felt to lead him back to their past memories, and feel for some means of putting him in possession of the truth. As the tension of her mind grew less, she became aware this would have been no easy thing to do. Then, as she sat holding the old hand, and wondering that anything so frail could still keep in bond a spirit weary of its prison, drowsiness crept over her once more, all the sooner for the monotonous rhythm of the heavy breath. Consciousness gave place to a state of mysterious discomfort, complicated with intersecting strings and a grave sense of responsibility, and then to oblivion. After a few thousand years, probably minutes on the clock, a jerk woke her.

"Oh dear! I was asleep."

"You might give me another nip of the champagne, Rosey dear. And then you must go and lie down. I shall be all right. Is it late?"

"Not very. About twelve. I'll look at my watch." She does so, and it is past one. Then the invalid, being raised up towards his champagne, has a sudden attack of coughing, which brings in the nurse as a reserve. Presently he is reinstated in semi-comfort, half a tone weaker, but with something to say. And so little voice to say it with! Rosalind puts her ear close, and repeats what she catches.

"Why did Major Roper come back? He didn't, dear. He went away about seven, and has not been here since."

"He was in the room just this minute." The voice is barely audible, the conviction of the speaker absolute. He is wandering. The nurse's mind decides, in an innermost recess, that it won't be very long now.

Rosalind looked out through a spot she had rubbed clean on the frozen window-pane, and saw that it was bright starlight. The fog had gone. That boy—he was asleep at the twopenny doss, and the trousers were drying. What a good thing that he should be totally insensitive to atmosphere, as no doubt he was.

The hardest hours for the watcher by a sick-bed are those

that cannot be convinced that they belong to the previous day. One o'clock may be coaxed or bribed easily enough into winking at a pretence that it is only a corollary of twelve; two o'clock protests against it audibly, and every quarter-chime endorses its claim to be to-morrow; three o'clock makes short work of an imposture only a depraved effrontery can endeavour to foist upon it. Rosalind was aware of her unfitness to sit up all night—all this next night—but nursed the pretext that it had not come, and that it was still to-day, until a sense of the morning chill, and something in the way the sound of each belated cab confessed to its own scarcity, convinced her of the uselessness of further effort. Then she surrendered the point, short of the stroke of three, and exchanged posts with the nurse, who promised to call her at once should it seem necessary to do so. Sleep came with a rush, and dreamless oblivion. Then, immediately, the hand of the nurse on her shoulder, and her voice, a sudden shock in the absolute stillness:

"I thought it better to wake you, Mrs. Nightingale. I am so sorry. . . ."

"Oh dear! how long have I slept?" Rosalind's mind leaped through a second of unconsciousness of where she is and what it's all about to a state of intense wakefulness. "What o'clock is it?"

"It's half-past six. I should have left you to have your sleep out, only he wanted you. . . . Yes, he woke up and asked for you, and then asked again. He's hardly coughed."

"I'll come." Rosalind tried for alacrity, but found she was quite stiff. The fire was only a remnant of red glow that collapsed feebly as the nurse touched it with the poker. It was a case for a couple of little gluey wheels, and a good contribution to the day's fog, already in course of formation, with every grate in London panting to take shares. Rosalind did not wait to see the black column of smoke start for its chimney-pot, but went straight to the patient's bedside.

"Is that Rosey? I can't see very well. Come and sit beside me. I want you." He was speaking more easily than before, so his hearer thought. Could it be a change for the better? She put her finger on the pulse, but it was hard to find. The fever had left him for the time being, but its work was done. It