

CHAPTER V

THE CHRISTMAS AFTER. OF THE CHURCH OF ST. SATISFAX, AND A YOUNG IDIOT WHO CAME THERE

WHEN one is called away in the middle of a street-fight, and misses seeing the end of it, how embittered one's existence is, and continues for some time after! Think what our friend the cabman would have felt had he missed the *dénouement*! And when one finds oneself again on its site—if that is the correct expression—how one wishes one was not ashamed to inquire about its result from the permanent officials on the spot—the waterman attached to the cab-rank, the crossing-sweeper at the corner, the neolithographic artist who didn't really draw that half-mackerel himself, but is there all day long, for all that; or even the apothecary's shop over the way, on the chance that the casualties went or were taken there for treatment after the battle. One never does ask, because one is so proud; but if one did ask, one would probably find that oblivion had drawn a veil over the event, and that none of one's catechumens had heard speak of any such an occurrence, and that it must have been another street. Because, if it had 'a been there, they would have seen to a certainty. And the monotonous traffic rolls on, on, on; and the two counter-streams of creatures, each with a story, divide and subdivide over the spot where the underneath man's head sounded on the kerbstone, which took no notice at the time, and now seems to know less than ever about it.

Are we, in thus moralising, merely taking the mean advantage the author is apt to imagine he has established over his reader when he ends off a chapter with a snap, and hopes the said reader will not dare to skip? No, we are not. We really mean something, and shall get to it in time. Let us only be clear what it is ourselves.

It refers, at any rate, to the way in which the contents of Chapters I. and II. had become records of the past six months

later, when the snow was on the ground four inches thick on Christmas morning—two inches, at least, having been last night's contribution—and made it all sweet and smooth all over so that there need be no unpleasantness. As Sally looked out of her mother's bedroom window towards the front through the Venetian blind, she saw the footprints of cats alone on the snow in the road, and of the milk alone along the pavement. For the milk had preferred to come by hand, rather than plough its tricycle through the unknown depths and drifts of Glenmoira Road, W., to which it had found its way over tracks already palliated by the courage of the early 'bus—not plying for hire at that hour, but only seeking its equivalent of the *carceres* of the Roman Coliseum, to inaugurate the carriage of twelve inside and fourteen out to many kinds of Divine Service early in the day, and one kind only of dinner-service late—the one folk eat too much pudding and mince-pie at, and have to take a dose after. During this early introductory movement of the 'bus its conductor sits inside like a lord, and classifies documents. But he has nothing to do with our story. Let us thank him for facilitating the milk, and dismiss him.

"My gracious goodness me!" said Sally, when she saw the snow. She did not say it quite from the bottom of her heart, and as her own form of expression; but in inverted commas, as it were, the primary responsibility being cook's or Jane's. "You mustn't think of getting up, mother."

"Oh, nonsense! I shall get up the minute the hot water comes."

"You won't do any good by getting up. You had much better lie in bed. I shouldn't get up, if I was you," etc., etc.

"Oh, stuff! My rheumatism's better. Do you know, I really think the ring *has* done it good. Dr. Vereker may laugh as much as he likes—"

"Well, the proof of the pudding's in the eating. But wait till you see how thick the snow is. *Come—in!*" This is very staccato. Jane was knocking at the door with cans of really hot water this time. "I said come in before. Merry Christmas and happy New Year, Jane! . . . Oh, I say! What a dear little robin! He's such a little duck, I hope that cat won't get him!" And Sally, who is huddled up in a thick dressing-gown

and is shivering, is so excited that she goes on looking through the blind, and the peep-hole she has had to make to see clear through the frosted pane, in spite of the deadly cold on the finger-tip she rubbed it with. Her mother felt interested, too, in the fate of the robin, but not to the extent of impairing her last two minutes in bed by admitting the slightest breath of cold air inside a well-considered fortress. She was really going to get up, though, that was flat! The fire would blaze directly, although at this moment it was blowing wood-smoke down Jane's throat, and making her choke.

Directly was five or six minutes, but the fire did blaze up royally in the end. You see, it wasn't a slow-combustion-grate, and it burned too much fuel, and flared away the coal, and did all sorts of comfortable, uneconomical things. So did Jane, who had put in a whole bundle of wood.

But now that the wood was past praying for, and Jane had departed, after thawing the hearts of two sponges, it was just as well to take advantage of the blaze while it lasted. And Mrs. Nightingale and her daughter, in the thickest available dressing-gowns, and pretending they were not taking baths only because the bath-room was thrown out of gear by the frost, took advantage of the said blaze to their heart's content and harked back—a good way back—on the conversation.

"You never said 'Come in,' chick."

"I *did*, mother! Well, if I didn't, at any rate, I always tell her not to knock. She is the stupidest girl. She *will* knock!" Her mother doesn't press the point. There is no bad blood anywhere. Did not Sally wish the handmaiden a merry Christmas?

"The cat didn't get the robin, Sally?"

"Not he! The robin was too sharp by half. Such a little darling! But I was sorry for the cat."

"Poor pussy! Not our pussy, was it?"

"Oh no; it was that piebald Tom that lives in at the empty house next door."

"I know. Horrible beast!"

"Well, but just think of being out in the cold in this weather, with nothing to eat! Oo—oo—oogh!" Sally illustrates, with an intentional shudder. "I wonder who that is!"

"I didn't hear any one."

"You'll see, he'll ring directly. I know who it is; it's Mr. Fenwick come to say he can't come to-night. I heard the click of his skates. They've a sort of twinkly click, skates have, when they're swung by a strap. He'll go out and skate all day. He'll go to Wimbledon."

The girl's hearing was quite correct. A ring came at the bell—Krakatoa had no knocker—and a short colloquy followed between Jane and the ringer. Then he departed, with his twinkly click and noiseless footstep on the snow, slamming the front gate. Jane was able to include a card he had left in a recrudescence or reinforcement of hot water. Sally takes the card and looks at it, and her mother says, "Well, Sally?" with a slight remonstrance against the unfairness of keeping back information after you have satisfied your own curiosity—a thing people are odious about, as we all know.

"*He's* coming all right," says Sally, looking at both sides of the card, and passing it on when she has quite done with it. Sally, we may mention, as it occurs to us at this moment,—though *why* we have no idea,—means to have a double chin when she is five years older than her mother is now. At present it—the chin—is merely so much youthful roundness and softness, very white underneath. Her mother is quite of a different type. Her daughter's father must have had black hair, for Sally can make huge shining coils, or close plaits, very wide, out of her inheritance. Or it will assume the form of a bush, if indulged, till Sally is almost hidden under it, as the Bosjesman under his version of Birnam Wood, that he shoots his assegai from. But the mother's is brown, with a tinge of chestnut; going well with her eyes, which have a claret tone, or what is so called; but we believe people really mean pale old port when they say so. She has had—still has, we might say—a remarkably fine figure, and we don't feel the same faith in Miss Sally's. That young lassie will get described as plump some day, if she doesn't take care.

But really it is a breach of confidence to get behind the scenes and describe two ladies in this way, when they are so very much in *déshabille*—have not even washed! We will look at them again when they have got their things on. However, they may

go on talking now. The blaze has lost its splendour, and dressing cannot be indefinitely delayed. But they can and do talk from room to room, confident that cook and Jane are in the basement out of hearing.

"We shall do nicely, kitten! Six at table. I'm glad Mr. Fenwick can come. Aren't you?"

"Rather! Fancy having Dr. and Mrs. Vereker and the dear old fossil and nobody to help out!"

"My dear! You say 'Dr. and Mrs. Vereker' as if he was a married man!"

"Well—him and his mammy, then! He's good—but he's professional. Oh dear—his professional manner! You have to be forming square to receive cavalry every five minutes to prevent his writing you a prescription."

"Ungrateful little monkey! You know the last he wrote you did you no end of good."

"Yes, but I didn't ask him for it. He wrote it by force. I hate being hectorated over and bullied. I say, mother!"

"What, kitten?"

"I hope, as Mr. Fenwick's coming, you'll wear your wedding-ring."

"Wear *what*?"

"Wear your wedding-ring. *His* ring, you know! You know what I mean—the rheumatic one."

"Of course I know perfectly well what you mean," says her mother, with a shade of impatience in her voice. "But why?"

"Why? Because it gives him pleasure always to see it on your finger—he fancies it's doing good to the neuritis."

"Perhaps it is."

"Very well, then; why not wear it?"

"Because it's so big, and comes off in the soup, and is a nuisance. And, then, he didn't give it to me, either. He was to have had a shilling for it."

"But he never *did* have it. And it wasn't a shilling. It was sixpence. And he says it's the only little return he's ever been able to make for what he calls our kindness."

"I couldn't shovel him out into the street."

"Put his wedding-ring on, mammy, to oblige me!"

"Very well, chick—I don't mind." And so that point is settled. But something makes the daughter repeat, as she comes into her mother's room dry-towelling herself, "You're sure you don't mind, mammy?" to which the reply is, "No, no! *Why* should I mind? It's all quite right," with a forced decision, equivalent to wavering, about it. Sally looks at her a moment in a pause of dry-towelling, and goes back to her room not quite convinced. Persons of the same blood, living constantly together, are sometimes quite embarrassed by their own brain-waves, and very often misled.

Exigencies of teeth and hair cut the talk short about Mr. Fenwick. But he gets renewed at breakfast, and, in fact, goes on more or less until brought up short by the early service at St. Satisfax, when he is extinguished by a preliminary hymn. But not before his whole story, so far as is known, has been passed in review. So that an attentive listener might have gathered from their disjointed chat most of the particulars of his strange appearance on the scene, and of the incidents of the next few weeks, and their result in the foundation of what seemed likely to be a permanent friendship between himself and Krakatoa Villa, and what certainly was (all things considered) that most lucrative and lucky post in a good wine-merchant's house in the City. For Mr. Fenwick had nothing to recommend him but his address and capacity, brought into notice by an accidental concurrence of circumstances.

It had been difficult to talk much about him to himself without seeming to wish to probe into his past life; and as Mrs. Nightingale impressed on Sally for the twentieth time, just as they arrived at St. Satisfax, they really knew nothing of it. How could they even know that this oblivion was altogether genuine? It might easily have been so at first, but who could say how much of his past had come back to him during the last six months? An unwelcome past, perhaps, and one he was glad to help Oblivion in extinguishing.

As this was on the semi-circular path in front of the Saint's shrine, between two ramparts of swept-up snow, and on a corrective of cinder-grit, Sally ascribed this speculation to a disposition on her mother's part to preach, she having come, as it were, within the scope and atmosphere of a pending decalogue. Also,

she thought the ostentatious way in which Mr. Fenwick had gone away to skate had something to do with it.

But she was at all times conscious of a certain access of severity in her mother as she approached altars—rather beyond the common attitude of mind one ascribes to the bearer of a prayer-book when one doesn't mean to go to church oneself. (We are indebted for this piece of information to an intermittent church-goer; it is on a subject on which our own impressions have little value.) In the present case Sally *was* going to church, so she had to account to herself for a *nuance* in her mother's manner—after dwelling on the needlessness and inadvisability of pressing Mr. Fenwick as to his recollections—by ascribing it to the consciousness of some secularism elsewhere; and he was the nearest case of ungodliness to hand.

"I wonder whether he believes anything at all!" said Sally, assuming the consecutiveness of her remark.

"I don't see why he shouldn't. . . . Why should he disbelieve more than . . . ? All I mean is, I don't know." The speaker ended abruptly; but then that may have been because they were at the church door. Possibly as a protest against having carried chat almost into the precinct, Mrs. Nightingale's preliminary burial of her face in her hands lasted a long time—in fact, Sally almost thought she had gone to sleep, and told her so afterwards. "Perhaps, though," she added, "it was me came up from under the bedclothes too soon." Then she thought her levity displeased her mother, and kissed her. But it wasn't that. She was thoughtful over something else.

This time, in the church, it may be Sally noticed her mother's abstraction (or was it, perhaps, devotional tension?) less than she had done when her attention had been caught once or twice lately by a similar strained look. For Miss Sally had her eyes on a little gratifying incident of her own—a trifle that would already have appeared as an incident in her diary, had she kept one, somewhat thus:—"Saw that young idiot from Cattley's Stores again in church to-day, in a new scarlet necktie. I wonder whether it's me, or Miss Peplow that gollops, or the large Miss Baker." Which would have shown that she was not always a nun breathless with adoration during religious exercises. The fact is, Sally would have made a very poor St. Teresa indeed.

The young idiot was the same young man who had brought the difficult French idiom to Krakatoa, while Mr. Fenwick was still without an anchorage of his own. Martha the cook, who admitted him, not feeling equal to the negotiation, had merely said—would he mind steppin' in the parlour, and she would send Miss Sally up? and had departed bearing Mrs. Nightingale's credential-card in a hand as free from grease as an apron so deeply committed could make it, and brought Miss Nightingale in from the garden, where she was gardening—possibly effectually, but what do we know? When you are gardening on a summer afternoon, you may look very fetching, if you are nineteen, and the right sex for the adjective. Miss Sally did, being both, and for our own part we think it was inconsiderate and thoughtless of cook. Sally was sprung upon that young man like a torpedo on a ship with no guards out, saying with fascinating geniality through a smile (as one interests oneself in a civility that means nothing) that Mr. Fenwick had just gone out, and she didn't know when he would be back. But why not ask Mrs. Prince at the school, opposite St. Satisfax, where we went to church; she was French, and would be sure to know what it meant. *She* wouldn't mind! "Say I sent you." And the youth, whom the torpedo had struck amidships, was just departing, conscious of reluctance, when Mr. Fenwick appeared, having come back for his umbrella.

Sally played quite fair. She didn't hang about as she might have done, to rub her pearly teeth and merry eyebrows into her victim. She went back and gardened honourably, while Mr. Fenwick solved the riddle and supplied the letter. But for all that, the young man appeared next Sunday at St. Satisfax's, with an extremely new prayer-book that looked as if his religious convictions were recent, and never took his eyes off Sally all through the service—that is, if he did as she supposed, and peeped all the while that his head ought to have been, as she metaphorically expressed it, "under the clothes."

Now, this was naturally a little unaccountable to Sally, after such a very short interview; and on the part, too, of a young gentleman who passed all the working hours of the day among working hours, as it were soaked and saturated in their fascinations, and not at liberty to squeeze their hands or ask them for

one little lock of hair all through shop-time. Sally did not realise the force of sameness, nor the amount of contempt familiarity will breed. Perhaps the houris got tired and snappish, poor things! and used up their artificial smiles on the customers. Perhaps it had leaked out that the trying-on hands contributed only length, personally, to the loveliness of the trying-on figures. All sorts of things might have happened to influence this young man towards St. Satisfax; and how did Sally know how often he had seen the other young lady communicants she had speculated about? Her mind had certainly thrown in the large Miss Baker with something of derision. But that Sylvia Peplow was just the sort of girl men run after, like a big pale gloire-de-Dijon rose all on one side, with pale golden wavy hair, and great big goggly blue eyes, looking as if she couldn't help it! Now that we have given you details, from Sally's inner consciousness, of Miss Peplow's appearance, we hope you will perceive why she said she "goloped." We don't, exactly.

However, on this Christmas morning it was made clear whom this young donkey was hankering after—this is Sally's way of putting it—as Miss Peplow failed to get her usual place through being late, and had to sit in a side-aisle, instead of the opposite of her to the idiot—we are again borrowing from Sally—and now the Idiot would have to glare round over his shoulder at her or go without! It was soon evident that he was quite content to go without, and that Sally herself had been his lode-star. The certainty of this was what prevented her taking so much notice of her mother as she might otherwise have done.

Had she done so closely, she would hardly have put down her preoccupation, or tension, or whatever it was, to displeasure at Mr. Fenwick's going to skate on Christmas morning instead of going to church. What concern was it of theirs what Mr. Fenwick did?

CHAPTER VI

OF BOXING DAY MORNING AT KRAKATOA VILLA, AND WHAT OBSERVANT CREATURES FOSSILS ARE

THE "dear old fossil" referred to by Miss Sally was one of those occurrences—auxiliaries or encumbrances, as may be—whom one is liable to meet with in almost any family, who are so forcibly taken for granted by all its members that the infection of their acceptance catches on, and no new-comer ever asks that they should be explained. If they were relatives, they would be easy of explanation; but the only direct information you ever get about them is that they are not. This seems to block all avenues of investigation, and presently you find yourself taking them as a matter of course, like the Lion and Unicorn, or the image on a stamp.

Fenwick accepted "the Major," as the old fossil was called, so frankly and completely under that name that he was still uncertain about his real designation at the current moment of the story. Nobody ever called him anything but "the Major," and he would as soon have asked "Major what?" as called in question the title of the King of Hearts instead of playing him on the Queen, and taking the trick. So far as he could conjecture, the Major had accepted him in the same way. When the railway adventure was detailed to him, the fossil said many times, "How *perfectly* extraordinary!" "God bless my soul!" "You don't mean *that!*" and so on; but his astonishment always knocked his double eyeglass off, and, when he couldn't find it, it had to be recovered before he could say, "Eh—eh—what was that?" and get in line again; so he made a disjointed listener.

But these fossils see more than they hear sometimes; and this old Major, for all he was so silent, must have noticed many little things that Christmas evening to cause him to say what he did next day to Sally. For, of course, the Major couldn't go back to his lodgings in Ball Street in weather like this; so