

CHAPTER XVIII

OF A SWIMMING-BATH, "ET PRÆTEREA EXIGUUM"

THIS was the best of the swimming-bath season, and Sally rarely passed a day without a turn at her favourite exercise. If her swimming-bath had been open on Sunday, she wouldn't have gone to church yesterday, not even to meet Dr. Vereker and talk about her father to him. As it was, she very nearly came away from Krakatoa Villa next morning without waiting to see the letter from Rheims, the post being late. Why is everything late on Monday?

However, she was intercepted by the postman and the foreign postmark—a dozen words on a card, but she read them several times, and put the card in her pocket to show to Lætitia Wilson. She was pretty sure to be there. And so she was, and by ten o'clock had seen the card and exhausted its contents. And by five-minutes-past Sally was impending over the sparkling water of Paddington swimming-bath. She was dry so far, and her blue bathing-dress could stick out. But it was not to be for long, for her two hands went together after a preliminary stretch to make a cutwater, and down went Sally with a mighty splash into the deep—into the moderately deep, suppose we say—at any rate into ten thousand gallons of properly filtered Thames water, which had been (no doubt) sterilised and disinfected and examined under powerful microscopes until it hadn't got a microbe to bless itself with. When she came up at the other end, to taunt Lætitia Wilson with her cowardice for not doing likewise, she was a smooth and shiny Sally, like a deep blue seal above water, but with modifications towards floating fins below.

"Now tell me about the row last night," said she, after reproaches met by Lætitia with, "It's no use, dear. I wasn't born a herring like you."

Sally must have heard there had been some family dissension at Ladbroke Grove Road as she came into the bath with Lætitia, whom she met at the towel-yielding *guichet*. However, the latter wasn't disposed to discuss family matters in an open swimming-bath in the hearing of the custodian, to say nothing of possible concealed dressers in horse-boxes alongside.

"My dear child, is this the place to talk about things in? Do be a little discreet sometimes," is her reply to Sally's request.

"There's nobody here but us. Cut away, Tishy!" But Miss Wilson will *not* talk about the row, whatever it was, with the chance of goodness-knows-who coming in any minute. For one thing, she wants to enjoy the telling, and not to be interrupted. So it is deferred to a more fitting season and place.

Goodness-knows-who (presumably) came in in the shape of Henriette Prince, who was, after Sally, the next best swimmer in the Ladies' Club. After a short race or two, won by Sally in spite of heavy odds against her, the two girls turned their attention to the art of rescuing drowning persons. A very amusing game was played, each alternately committing suicide off the edge of the bath while the other took a header to her rescue from the elevation which we just now saw Sally on ready to plunge. The rules were clear. The suicide was to do her best to drag the rescuer under water and to avoid being dragged into the shallow end of the bath.

"I know you'll both get drowned if you play those tricks," says Lætitia nervously.

"No—we *shan't*," vociferates Sally from the brink. "Now, are you ready, Miss Prince? Very well. Tishy, count ten!"

"Oh, I wish you wouldn't! One—two—three . . ." And Lætitia, all whose dignity and force of character go when she is bathing, does as she is bidden, and, at the "ten," the suicide, with a cry of despair, hurls herself madly into the water, and the rescuer flies to her succour. What she has to do is to grasp the struggling quarry by the elbows from behind and keep out of the reach of her hands. But the tussle that ensues in the water is a short one, for the rescuer is no match for the supposed involuntary resistance of the convulsed suicide, who eludes the coming grasp of her hand with eel-like dexterity, and has her

round the waist and drags her under water in a couple of seconds.

"There now!" says Sally triumphantly, as they stand spluttering and choking in the shallow water to recover breath. "Didn't I do that beautifully?"

"Well, but *anybody* could like that. When real people are drowning they don't do it like that." Miss Prince is rather rueful about it. But Sally is exultant.

"Oh, don't they!" she says. "They're worse when it's real drowning—heaps worse!" Whereon both the other girls affirm in chorus that then nobody can be saved without the Humane Society's drags—unless, indeed, you wait till they are insensible.

"Can't they?" says Sally, with supreme contempt. "We were both of use drowned that time fair. But now you go and drown yourself, and see if I don't fish you out. Fire away!"

They fire away, and the determined suicide plays her part with spirit. But she is no match for the submarine tactics of her rescuer, who seems just as happy under water as on land, and rising under her at the end of a resolute deep plunge, makes a successful grasp at the head of her prey, who is ignominiously towed into safety, doing her best to drown herself to the last.

This little incident is so amusing and exciting that the three young ladies, who walk home together westward, can talk of nothing but rescues all the way to Notting Hill. Then Miss Henriette Prince goes on alone, and as Lætitia and Sally turn off the main road towards the home of the former, the latter says: "Now tell me about the row."

It wasn't exactly a row, it seemed; but it came to the same thing. Mamma had made up her mind to be detestable about Julius Bradshaw—that was the long and short of it. And Sally knew, said Lætitia, how detestable mamma could be when she tried. If it wasn't for papa, Julius Bradshaw would simply be said not-at-home to, and have to leave a card and go. But she was going to go her own way and not be dictated to, maternal authority or no. Perhaps the speaker felt that Sally was mentally taking exception to universal revolt, for a flavour of excuse or justification crept in.

"Well!—I can't help it. I *am* twenty-four, after all. I shouldn't say so if there was anything against him. But no

man can be blamed for a cruel conjunction of circumstances, and mamma may say what she likes, but being in the office really makes all the difference. And look how he's supporting his mother and sister, who were left badly off. *I* call it noble."

"But you know, Tishy, you did say the negro couldn't change his spots, and that I must admit there were such things as social distinctions—and you talked about sweeps and dustmen, you know you did. Come, Tishy, did you, or didn't you?"

"If I said anything it was leopard, not negro. And as for sweeps and dustmen, they were merely parallel cases used as illustrations; and I don't think I deserve to have them raked up. . . ." Miss Wilson is rather injured over this grievance, and Sally appeases her. "She shan't have them raked up, she shan't! But what was this row really about, that's the point? It was yesterday morning, wasn't it?"

"How often am I to tell you, Sally dear, that there was really no *row*, properly speaking. If you were to say there had been comments at breakfast yesterday, then recrimination overnight, and a stiffness at breakfast again this morning, you would be doing more than justice to it. You'll see now if mamma isn't cold and firm and disinherity and generally detestable about it."

"But what *was* it? That's what *I* want to know."

"My dear—it was—absolutely nothing! Why should it be stranger for Mr. Bradshaw to drive me home to save two hansoms than for you and Dr. Vereker and the Voyseys to go all in one growler?"

"Because the Voyseys live just round the corner, quite close. It came to three shillings because it's outside the radius." The irrelevancy of this detail gives Lætitia an excuse for waiving the cab-question, on which her position is untenable. She dilutes it with extraneous matter, and it is lost sight of.

"It doesn't matter whether it's cabs or what it is. Mamma's just the same about everything. Even walking up Holland Park Lane after the concert at Kensington Town Hall. I am sure if ever anything was reasonable, that was." She pauses for confirmation—is, in fact, wavering about the correctness of her own position, and weakly seeking reassurance. She is made happier by a nod of assent from Miss Sally. "Awfully reasonable!" is the verdict of the latter. Whatever there is lacking

seriousness in the judge's face is too slight to call for notice—a mere twinkle to be ignored. Very little self-deception is necessary, and in this department success is invariable.

"I knew you would say so, dear," Tishy continues. "And I'm sure you would about the other things too . . . well, I was thinking about tea in Kensington Gardens on Sunday. We have both of us a perfect right to have tea independently, and the only question is about separate tables."

"Suppose I come—to make it square."

"Suppose you do, dear." And the proposal is a relief evidently.

A very slight insight into the little drama that is going on at Ladbroke Grove Road is all that is wanted for the purposes of this story. The foregoing dialogue, ending at the point at which the two young women disappear into the door of No. 287, will be sufficient to give a fairly clear idea of the plot of the performance, and to point to its *dénouement*. The exact details may unfold themselves as the story proceeds. The usual thing is a stand-up fight over the love-affair, both parties to which have made up their minds—becoming more and more obdurate as they encounter opposition from without—followed by reconciliations more or less real. Let us hope for the former in the present case, and that Miss Wilson and Mr. Bradshaw's lot may not be crossed by one of those developments of strange inexplicable fury which so often break out in families over the schemes of two young people to do precisely what their parents did before them; and most ungovernably, sometimes, on the part of members who have absolutely no suggestion to make of any alternative scheme for the happiness of either.

CHAPTER XIX

HOW FENWICK KNEW ALL ABOUT THE MASS. AND HOW BARON KREUTZ-KAMMER RECOGNISED MR. HARRISSON. LONDON AGAIN!

"WHY do they call it the *messe des paresseux*?" The question must have been asked just as Sally looked at her watch because she saw the clock had stopped. But the nave of the Cathedral of Rheims was very unlike that of St. Satisfax as the bride and bridegroom lingered in out of the sunshine, and the former took the unwarrantable liberty, for a heretic, of crossing herself from the Holy Water at the foot of the column near the door. But she made up for it by the amount of *sous* she gave to the old blind woman, who must have been knitting there since the days of Napoleon at least, if she began in her teens.

"You haven't done it right, dearest. I knew you wouldn't. Look here." And Fenwick crosses himself *secundum artem*, dipping his finger first to make it valid.

"But how came you to know?" His wife does not say this; she only thinks it. And how came he to know about the *messe des paresseux*? She repeats her question aloud.

"Because the lazy people don't come to Mass till ten," he replies. They are talking under their breath, as English folk do in foreign churches, heedless of the loud gabble and resonant results of too much snuff on the part of ecclesiastics off duty. Their own salvation has been cultivated under a list slipper, cocoanut matting, secretive pew-opener policy; and if they are new to it all, they are shocked to see the snuff taken over the heads and wooden *sabots* of the devout country-folk, whose ancestors knelt on the same hard stone centuries ago, and prayed for great harvests that never came, and to avert lean years that very often did. The Anglican cannot understand the real aboriginal Papist. Sally's mother was puzzled when she saw an old, old kneeling figure, toothless and parchment-skinned, on whose rosary a pinch of snuff *ut supra* descended, shake it