

CHAPTER XXVII

ST. SENNANS-ON-SEA. MISS GWENDOLEN ARKWRIGHT. WOULD ANY OTHER CHILD HAVE BEEN SALLY? HOW MRS. IGGULDEN'S COUSIN SOLOMON SURRENDERED HIS COUCH

ST. SENNANS-ON-SEA consists of two parts—the new and the old. The old part is a dear little old place, and the new part is beastly. So Sally says, and she must know, because this is her third visit.

The old part consists of Mrs. Iggulden's and the houses we have described on either side of her, and maybe two dozen more wooden or black-brick dwellings of the same sort; also of the beach and its interesting lines of breakwater that are so very jolly to jump off or to lie down and read novels under in the sea smell. Only not too near the drains, if you know it. If you don't know it, it doesn't matter so much, because the smell reminds you of the seaside, and seems right and fitting. You must take care how you jump, though, off these breakwaters, because where they are not washed inconceivably clean, and all their edges smoothed away beyond belief by the tides that come and go for ever, they are slippery with green sea-ribbons that cling close to them, and green sea-fringes that cling closer still, and brown sea-ramifications that are studded with pods that pop if you tread on them, but are not quite so slippery; only you may just as well be careful, even with them. And we should recommend you, before you jump, to be sure you are not hooked over a bolt, not merely because you may get caught, and fall over a secluded reading-public on the other side, but because the red rust comes off on you and soils your white petticoat.

If you don't mind jumping off these breakwaters—and it really is rather a lark—you may tramp along the sea front quite near up to where the fishing-luggers lie, each with a capstan all to itself, under the little extra old town the red-tanned fishing-nets live in, in houses that are like sailless windmill-tops whose

plank walls have almost merged their outlines in innumerable coats of tar, laid by long generations back of the forefathers of the men in oil-cloth head-and-shoulder hats who repair their nets for ever in the Channel wind, unless you want a boat to-day, in which case they will scull you about, while you absolutely ache sympathetically with their efforts, of which they themselves remain serenely unaware, till you've been out long enough. Then they beach you cleverly on the top of a wave, and their family circle seizes you, boat and all, and runs you up the shingle before the following wave can catch you and splash you, which it wants to do.

There is an aroma of the Norman Conquest and of Domesday Book about the old town. Research will soon find out, if she looks sharp, that there is nothing Norman in the place except the old arch in the amorphous church-tower, and a castle at a distance on the flats. But the flavour of the past is stronger in the scattered memories of bygone sea-battles not a century ago, and the names of streets that do not antedate the Georges, than in these mere scraps that are always open to the reproach of mediævalism, and are separated from us by a great gulf. And it doesn't much matter to us whether the memories are of victory or defeat, or the names those of sweeps or heroes. All's one to us—we glow; perhaps rashly, for, you see, we really know very little about them. And he who has read no history to speak of, if he glows about the past on the strength of his imperfect data, may easily break his molasses-jug.

So, whether our blood is stirred by Nelson and Trafalgar, whereof we have read, or by the Duke of York and Walcheren, whereof we haven't—or mighty little—we feel in touch with both these heroes, for they are modern. Both have columns, anyhow; and we can dwell upon their triumph or defeat almost as if it wasn't history at all, but something that really happened, without running any risk of being accused of archaism or of deciphering musty tomes. And we can enjoy our expedition all the same to the ruined keep in the level pastures, where the long-horned black cattle stand and think and flap their tails still, just as they did in the days when the basement dungeons, now choked up, held real prisoners with real broken hearts.

But there is modern life, too, at St. Sennans—institutions that

keep abreast of the century. Half the previous century ago, when we went there first, the Circulating Library consisted, so far as we can recollect it, of a net containing bright leather balls, a collection of wooden spades and wheelbarrows, a glass jar with powder-puffs, another with tooth-brushes, a rocking-horse—rashly stocked in the first heated impulse of an over-confident founder—a few other trifles, and, most important of all, a book-case that supplied the title-rôle to the performance. That book-case contained (we are confident) *editiones principes* of Mrs. Ratcliffe, Sir Walter Scott, Bulwer Lytton, Currer Bell . . . well, even Fanny Burney, if you come to that. There certainly was a copy of "Frankenstein," and fifty years ago our flesh was so compliant as to creep during its perusal. It wouldn't now.

But even fifty years ago there was never a volume that had not been defaced out of all knowledge by crooked marks of the most inquisitive interrogation, and straight marks of the most indignant astonishment, by the reading-public in the shadows of the breakwaters. It really read, that public did; and, what's more, it often tore out the interesting bits to take away. I remember great exasperation when a sudden veil was drawn over the future of two lovers just as the young gentleman had flung himself into the arms of the young lady. An unhallowed fiend had cut off the sequel with scissors and boned it!

That was done, or much of it, when the books were new, and the railway-station was miles away; when the church wasn't new, but old, which was better. It has been made new since, and has chairs in it, and memorial windows by Stick and Co. In those days its Sunday-folk were fisherfolk mostly, and a few local magnates or parvates—squirophants, they might be called—and a percentage of the visitors.

Was St. Sennan glad or sorry, we wonder, when the last two sorts subscribed and restored him? If we had been he, one of us would have had to have the temper of a saint to keep cool about it. Anyhow, it's done now, and can't be undone.

But the bathing-machines are not restored, at any rate. Those indescribables yonder, half rabbit-hutch, half dry-dock—a long row for ladies and a short one for gentlemen, three hundred yards apart—couldn't trust 'em any nearer, bless you!—these super-annuated God-knows-whats, struggling against disintegration

from automatic plunges down a rugged beach, and creaking journeys back you are asked to hold on through—it's no use going on drying!—these tributes to public decorum you can find no room in, and probably swear at—no sacrilegious restorer has laid his hand on these. They evidently contemplate going on for ever; for though their axes grow more and more oblique every day, their self-confidence remains unshaken. But then they think they *are* St. Sennans, and that the wooden houses are subordinate accidents, and the church a mere tributary that was a little premature—got there first, in its hurry to show respect for *them*. And no great wonder, seeing what a figure they cut, seen from a boat when you have a row! Or, rather, used to cut; for now the new town (which is beastly) has come on the cliff above, and looks for all the world as if *it* was St. Sennans, and speaks contemptuously of the real town as the Beach Houses.

The new town can only be described as a tidy nightmare; yet it is a successful creation of the brains that conceived it—a successful creation of ground-rents. As a development of land ripe for building, with more yards of frontage to the main-road than at first sight geometry seems able to accommodate, it has been taking advantage of unrivalled opportunities for a quarter of a century, backed by advances on mortgage. It is the envy of the neighbouring proprietors east and west along the coast, who have developed their own eligible sites past all remedy and our endurance, and now have to drain their purses to meet the obligations to the professional mortgagee, who is biding his hour in peace, waiting for the fruit to fall into his mouth and murderously sure of his prey. But at St. Sennans a mysterious silence reigns behind a local office that yields keys on application, and answers all inquiries, and asks ridiculous rents. And this silence, or its keeper, is said to have become enormously rich over the new town.

The shareholders in the St. Sennans Hotel, Limited, cannot have become rich. If they had, surely they would provide something better for a hungry paying supplicant than a scorched greasy chop, inflamed at the core, and glass bottles containing a little pellucid liquid that parts with its carbon dioxide before you can effect a compromise with the cork, which pushes in, but not so as to attain its ideal. So your Seltzer water doesn't

pour fast enough to fizz outside the bottle, and your heart is sad. Of course, you can have wine, if you come to that, for look at the wine-list! Only the company's ideas of the value of wine are not limited, and if you decide not to be sordid, and order a three-shilling bottle of Médoc, you will find its contents to be very limited indeed. But why say more than that it is an enormous hotel at the seaside? You know all about them, and what it feels like in rainy weather, when the fat gentleman has got to-day's "Times," and means to read all through the advertisement-column before he gives up the leaders, and you have to spend your time turning over thick and shiny snap-shot journals with a surfeit of pictures in them; or the Real Lady, or the Ladylike Lady, or the Titled Lady, the portraits of whom—one or other of them—sweep in curves about their folio pages; and, while they fascinate you, make you feel that you would falter on the threshold of matrimony if only because they couldn't possibly take nourishment. Would not the discomfort of meals eaten with a companion who could swallow nothing justify a divorce *a mensa*?

A six-shilling volume might be written about the New Hotel, with an execration on every page. Don't let us have anything to do with it, but keep as much as possible at the Sea Houses under the cliff, which constitute the only St. Sennans necessary to this story. We shall be able to do so, because when Mrs. and Mr. Fenwick and their daughter went for a walk they always went up the cliff-pathway, which had steps cut in the chalk, past the boat upside down, where new-laid eggs could be bought from a coastguard's wife. And this path avoided the New Town altogether, and took them straight to the cliff-track that skirted growing wheat and blazing poppies till you began to climb the smooth hill-pasture the foolish wheat had encroached upon in the Protection days, when it was worth more than South Down mutton. And now every ear of it would have been repenting in sackcloth and ashes if it had been qualified by Nature to know how little it would fetch per bushel. But it wasn't. And when, the day after their arrival, Rosalind and her husband were on the beach talking of taking a walk up that way when Sally came out, it could have heard, if it would only have stood still, the sheep-bells on the slopes above reproaching it, and taunting

it with its usurpation and its fruitless end. Perhaps it was because it felt ashamed that it stooped before the wind that carried the reproachful music, and drowned it in a silvery rustle. The barley succeeded the best. You listen to the next July barley-field you happen on, and hear what it can do when a breeze comes with no noise of its own.

Down below on the shingle the sun was hot, and the tide was high, and the water was clear and green close to the shore, and jelly-fish abounded. You could look down into the green from the last steep ridge at high-water mark, and if you looked sharp you might see one abound. Only you had to be on the alert to jump back if a heave of the green transparency surged across the little pebbles that could gobble it up before it was all over your feet—but didn't this time. Oh dear!—how hot it was! Sally had the best of it. For the allusion to Sally's "coming out" referred to her coming out of the water, and she was staying in a long time.

"That child's been twenty-four minutes already," said her mother, consulting her watch. "Just look at her out there on the horizon. What on earth *are* they doing?"

It was a little inexplicable. At that moment Sally and her friend—it was one Fräulein Braun, who had learned swimming in the baths on the Rhone at Geneva and in Paris—appeared to be nothing but two heads, one close behind the other, moving slowly on the water. Then the heads parted company, and apparently their owners lay on their backs in the water, and kicked up the British Channel.

"They're saving each other's lives," said Gerry. He got up from a nice intaglio he had made to lie in, and after shaking off a good bushel of small pebbles a new-made beach-acquaintance of four had heaped upon him, resorted to a double opera-glass to see them better. "The kitten wanted me to get out of my depth for her to tow me in. But I didn't fancy it. Besides, a sensitive British public would have been scandalised."

"You never learned to swim, then, Gerry——?" She just stopped herself in time. The words "after all" were on her lips. Without them her speech was mere chat; with them it would have been a match to a mine. She sometimes wished in these days that the mine might explode of itself, and give her peace.

"I suppose I never did," replied her husband, as a matter of course. "At least, I couldn't do it when I tried in the water just now. I should imagine I must have tried B.C., or I shouldn't have known how to try. It's not a thing one forgets, so they say." He paused a few seconds, and then added: "Anyhow, it's quite certain I couldn't do it." There was not a trace of consciousness on his part of anything in *her* mind beyond what her words implied. But she felt in peril of fire, so close to him, with a resurrection of an image in it—a vivid one—of the lawn-tennis garden of twenty years ago, and the speech of his friend, the real Fenwick, about his inability to swim.

This sense of peril did not diminish as he continued: "I've found out a lot of things I *can* do in the way of athletics, though; I seem to know how to wrestle, which is very funny. I wonder where I learned. And you saw how I could ride at Sir Mount-massingham's last month?" This referred to a country visit, which has not come into our story. "And that was very funny about the boxing. Such a peaceful old fogey as your husband! Wasn't it, Rosey darling?"

"Why won't you call the Bart. by his proper name, Gerry? Wasn't what?"

"Funny about the gloves. You know that square fellow? He was a well-known prizefighter that young Sales Wilson had picked up and brought down to teach the boys. You remember him? He went to church, and was very devout. . . ."

"I remember."

"Well, it was in the billiard-room, after dinner. He said quite suddenly, 'This gentleman now can make use of his daddles. I can see it in him'—meaning me. 'What makes you think that, Mr. Macmorrough?' said I. 'We of the fancy, sir,' says he, 'see these things, without referrin' to no books, by the light of Nature.' And next day we had a set-to with the gloves, and his verdict was 'Only just short of professional.' Those boys were delighted. I wonder how and when I became such a dab at it?"

"I wonder!" Rosalind doesn't seem keen on the subject. "I wish those crazy girls would begin to think of coming in. If it's going to be like this every day I shall go home to London, Gerry."

"Perhaps when Vereker comes down on Monday he'll be able to influence. Medical authority!"

Here the beach-acquaintance, who had kept up a musical undercurrent of disjointed comment, perceived an opportunity for joining more actively in the conversation.

"My mummar says—my mummar says—my mummar says . . ."

"Yes—little pet—what does she say?" Thus Rosalind.

"Yes—Miss Gwendolen Arkwright—what does she say?" Thus Fenwick, on whom Miss Arkwright is seated.

"My mummar says se wissus us not to paggle Tundy when the tideses goed out. But my mummar says—my mummar says . . ."

"Yes, darling."

"My mummar says we must paggle Monday up to here." Miss Arkwright indicates the exact high-water mark sanctioned, candidly. "Wiv no sooze, and no stottins!" She then becomes diffuse. "And my bid sister Totey's doll came out in my bed, and Dane dusted her out wiv a duster. And I can do thums. And they make free . . ." At this point Miss Arkwright's copy runs short, and she seizes the opportunity for a sort of seated dance of satisfaction at her own eloquence—a kind of subjective horsemanship.

"I wish I never had to do any sums that made more than three," is the putative horse's comment. "But there are only two possible, alas! And the totals are stale, as you might say."

"I'm afraid my little girl's being troublesome." Thus the mamma, looking round a huge groin of breakwater a few yards off.

"Troublesome, madame?" exclaims Fenwick, using French unexpectedly. "She's the best company in Sussex." But Miss Arkwright's nurse Jane domineers into the peaceful circle with a clairvoyance that Miss Gwendolen is giving trouble, and bears her away rebellious.

"What a shame!" says Gerry *sotto voce*. "But I wonder why I said 'madame!'"

"I remember you said it once before." And she means to add "the first time you saw me," but dubs it, in thought, a needless lie, and substitutes, "that day when you were electrocuted." And

then imagines she has flinched, and adds her original text boldly. She isn't sorry when her husband merely says, "That was queer too!" and remains looking through his telescope at the swimmers.

"They're coming at last—a couple of young monkeys!" is her comment. And, sure enough, after a very short spell of stylish sidestrokes Sally's voice and laugh are within hearing ahead of her companion's more guttural intonation. Her mother draws a long breath of relief as the merpussy vanishes under her awning, and is shouted and tapped at to hold tight, while capstan-power tugs and strains to bring her dressing-room up a sharp slope out of reach of the sea.

"Well, Jeremiah, and what have *you* got to say for yourself?" said the merpussy soon after, just out of her machine, with a huge mass of briny black hair spread out to dry. The tails had to be split and sorted and shaken out at intervals to give the air a chance. Sally was blue and sticky all over, and her finger-tips and nails all one colour. But her spirits were boisterous.

"What about?"

"What about, indeed? About not coming into the water to be pulled out. You promised you would, you know you did!"

"I did; but subject to a reasonable interpretation of the compact. I should have been out of my depth ever so long before you could reach me. Why didn't you come closer?"

"How could I, with a fat, pink party drying himself next door? *You* wouldn't have, if it had been you, and him Goody Vereker. . . ."

"Sal-ly! Darling!" Her mother remonstrates.

"We-ell, there's nothing in that! As if we didn't all know what the Goody would look like. . . ."

Rosalind is really afraid that the strict mamma of her husband's recent incubus will overhear, and sit at another breakwater next day. "*Come along!*" she says, dispersively and emphatically. "We shall have the shoulder of mutton spoiled."

"No, we shan't! Shall we, Jeremiah? We've talked it over, me and Jeremiah. Haven't we, Gaffer Fenwick?" She is splitting up the salt congestions of his mane as she sits by him on the shingle. He confirms her statement.

"We have. And we have decided that if we are two hours

late it may be done enough. But that in any case the so-called gravy will be grey hot water."

"Get up and come along, and don't be a mad kitten! I shall go and leave you two behind. So now you know." And Rosalind goes away up the shingle.

"What makes mother look so serious sometimes, kitten? She did just now."

"She's jealous of you and me flirting like we do. Don't put your hat on; let the sun dry you up a bit. Does she really look serious though? Do you mean it?"

"Yes, I mean it. It comes and goes. But when I ask her she only laughs at me." A painful thought crosses Sally's mind. Is it possible that some of her reckless escapades have *froissé*'d her mother? She goes off into a moment's contemplation, then suddenly jumps up with, "Come along, Jeremiah," and follows her up the beach.

But the gravity on the face of the latter, by now half-way to the house, had nothing to do with any of Sally's shocking vulgarities and outrageous utterances. No, nor even with the green-eyed monster Jealousy her unscrupulous effrontery had not hesitated to impute. She allowed it to dominate her expression, as there was no one there to see, until the girl overtook her. Then she wrenched her face and her thoughts apart with a smile. "*You are* a mad little goose," said she.

But the thing that weighted her mind—oppressed or puzzled her, as might be—what was it?

Had she been obliged to answer the question off-hand she herself might have been at a loss to word it, though she knew quite well what it was. It was the old clash between the cause of Sally and its result. It was the thought that, but for a memory that every year seemed to call for a stronger forgetfulness, a more effective oblivion, this little warm star that had shone upon and thawed a frozen life, this salve for the wound it sprang from, would have remained unborn—a nonentity! Yes, she might have had another child—true! But would that child have been Sally?

She was so engrossed with her husband, and he with her, that she felt she could, as it were, have trusted him with his own identity. But, then, how about Sally? Though she might with

time show him the need for concealment, how be sure that nothing should come out in the very confusion of the springing of the mine? She could trust him with his identity—yes! Not Sally with hers. Her great surpassing terror was—do you see?—not the effect on *him* of learning about Sally's strange *provenance*, but for Sally herself. The terrible knowledge she could not grasp the facts without would cast a shadow over her whole life.

So she thought and turned and looked down on the beach. There below her was this unsolved mystery sitting in the sun beside the man whose life it had rent asunder from its mother's twenty years ago. And as Rosalind looked at her she saw her capture and detain his hat. "To let his mane dry, I suppose," said Rosalind. "I hope he won't get a sunstroke." She watched them coming up the shingle, and decided that they were going on like a couple of school-children. They were, rather.

Perhaps the image in Sally's profane mind of "hers affectionately, Rebecca Vereker," before or after an elderly bathe, would not have appeared there if she had not received that morning a letter so signed, announcing that, subject to a variety of fulfilments—among which the Will of God had quite a conspicuous place—she and her son would make their appearance next Monday, as our text has already hinted. On which day the immature legs of Miss Gwendolen Arkwright were to be released from a seclusion by which some religious object, undefined, had been attained the day before.

But the conditions which had to be complied with by the lodgings it would be possible for this lady to occupy were such as have rarely been complied with, even in houses built specially to meet their requirements. Each window had to confront, not a particular quarter, but a particular ninetieth, of the compass. A full view of the sea had to be achieved from a sitting-room not exposed to its glare, an attribute destructive of human eyesight, and fraught with curious effects on the nerves. But the bedrooms had to look in directions foreign to human experience—directions from which no wind ever came at night. A house of which every story rotated on an independent vertical axis might have answered—nothing else would. Even then space would

have called for modification, and astronomy and meteorology would have had to be patched up. Then with regard to the different levels of the floors, concession was implied to "a flat"; but, stairways granted, the risers were to be at zero, and the treads at boiling-point—a strained simile! As to cookery, the services of a *chef* with great powers of self-subordination seemed to be pointed at, a *cordon-bleu* ready to work in harness. Hygienic precautions, such as might have been insisted on by an Athanasian sanitary inspector on the premises of an Arian householder, were made a *sine qua non*. Freedom from vibration from vehicles was so firmly stipulated for that nothing short of a balloon from Shepherd's Bush could possibly have met the case. The only relaxation in favour of the possible was a diseased readiness to accept shakedowns, sandwiches standing, cuts off the cold mutton, and snacks generally on behalf of her son.

Mrs. Iggulden, who was empty both sets on Monday, didn't answer in any one particular to any of these requisitions. But a spirit of overgrown compromise crept in, making a sufficient number of reasons why no one of them could be complied with an equivalent of compliance itself. Only in respect of certain racks and tortures for the doctor was Mrs. Iggulden induced to lend herself to dangerous innovation. "I can't have poor Prosy put to sleep in a bed like this," said Sally, punching in the centre of one, and finding a hideous cross-bar. Either Mrs. Iggulden's nephew must saw it out, and tighten up the sacking from end to end, or she must get a Christian bed. Poor Prosy! Whereon Mrs. Iggulden explained that her nephew had by an act of self-sacrifice surrendered this bed as a luxury for lodgers in the season, having himself a strong congenital love of bisection. He hadn't slept nigh so sound two months past, and the crossbar would soothe his slumbers.

So it was finally settled that the Goody and her son should come to Iggulden's. The question of which set she should occupy being left open until she should have inspected the stairs. Thereon Mrs. Iggulden's nephew, whose name was Solomon, contrived a chair to carry the good lady up them; which she, though faint, declined to avail herself of when she arrived, perhaps seeing her way to greater embarrassment for her species by being supported slowly upstairs with a gasp at each step, and a moan at

intervals. However, she was got up in the end, and thought she could take a little milk with a teaspoonful of brandy in it.

But as to giving any conception of the difficulties that arose at this point in determining the choice between above and below, that must be left to your imagination. A conclusion *was* arrived at in time—in a great deal of it—and the Goody was actually settled on the ground floor at Mrs. Iggulden's, and contriving to battle against collapse from exhaustion with an implication that she had no personal interest in reviving, but would do it for the sake of others.

CHAPTER XXVIII

HOW SALLY PUT THE FINISHING TOUCH ON THE DOCTOR, WHO COULDN'T SLEEP. OF THE GRAND DUKE OF HESSE-JUNKERSTADT. AND OF AN INTERVIEW OVERHEARD

FENWICK was not a witness of this advent, as the Monday on which it happened had seen his return to town. He had had his preliminary week, and his desk was crying aloud for him. He departed, renewing a solemn promise to write every day as the train came into the little station at Egbert's Road, for St. Sennans and Growborough. It is only a single line, even now, to St. Sennans from here, but as soon as it was done it was good-bye to all peace and quiet for St. Sennan.

Rosalind and her daughter came back in the omnibus—not the one for the hotel, but the one usually spoken of as Padlock's—the one that lived at the Admiral Collingwood, the nearest approach to an inn in the old town. The word "omnibus" applied to it was not meant literally by Padlock, but only as a declaration of his indifference as to which four of the planet's teeming millions rode in it. This time there was no one else except a nice old farmer's wife, who spoke *to* each of the ladies as "my dear," and *of* each of them as "your sister." Rosalind was looking wonderfully young and handsome, certainly. They secured all the old lady's new-laid eggs, because there would be Mrs. Vereker in the evening. We like adhering to these ellipses of daily life.

Next morning Sally took Dr. Vereker for a walk round to show him the place. Try to fancy the condition of a young man of about thirty, who had scarcely taken his hand from the plough of general practice for four years—for his holidays had been mighty insignificant—suddenly inaugurating three weeks of paradise in *the* society man most covets—of delicious seclusion remote from patients, a happy valley where stethoscopes might be forgotten, and carbolic acid was unknown, where diagnosis