

CHAPTER XXXIII

OF AN INTERMITTENT CURRENT AT THE PIER-END, AND OF DOLLY'S FORTITUDE. HOW FENWICK PUT HIS HEAD IN THE JAWS OF THE FUTURE UNAWARES, AND PROSY DIDN'T COME. HOW SALLY AND HER STEP SAW PUNCH, AND OF A THIN END OF A FATAL WEDGE. BUT ROSALIND SAW NO COMING CLOUD

An iron pier, with a sense of lattice structure about it, is not to our old-fashioned minds nearly so fascinating as the wooden fabric of our early memories at more than one seaside resort of our boyhood. St. Sennan was of another school, or had become a convert or pervert, if a Saint may be judged by his pier. For this was iron or steel all through, barring the timber flooring whose planks were a quarter of an inch apart, so that you could kneel down to see the water through if you were too short to see over the advertisements a sordid spirit of commercialism had blocked the side-railings with. And if you were three or four, and there was nobody to hold you up (because they were carrying baby), you did so kneel, and as like as not got tar on your knees, and it wouldn't come off. Anyhow, Miss Gwendolen Arkwright did, on her way to the appointment, and was reproved therefore. On which she also reproved dolly in identical terms, dolly having had a look through as well, though, indeed, she can hardly be said to have knelt.

But to console us for the loss of the solid groins and bolted timbers of our youth, and to make it palatable to us that the great seas should follow each other for ever almost unopposed—instead of being broken into floods of drenching foam visitors get wet-through in—this unsubstantial-looking piece of cage-work expanded as soon as it was well out in the open channel, and almost provided John Bull with another "other island." And whereon the pier-company's sordid commercialism had suggested the construction of a Chinese joss-house, or Indian bungalow—our description is a random one—that lent itself, or was lent by the company, at really an almost nominal figure, for

entertainments in the afternoon all through the season. And round this structure were things desirable by all mankind, and supposed to be desired by possessors of one penny willing to part with it. For a penny-in-the-slot you could learn your fate from a Sibyl, and repent of having spent your penny on it. For another you could scent your pocket-handkerchief, and be sorry you hadn't kept your penny for chocolate. For another you could have the chocolate, and wish you had waited and taken a cigarette. And for another you could take the cigarette, and realise how ill-assorted are the flavours of chocolate and the best Virginian tobacco.

But the pennyworth that seemed the worthiest of its penny was, no doubt, the old-fashioned galvanic battery, which shocked you for a sixth part of the smallest sum required by literature on first publication. It had brass handles you took hold of, and brass basins with unholy water in them that made you curl up, and anybody else would do so too. And there was a bunch of wires to push in, and agonize the victim who, from motives not easily understood, laid himself open to torture. And it certainly said "whizzy-wizzy-wizz." But Gwenny's description had been wrong in one point. For it was yourself, the investigator, not the machine, that said "e-e-e-e!"

Now this machine was in charge of a young woman, who was also the custodian of an invisible lady, who was to be seen for a penny each person, children half-price. This appeared to be a contradiction in terms, but public apathy accepted it without cavil. The taking of this phenomenon's gate-money seemed to be almost a sinecure. Not so the galvanic battery, which never disappointed any one. It might disgust, or repel, those who had had no occasion to study this branch of science, but it always acted up to its professions. Those investigators who declined to have any more never could go away and complain that they had not had enough. And no one had ever been discontented with its baneful results when all the bundle of wires was put in; indeed, the young person in charge said she had never known any one to drain this cup of scientific experience to the dregs. "Half-way in's enough for most," was her report of human endurance. It was a spirited little machine, though old-fashioned.

Miss Arkwright and her dolly, accompanied, as we have hinted,

by her Nurse Jane and baby, whose violent temper had condemned his perambulator, and compelled his attendant to carry him—so she said—were beforehand at the place and hour named. For security against possible disappointment a fiction was resorted to that dolly wouldn't cry if her mamma talked seriously to her, and it was pointed out that Mr. Fenwick was coming, and Mrs. Fenwick was coming, and Miss Nightingale was coming, and Dr. Vereker was coming—advantage being taken of an infant's love of vain repetitions. But all these four events turned on dolly being good and not crying, and the reflex action of this stipulation produced goodness in dolly's mamma, with the effect that she didn't roar, as, it seemed, she might otherwise have done.

Miss Gwendolen was, however, *that* impatient that no dramatic subterfuge, however skilfully engineered, could be relied upon to last. Fortunately, a young lady she recognised, and a gentleman whom she did not personally know, but had seen on the beach, became interested in baby, who took no notice of them, and hiccupped. But, then, his eyes were too beady to have any human expression; perhaps it was more this than a contempt for vapid compliment that made him seem unsympathetic. The young lady, however, congratulated him on his *personnel* and on the variety of his attainments; and this interested Miss Gwendolen, who continued not to roar, and presently volunteered a statement on her own account.

"My mummar zis a-comin', and Miss Ninedale zis a-comin', and Miss Ninedale's mummar zis a-comin', and . . ." But Nurse Jane interposed, on the ground that the lady knew already who was coming. She had no reason for supposing this; but a general atmosphere of omniscience among grown-up classes is morally desirable. It was, however, limited to Clause 1. Miss Gwenny went on to the consideration of Clause 2 without taking a division.

"To see dolly danvalised for a penny. My mummar says—see—sall—div me a penny. . . ."

"To galvanise dolly? How nice that will be!—Isn't she a dear little thing, Paggy?—And we're just in time to see it. Now, that *is* nice!" Observe Lætitia's family name for her husband, born of Cattley's.

"Isn't that them coming, Tish?" Yes, it is. They are conscientiously negotiating the turnstile at the pier-entrance, where one gets a ticket that lets you on all day, and you lose it. Conscientiously, because the pier-company often left its side-gate open, and relied on public spirit to acquiesce in its turnstile without dispute.

But Bradshaw has the misfortune to fall in Nurse's good opinion. For he asks who the important-looking party is, and is called to order.

"Sh-sh-iii-sh, love! Do take care! Gwenny's mamma—Mrs. Chesterfield Arkwright. They've a house at Boxley Heath—friends of the Hugh Jameses—those very high-flying people." This is not *à pleine voix*, and a well-disciplined Nurse knows better than to hear it.

Miss Gwenny and dolly consent to accompany the lady and gentleman to meet the party, the former undertaking to point out her mamma. "I sall sow you wiss," she says; and then gives descriptive particulars of the conduct of the galvanic battery, and forecasts its effect on dolly.

"There's that dear little pet," says Sally; and resumes the operation of spoiling the little pet on the spot. She isn't sorry to tally the pet (whose phonetics we employ) "dest wunced round the p on her soulders, only zis wunced." She is a little silent, is Sally, and preoccupied—perhaps won't object to a romp to divert her thoughts. Because she is afraid poor Prosy is in the tentacles of the Octopus. She evidently is not in love with him; if she were she would be feeling piqued at his not being in time to the appointment, not fidgeting about his losing the fun. She made some parade, at any rate, of her misgivings that poor Dr. Conrad had got hooked by his Goody, and would be late. If she *was* piqued she concealed it. Whichever it was, she found it congenial to "tally" Miss Arkwright on her "soulders" twiced round the pier-end before the party arrived within range of the battery. They meanwhile—that is to say, Rosalind and her husband, Lætitia and hers, with Sally and Gwenny's mamma—lingered slowly along the pier listening to the experiences of the latter, of men, women, and things among the right sort of people.

"You really never know, and one cannot be too careful. So

much turns on the sort of people you let your daughter get mixed up with. I'm sure Mrs. Fenwick will agree with me that Mrs. Hugh James was right. You see, I've known her from a child, and a more unworldly creature never breathed. But she asked me, and I could only say what I did: "Take the child at once to Paris and Ems and Wiesbaden—anywhere for a change. Even a tradesman is better than a professional man. In that case there may be money. But nowadays none of the professions pay. And their connexions are most undesirable."

"Now I should call that a brig." Thus Bradshaw, pursuing the great controversy. But Fenwick knows better, or thinks he does. She's a brigantine, and there are sprits'ls on both masts, and only one square sail on the foremast. He may be right, for anything we know. Anyhow, her sheets are white in the sun, as she tacks down channel against the west or south-west wind, which has freshened. And she is a glorious sight as she comes in quite close to the pier-head, and goes into stays—(is that right?)—and her great sails flap and swing, and a person to whom caution is unknown, and who cares for nothing in heaven or earth, sits unconcerned on a string underneath her bowsprit, and gets wet through every time she plunges, doing something nautical in connexion with her foresail overhead. And then she leans over in the breeze, and the white sheets catch it full—so near you can hear the boom click as it swings, and the rattle of the cordage as it runs through the blocks—and then she gets her way on her, and shoots off through a diamond-drench of broken seas, and we who can borrow the coastguard's telescope can know that she is the Mary of Penzance, but are none the wiser. And a man stripped to the waist, who is washing radishes on the poop, continues washing radishes unmoved, and ignores all things else.

"As far as the young man himself goes, I believe there is nothing to be said. But the mother is quite unrepresentable, perfectly impossible. And the eldest sister is married to a Dissenting clergyman—a very worthy man, no doubt, but not exactly. And the girls are loud, etc., etc., etc." Miss Arkwright's mamma ripples on, even as persons of condition ripple; and Tishy, whose views in this direction have undergone expansion, manages to forget how she has done the same herself—not long ago, neither!—and decides that the woman is detestable.

Not so her daughter, who, with Sally as guardian and dolly as ward, is awaiting the arrival of the party at the galvanic battery. She is yearning for the great event; not for a promised land of jerks and spasms for herself, but for her putative offspring. She encourages the latter, telling her not to be pitened and kye. Dolly doesn't seem apprehensive—shows great self-command, in fact.

But this detestable mother of a lovable daughter and an untempting granddaughter is destined to become still more detestable in the eyes of the Julius Bradshaws before she exhausts her topic. For as the party draws near to the scene of scientific recreation—and progress is slow, as she is deliberate as well as detestable; and, of course, is the pace-maker—she climbs up to a higher platform, as it were, for the contemplation of a lower deep. She assumes, for purposes of temporary handling of the subject, the air of one too far removed to know more about its details than the seismograph at Greenwich knows about the earthquake in the Andes. A dim contemplation of a thing afar—to be forgotten on the spot, after record made.

"Luckily, it's not so bad in this case as—(Gweny, you're tiring Miss Nightingale. Come down!)—not so bad in this case as—(NO, my dear! you *must* wait for dolly to be galvanised. Come down at once, and don't make conditions.)"

"But I love having her dearly—do let me keep her!" from Sally.

And from the human creature on her shoulders, "Miss Nine-dale says 'No!'"

"Not so bad, you were saying, as . . . ?" Thus Rosalind, to divert the conversation from the child.

"Oh dear! What *was* I saying? That child! What plagues the little things are!" The lady closes her eyes for two seconds behind a horizontal gloved hand, a seclusion to recollect in; then continues: "Oh yes, when it's a shopman. I dare say you've heard of that very painful case—daughter of a well-known Greek Pr . . ."

But the speaker has tact enough to see her mistake from the simultaneous loud speech it provokes. Every one seems to have something vociferous to say, and all speak at once. Sally's con-

tribution is a suggestion that before dolly is put to the torture we shall go into the downstairs place and see the gentleman who's fishing catch a big grey mullet. It is adopted. Rosalind only remains upstairs, and takes the opportunity to communicate the Julius Bradshaw epic to Gwenny's mamma, who will now be more careful than ever about the sort of people you pick up at the seaside and drop. She puts these words by in her mind, for Gwenny's papa, later on.

The gentleman who is to be seen catching the big grey mullet hadn't caught it, so far—not when the party arrived on the strange middle-deck of the pier the water reaches at high tide, and persuades occasional molluscs to grow on the floor of, with promises of a bath next month. The green reflected light from the endless rise and fall of the waves Gwenny could see (without getting down) through the floor-gaps, seemed to be urging the fisher-gentleman to give it up, and pointing out that the grey mullet was down here, and didn't mean to be caught. But he paid no attention, and only went on doing all the things that fishers do. He ascribed the fishes' reluctance to bite to the sort of sky, and not to common-sense on their part. He tried the other side instead. He lost his worm, and blamed him for going off the hook—which he would have done himself, and he knew it! He believed, honestly, that a fish of fabulous dimensions had thought seriously of biting, and would have bitten, only you got in the light, or made a noise.

But there was no noise to speak of, really, except the clunk-clunk of one or two moored rowboats down below, and the sh-r-r-r-r-p (if that spells it) of their corrugated plank-sides, as they dipped and dripped alternately. They were close to the bottom flight of stairs, whose lowest step was left forlorn in the air, and had to be jumped off when a real spring-tide came that knew its business.

Gwenny's remark, "Ze man is fassin'," seemed to point to an incubation of an idea, familiar to maturer life, that fishing is more truly a state than an action. But the addendum—that he didn't cass any fiss—betrayed her inexperience. Maturity does not call attention to ill-success; or, if it does, it lays it at the door of the fish.

"What a jolly header one could have from here! No railings

or anything. No—ducky! I won't put you down to look over the edge. That's not a thing for little girls to do."

"You'd never get up again, Sarah. You'd have to swim ashore."

"One could swim round the steps, Jeremiah—at least, according to the tide. It's slack water now."

"I wish, Mr. Fenwick—(so does Julius)—that you would make that girl reasonable. She'll drown herself before she's done."

"I know she will, Mrs. Paganini. Sure and certain! Nobody can stop her. But Vereker's going to bring her to."

"Where is the doctor, Tish? Didn't he say he was coming?" This was Bradshaw. He usually says things to his wife, and leaves publication to her.

"Of course he said he was coming. I wonder if anything's the matter?"

"Oh, no! It's his ma! The Goody's put an embargo on him, and kept him at home. Poor Prosy!" Sally is vexed, too. But observe!—she knows perfectly well that nothing but the Goody would have kept Prosy from his appointment.

No one in particular, but every one more or less, supposes that now we must go back for dolly to be galvanised, Tishy rather reluctantly, for she does not share her husband's indifference about what the detestable one above says on the subject of shopmen; Miss Arkwright greedily, being reminded of a higher object in life than mere grey mullet catching. She, however, ascribes her avidity to dolly, calling on public credulity to believe that the latter has spoken to that effect.

The arrangement of dolly in connexion with the two brass handles offers difficulties, but a felicitous solution is discovered, for not only will dolly remain in contact with both if her arms are thrust inside them, but insomuch as her sleeves are stiff and expansive, and require a perceptible pull to withdraw them, will remain suspended in mid-air without further support, to enjoy the rapture or endure the torture of the current, as may prove to be the case. From this arises an advantage—namely, that her mamma will be able to give her attention to the regulator, and shift the wire bundle in and out, with a due regard to dolly's powers of endurance.

What little things the lives of the folk in this story have turned

on! Now, suppose Gwenny had never been allowed to take charge of that regulator! However, this is anticipation.

When dolly had endured unmoved the worst that science could inflict, nothing would satisfy Miss Gwenny but that every one else should take hold in a circle, as on a previous occasion, and that she should retain control of the regulator. The experiment was tried as proposed, all present joining in it except Mrs. Arkwright, who excused herself owing to the trouble of taking her gloves off. Including nurse, there were six persons. However, as nurse couldn't abide it, almost before it had begun to say whizzy-wizzy-wizz, this number was reduced to five.

"Keep your eye on the kid, my dear," said Fenwick, addressing the presiding young lady in his easy-going way; "don't let her put it on all at once. Are you ready, Sarah? You ready, Mrs. Paganini? All right—fire away!"

The young lady in charge kept a careful hand near Miss Gwenny's, who was instructed or guided to increase the current gradually. Her attitude was docile and misleading.

"Go on—a little more—yes, a little more. . . . No, that's enough! . . . Oh, what nonsense! that's nothing! . . . Oh, Sally, do let go! . . . Oh, Tishy, what a goose you are! That's nothing. . . . E-ow! It's horrible. I won't have any more of it." The chorus of exclamations, which you may allot at choice, ended in laughter as the galvanised circle broke up.

"Well, you are a lot of weak-kneed . . . conductivities," said Fenwick, feeling for the word. "That was nothing, as Sarah says."

"Look here," suggested Sally. "Me get between you two men, and Gwenny stick it in full up." This was done, and Sally heroically endured the "full up" current, which, as you doubtless are aware, increases in viciousness as it has fewer and fewer victims. But she wasn't sorry when it was over, for all that.

"You and I could take it full up," said Fenwick to Bradshaw, who assented. But Paganini evidently didn't like it when it came to three-quarters. Also, his wife said to him, "You'll spoil your fingering, Julius."

Fenwick seemed to think them all over-sensitive. "I could stand that by myself," said he, and took both handles.

But just at this moment a strange event happened. Some-

body actually applied to see the invisible lady. The eyes of the damsel in charge were for one moment withdrawn from Miss Gwenny, who promptly seized the opportunity to thrust in the regulator "full up."

Fenwick wasn't going to cry for mercy—not he! But his lips clenched and his eyes glared, and his hands shook. "How can you be such a *goose*, Jeremiah?" said Sally, who was standing close by the battery, opposite to Gwenny. She thrust back the regulator, and put an end to Fenwick's exertions.

He said, "What did you do that for, Sarah? I could have stood it for six months."

And Sally replied: "For shame, you wicked story! And after you'd been electrocuted once, too!"

Fenwick burst into a great laugh, and exclaimed, "What on earth are we all torturing ourselves for? Do let's go and get some tea." And then carried Gwenny on his shoulders to the pier-entrance, where he delivered her to her proprietors, and then they all sauntered seawards, laughing and chatting.

Rosalind thought she had never seen Gerry in such health and spirits. On their way up to the house they passed Punch, leaning over the footlights to rejoice in his iniquity. Few persons of healthy sympathies can pass Punch, and these only under the strongest temptation, such as tea. Rosalind and Lætitia and her husband belonged to the latter class, but Fenwick and Sally elected to see the immortal drama to a close. It lasted nearly through the remainder of Fenwick's cigar, and then they came away, reluctant, and wanting more of the same sort.

It was then that Sally's stepfather said a rather singular thing to her—a thing she remembered afterwards, though she noticed it but slightly at the time. She had said to him:

"Codling and Short will be quite rich men! What a lot of money you've given them, Jeremiah!"

And he had replied: "Don't they deserve it?"

They had then walked on together up the road, he taking her arm in his hand, as is the way nowadays, but saying nothing. Presently he said, as he threw away the very last end of the cigar:

"It was the first lesson of my early boyhood in retributive injustice. It's a poor heart that never rejoices at Punch."

It was the first time Sally had ever heard him speak of his boyhood except as a thing he had forgotten.

Much, so much, of this chapter is made up of matter so trifling. Was it worth recording? The chronicler might plead again as excuse his temptation to linger over the pleasant hours it tells of, the utter freedom of its actors from care, and his reluctance to record their sequel. But a better apology for his prolixity and detail would be found in the wonder felt by those actors when in after-life they looked back and recalled them one by one; and the way each memory linked itself, in a way unsuspected at the time, with an absolutely unanticipated future. For even Rosalind, with all her knowledge of the past, had no guess, for all her many misgivings and apprehensions, of the way that things would go. Never had she been freer from a sense of the shadow of a coming cloud than when she looked out from the window while the tea she had just made was mellowing, and saw her husband and daughter coming through the little garden gate, linked together and in the best of spirits.

CHAPTER XXXIV

OF THE REV. SAMUEL HERRICK AND A SUNSET. THE WEDGE'S PROGRESS. THE BARON AGAIN, AND THE FLY-WHEEL. HOW FENWICK KNEW HIS NAME RIGHT, AND ROSALIND DIDN'T. HOW SALLY AND HER MEDICAL ADVISER WERE NOT QUITE WET THROUGH. HOW HE HAD MADE HER THE CONFIDANTE OF A LOVE-AFFAIR. OF A GOOD OPENING IN SPECIALISM. MORE PROGRESS OF THE WEDGE. HOW GERRY NEARLY MADE DINNER LATE

It was quite true, as Sally had surmised, that poor Prosy had been entangled in the meshes of his Octopus. But Sally had also recorded her conviction that he would turn up at tea. He did so, with apologies. You see, he hadn't liked to come away while his mother was asleep, in case she should ask for him when she woke up, and she slept rather longer than usual.

"She may have been trying to do too much lately," said he, with a beautiful faith in some mysterious activities practised by the Goody unseen. Sally cultivated this faith also, to the best of her ability, but she can hardly be said to have embraced it. The way in which she and her mother lent themselves to it was, nevertheless, edifying.

"You mustn't let her overdo it, doctor," said Rosalind, seriously believing herself truthful. And Sally, encouraged by her evident earnestness, added, "And make her take plenty of nourishment. That's half the battle."

Whereupon Lætitia, swept, as it were, into the vortex of a creed, found it in her to say, "As long as she doesn't get low." It was not vigorous, and lacked completion, but it reassured and enforced. By the time the little performance was done every one in the room believed that Mrs. Vereker did down the stairs, or scoured out saucepans, or at least dusted. Even her son believed, so forcibly was the unanimity. Perhaps there was a taint of the incredulous in the minds of Fenwick and Bradshaw. But each thought the other was heart-whole, and neither suspected himself of insincerity.