

"The baby—his baby—his horrible baby!"

"Gerry darling! Gerry *dearest!* do think. . . ." His puzzled eyes, bloodshot in his white face, turned full upon her; but he remained silent, waiting to hear more. "You have forgotten, darling," she said quietly.

His free hand that lay on the coverlid clenched, and a spasm caught his arm, as though it longed for something to strike or strangle. "No, no!" said he; "I am all right. I mean that damned monster's baby. There *was* a baby?" His voice shook on these last words as though he, too, had a fear for his own reason. His face flushed as he awaited her reply.

"Oh, Gerry darling! but you *have* forgotten. His baby was Sally—my Sallykin!"

For it was absolutely true that, although he had as complete a knowledge, in a certain sense, of Sally's origin as the well-coached student has of the subject he is to answer questions in, he had forgotten it under the stress of his mental trial as readily as the student forgets what his mind has only acquiesced in for its purpose, in his joy at recovering his right to ignorance. Sally had an existence of her own quite independent of her origin. She was his and Rosalind's—a part of *their* existence, a necessity. It was easy and natural for him to dissociate the living, breathing reality that filled so much of their lives from its mere beginnings. It was less easy for Rosalind, but not an impossibility altogether, helped by the forgiveness for the past that grew from the soil of her daughter's love.

"You *had* forgotten, dear," she repeated; "but you know now."

"Yes, I had forgotten, because of Sally herself; but she is *my* daughter now. . . ."

She waited, expecting him to say more; but he did not speak again. As soon as he was, or seemed to be, asleep, she rose quietly and left him.

She was so anxious that no trace of the tempest that had passed over her should be left for Sally to see in the morning that she got as quickly as possible to bed; and, with a little effort to tranquillise her mind, soon sank into a state of absolute oblivion. It was the counterswing of the pendulum—Nature's protest against a strain beyond her powers to bear, and its remedy.

CHAPTER XLIV

OF A CONTRACT JOB FOR REPAIRS. HOW FENWICK HAD ANOTHER SLEEP-LESS NIGHT AFTER ALL. WHICH IS WHICH, NOW OR TWENTY ODD YEARS AGO? HOW SALLY FOLLOWED JEREMIAH OUT. WHAT A LOT OF TALK ABOUT A LIFE-BELT!

A COLOURLESS dawn chased a grey twilight from the sea and white cliffs of St. Sennans, and a sickly effort of the sun to rise visibly, ending above a cloud-bank in a red half-circle that seemed a thing quite unconnected with the struggling light, was baffled by a higher cloud-bank still that came discouragingly from the west, and quenched the hopes of the few early risers who were about as St. Sennans tower chimed six. The gull that flew high above the green waste of white-flecked waters was whiter still against the inky blue of the cloud-curtain that had disallowed the day, and the paler vapour-drifts that paused and changed and lost themselves and died; but the air that came from the sea was sweet and mild for the time of year, and the verdict of the coast-guard'sman at the flagstaff, who in pursuance of his sinecure had seen the night out, was that the day was pretty sure to be an uncertain sart, with little froshets on the water, like over yander. He seemed to think that a certainty of uncertainty had all the value of a forecast, and was as well satisfied with his report as he was that he had not seen a smuggler through the telescope he closed as he uttered it.

"Well, I should judge it might be fairly doubtful," was the reply of the man he was speaking with. It was the man who had "Elinor" and "Bessie" tattooed on his arm. They were not legible now, as a couple of life-belts, or hencoops, as they are sometimes called, hung over the arm and hid them. The boy Benjamin was with his father, and carried a third. An explanation of them came in answer to interrogation in the eye of the coastguard. "Just to put a touch of new paint on 'em against the weather." The speaker made one movement of his head say

that they had come from the pier-end, and another that he had taken them home to repaint by contract.

"What do you make out of S. S. P. C.?" the coastguard asked, scarcely as one who had no theory himself, more as one archæologist addressing another, teeming with deference, but ready for controversy. The other answered with some paternal pride:

"Ah, there now! Young Benjamin, he made *that* good, and asked for to make it red in place of black himself! Didn't ye, ye young sculping? St. Sennans Pier Company, that's all it comes to, followed out. But I'm no great schoolmaster myself, and that's God's truth." Both contemplated the judicious restoration with satisfaction; and young Benjamin, who had turned purple under publicity, murmured that it was black aflower. He didn't seem to mean anything, but to think it due to himself to say something, meaning or no. The coastguardsman merely said, "Makes a tidy job!" and the father and son went on their way to the pier.

A quarter of an hour before, this coastguard had looked after the visitor in a blue serge suit up at Lobjoit's, who had passed him going briskly towards the fishing-quarter. He had recognised him confidently, for he knew Fenwick well, and saw nothing strange in his early appearance. Now that he saw him returning, and could take full note of him, he almost suspected he had been mistaken, so wild and pallid was the face of this man, who, usually ready with a light word for every chance encounter—even with perfect strangers—now passed him by ungreeted, and to all seeming unconscious of his presence. The coastguard was for a moment in doubt if he should not follow him, inferring something in the nature of delirium from his aspect; but seeing that he made straight for the pier, and knowing that young Benjamin's father was more familiar with him than himself, he was contented to record in thought that that was a face with a bad day ahead, and leave it.

For Gerry, when Rosalind left him, was rash in assuming he could let her do so safely. His well-meant pretext of sleep was not destined to grow into a reality. He had really believed that it would, so soothing was the touch of her hand in his own. The moment he was alone his mind leapt, willy-nilly, to the analysis of one point or other in the past that had just come back to him.

He tried to silence thought, and to sleep, knowing that his best hope was in rest; but each new effort only ended in his slipping back to what he had just dismissed. And that terrible last interview with Rosey at Umballa, when he parted from her, as he thought, never to see her again, was the Rome to which all the roads of recollection led. Each involuntary visit there had its *renchérissement* on the previous one, and in the end the image of that hour became a brain-oppression, and wrote the word "fever" large on the tablets of his apprehension.

He knew now it was not to be sleep; he knew it as he sat up in bed feeling his pulse, and stimulating it with his anxiety that it should go slow. Was there nothing he could take that would make him sleep? Certainly he knew of nothing, anywhere, except it was to be found by waking Rosalind, probably sound asleep by now. Out of the question! Oh, why, why, with all the warning he had had, had he neglected to provide himself with a mysterious thing known to him all his life as a soothing-draught? It would have been so useful now, and Conrad would have defined it down to the prosaic requirements of pharmacy. But it was too late!

So long as her hand was in his, so long as her lips were near his own, what did it matter what he recollected? The living present cancelled the dead past. But to be there alone in the dark, with the image of that Rosalind of former years clinging to him, and crying for forgiveness because his mind, warped against her by a false conception of the truth, could not forgive; to be defenceless against her last words, coming through the long interval to him again just as he heard them, twenty years ago, bringing back the other noises of the Indian night—the lowing of the bullocks in the compound, the striking of the hour on the Kutcherry gongs, the grinding of the Persian wheels unceasingly drawing water for the irrigation of the fields—to be exposed to this solitude and ever-growing imagination was to become the soil for a self-sown crop of terrors—fear of fever, fear of madness, fear at the very least of perturbation such that Sally might come, through it, to a knowledge that had to be kept from her at all costs.

He lighted his candle with a cautious match, and found what might be a solace—a lucky newspaper of the morning. If only he could read it without audible rustling, unheard by the sleepers!

The print was almost too small to be read by the light of a single candle; but there were the usual headings, the usual ranks of capitals that tell us so quick that there is nothing we shall care about in the pale undecipherable paragraphs below, and that we have spent our halfpenny in vain. There was the usual young lady who had bought, or was trying on, a large hat, and whose top-story above, in profile, had got so far ahead of her other stories below. There were the consignments of locust-flights of boots, for this young lady's friends, with heels in the instep. And all the advertisements that some one *must* believe, or they would not pay for insertion; but that *we* ignore, incredulous. Fenwick tried hard, for his own sake, to make the whole thing mean something, but his dazed brain and feverish eyes refused to respond to his efforts, and he let the paper go, and gave himself up, a prey to his own memories. After all, the daylight was sure to come in the end to save him.

He tried hard to reason with himself, to force himself to feel the reality of his own belief that all was well; for he had no doubt of it, as an abstract truth. It was the power of getting comfort from it that was wanting. If only his heart could stop thumping and his brain burning, *he* would have done the rejoicing that Rosalind was there, knowing all he knew, and loving him; that Sally was there, loving him too, but knowing nothing, and needing to know nothing; that one of his first greetings in the day to come would be from Conrad Vereker, probably too much intoxicated with his own happiness to give much attention to what he was beginning to acknowledge was some kind of physical or nervous fever. If he could only sleep!

But he could not—could hardly close his eyes. He said to himself again and again that nothing was the matter; that, if anything, he and Rosey were better off than they had been yet; that they had passed through a land of peril to a great deliverance. But he did not believe his own assurance, and the throng of memories that his feverish condition would not let sleep, or that were its cause, came on him more and more thickly through all those hours of the dreary night. They came, too, with a growing force, each one as it returned having more the character of a waking dream, vivid almost to the point of reality. But all ended alike. He always found himself breaking away

from Rosey in the veranda in the bungalow at Umballa, and could hear again her cry of despair: "Oh, Gerry, Gerry! It is not as you think. Oh, stay, stay! Give me a chance to show you how I love you!" The tramp of his horse as he rode away from his home and that white figure left prostrate in the veranda above him, became a real sound that beat painfully upon his ears; and the voice of the friend he sought—an old soldier in camp at Sabatoo, where he rode almost without a halt—as he roused him in the dawn of the next day, came to him again almost as though spoken in the room beside him: "Left *your* wife, Palliser! My God, sir! what's to come next?" And then the wicked hardness of his own heart, and his stubborn refusal to listen to the angry remonstrance that followed. "I tell you this, young man! the man's a fool—a damned fool—that runs from the woman who loves him!" And the asseveration that the speaker would say the same if she was anything short of the worst character in camp, only in slightly different words. His remorse for his own obduracy, and the cruelty of his behaviour then; his shame when he thought of his application, months later, to the Court at Lahore—for "relief" from Rosey: just imagine it!—these were bad enough to think back on, even from the point of view of his previous knowledge; but how infinitely worse when he thought what she had been to him, how she had acted towards him two years ago!

Even the painful adventure he could now look back to clearly, and with a rather amused interest, as to an event with no laceration in it—his wandering in an Australian forest, for how many days he could not say, and his final resurrection at a town a hundred miles from his starting-point—even this led him back in the end to the old story. The whole passed through his mind like the scenes of a drama—his confidence, having lost the track, that his horse, left to himself, would find it again; his terror when, coming back from a stone's-throw off, he found the tree deserted he had tied his horse to; his foolish starting off to catch him, when the only sane course was to wait for his return. But the second act of the drama took his mind again to Rosey in her loneliness; for when he was found by a search-party at the foot of a telegraph-post he had used his last match to burn down, he was inarticulate, and seemed to give his name as Harrisson. As

he slowly recovered sense and speech at the telegraph-station—for the interruption of the current had been his cry for help to its occupants—he heard himself addressed by the name and saw the mistake; but he did not correct it, being, indeed, not sorry for an incognito, sick of his life, as it were, and glad to change his identity. But how if Rosey wrote to him then—think of it!—under his old name? Fancy *her* when the time came for a possible reply, with who could say what of hope in it! Fancy her many decisions that it was still too soon for an answer, followed by as many others as time went on that it was not too late! If he had received such a letter from her then, might it not all have been different? May she not have written one? He had talked so little with her; nothing forbade the idea. And so his mind travelled round with monotonous return, always to that old time, and those old scenes, and all the pain of them.

It was curious—he noted the oddity himself—that his whole life in America took the drama character, and *he* became the spectator. He never caught himself playing his own part over again, with all its phases of passion or excitement, as in the earlier story. In that, his identification of himself with his past grew and grew, and as his fever increased through the small hours of the morning, got more and more the force of a waking dream. And when the dawn came at last, and the gleam from the languid sun followed it, the man who got up and looked out towards its great blue bank of cloud was only half sure he was not another former self, looking out towards another sea, twenty years ago, to see if he could identify the ship that was to take him from Kurachi to Port Jackson.

What did it all mean? Yes, sure enough he had taken his passage, and to-morrow leagues of sea would lie between him and Rosey. That would end it for ever. No reconciliations, no repentance then! . . . Was there not still time? a chance if he chose to catch at it? Puny irresolution! Shake it all off, and have done with it. . . . He shuddered as he thought through his old part again, and then came back with a jerk to the strange knowledge that he was opening a closed book, a tragedy written twenty years ago; and that there, within a few feet of where he gazed with a jaded sight out to the empty sea, was Rosey herself, alive and breathing; and in an hour or two he was to see her,

feel the touch of her hand and lips, be his happy self again of three days only gone by, if he could but face masterfully the strange knowledge this mysterious revival of a former self had brought upon him. And there was Sally. . . .

But at the name, as it came to his mind, came also the shock of another mystery—who and what was Sally?

Let him lie down again and try to think quietly. Was not this part of his delirium? Could he have got the story right? Surely! Was it not of her that Rosey had said, only a few hours since, "*His* baby was Sally—*my* Sallykin"? And was he not then able to reply collectedly and with ease, "*She is my* daughter now," and to feel the power of his choice that it should be so? But the strength of Rosalind was beside him then, and now he was here alone. He beat off—fought against—that hideous fatherhood of Sally's that he could not bear, that image that he felt might drive him mad. Oh, villain, villain! Far, far worse to him was—perforce must be—this miscreant's crime than that mere murder that shook Hamlet's reason to its foundation. He dared not think of it lest he should cry out aloud. But, patience! Only two or three hours more, and Rosalind would be there to help him to bear it. . . . What a coward's thought!—to help him to bear what she herself had borne in silence for twenty years!

Would he not be better up, now that it was light? Of course! But how be sure he should not wake them?

Well, the word was caution; he must be very quiet about it, that was all. He slipped on his clothes without washing—it always makes a noise—ran a comb through the tangled hair his pillow-tossings of four hours had produced, and got away stealthily without accident, or meeting any early riser, speech with whom would have betrayed him.

He had little trouble with the door-fastenings, that often perplex us in a like case, blocking egress with mysterious mechanisms. Housebreakers were rare in St. Sennans. He had more fear his footsteps would be audible; but it seemed not, and he walked away towards the cliff pathway unnoticed.

The merpussy waked to a consciousness of happiness undefined, a sense of welcome to the day. What girl would not have done so, under her circumstances? For Sally had no doubt in her

mind of her own satisfaction at the outcome of yesterday. She might have treated the feelings and experience of other lovers—regular ones, prone to nonsense—with contempt, but she never questioned the advantages of her own position as compared with theirs. Her feast was better cooked, altogether more substantial and real than the kickshaws and sweetmeats she chose to ascribe to the *menus* of Arcadia. Naturally; because see what a much better sort Conrad was! It was going to be quite a different kind of thing this time. And as for the old Goody, she was not half bad. Nothing was half bad in Sally's eyes that morning, and almost everything was wholly good.

She had slept so sound she was sure it was late. But it was only half-past six, and the early greetings of Mrs. Lobjoit below were not to the baker, nor even to the milk, but to next door, which was dealing with the question of its mat and clean step through the agency of its proprietress, whose voice chimed cheerfully with Mrs. Lobjoit's over the surprise of the latter finding *her* street door had been opened, and that some one had already passed out. For Mrs. Lobjoit had made *that* sure, the night before, that she had "shot to" the bottom bolt that *would* shet, *because* she had ignored as useless the top bolt that *wouldn't* shet—the correlation of events so often appealed to by witnesses under examination; which Law, stupidly enough, prides itself on snubbing them for. Further, Mrs. Lobjoit would have flown to the solution that it was her gentleman gone out, only that it was quite into the night before they stopped from talking.

Sally heard this because she had pulled down the top sash of her window to breathe the sea air, regardless of the fact she well knew, and described thus—that the sash-weight stuck and clunked and wouldn't come down. She decided against running the risk of disturbing Jeremiah on the strength of Mrs. Lobjoit's impressions; although, if he had gone out, she certainly would follow him. But she slipped on a dressing-gown and went half-way downstairs, to see if his hat was still on its peg. It was gone. So she went back to her room, and dressed furtively. Because if they *had* been talking late into the night, it would be just as well for her mother to have her sleep out.

But she had hardly finished washing when she became aware of a footstep outside—Jeremiah's certainly. She went to the win-

dow, saw him approach the house, look up at it, but as though he did not recognise that she was there, and then turn away towards the flagstaff and the old town. It was odd and unlike him, and Sally was alarmed. Besides, how white he looked!

Bear this in mind, that Sally knew absolutely nothing of the cataclysm of revived memory in Jeremiah. Remember that the incident of the galvanic battery at the pier-end is only four days old. Do not be misled by the close details we have given of these four days.

Sally's alarm at the haggard look of her stepfather's face took away her breath; at least, she did not find her voice soon enough for him to hear her call out—she did not like to shout loud because of her mother—as he turned away. Or it seemed so, for that was the only way she could account for his walking away so abruptly. In her hurry to get dressed and follow him, she caught up an undergarment that lay on the floor, without seeing that her own foot was on the tape that was to secure it, and a rip and partial disruption was the consequence. Never mind, it would hold up till she came in. Or, if it didn't, where was that safety-pin that was on her dressing-table yesterday? Not there? Again, never mind! She would do, somehow. She hurried on her clothes, and her hat and waterproof, and left the house, going quickly on what she supposed to be the track of Jeremiah, who was, by now, no longer visible.

But she caught sight of him returning, while she was still two or three minutes' walk short of the flagstaff he was approaching from the other side. He would stop to talk with the coastguard. He always did. Surely he would, this time. But no—he didn't.

He may have spoken, but he did not stop. So Sally noted as she hesitated an instant, seeing him turn off at an angle and go towards the pier. There was a shorter cut to the pier, without going to the flagstaff. Sally turned herself, and took it. She would catch him as he came back from the pier-end, if he was going to walk along it.

She saw him as she descended the slope that, part pathway and part steps, led down towards the sea. He walked straight towards the pier, passing as he went a man and boy, who were carrying what she took, at that distance, for well-made coils of rope; and then, arriving at the pier-turnstile just as they did, pass them,

and, leaving them apparently in conversation with the gatekeeper, walk steadily on towards the pier-end.

"I shouldn't call the paint properly hardened on myself. Nor won't be yet-a-piece, if you ask my opinion." It was young Benjamin's father said these words to the veteran in charge of the pier-turnstile; who, as an early bird, was counting his tickets, so to speak, before they were hatched—his actual professional cabinet-séance not having begun. For the pier wasn't open yet, and his permission to Fenwick to pass the open side-gate was an indulgence to an acquaintance.

His reply to the speaker was that he must bide awhile in patience, then. Paint was good to dry while the grass grew, and there was plenty else to fret about for them as wanted it. He seemed only to mention this from consideration of the wants of others. He either had plenty to fret about, or was happier without anything. He ended with, "What have you to say to that, Jake Tracy?" showing that the father of Benjamin was Jacob, following precedent.

But Jacob preferred not to be led away into ethics. "I should stand 'em by, in the shadow, for the matter of a day or two," said he. "In yander." And the life-belts being safely disposed of, he added: "I thought to carry back number fower from the pier-end, and make a finish of the job. But looking to the condition of this paint, maybe better leave her for service. She'll do as well next week." But the moralist inclined to make a finish of the job. Who was going overboard afore the end of next week? And supposing they did, the resources of civilisation wouldn't be exhausted, for we could throw 'em a clean one paint or no.

"Send your lad to fetch her along, Jake. I'll make myself answerable." And young Benjamin, confirmed by a nod from his father, departed for the mysteriously feminine hencoop.

Just as the boy turned to go, Fenwick came up, and, paying no attention to greetings from the two men, passed through the side-gate and walked rather briskly away along the pier. Each of the men looked at the other, as though asking a question. But neither answered, and then both said, "Queer, too!" A nascent discussion of whether one or other should not follow him—for the look of his face had gone home to both, as he was, of course,

well known to them—was cut short by Jacob Tracy saying, "Here's his daughter coming to see for him." And, just after, Sally had passed them, leaving them pleasantly stirred by the bright smile and eye-flash that seemed this morning brighter than ever. The boy shouted something from the pier-end, to which his father's shouted reply was that he must bide a minute and he would come to see himself.

"The yong beggar's got the use of his eyes," he said, not hurrying. "I'll go bail he'll find her. She's there all right, I suppose?" He was still referring to the hencoop, not to any lady.

"Ah, *she's* there, quite safe. You'd best step along and find her. Boys are boys, when all's told."

But Jacob wanted Benjamin to distinguish himself, and still didn't hurry. The strange appearance of Mrs. Lobjoit's gentleman supplied materials for chat. Presently his son shouted again, and he answered, "Not there, is she? I'll come." He walked away towards the pier-end just as Sally, who had fancied Jeremiah would be somewhere alongside of the pagoda-building that nearly covered it, came back from her voyage of exploration, and looked down the steps to the under-platform, that young Benjamin had just come up shouting.

What little things life and death turn on sometimes!