

THE FALL

WHEN I was six years old, and my brother was five, our mother gave birth to another child, a little girl whom she called Sally. We were taken to visit her while she was in hospital. My mother looked quite different from her usual self; her hands which used to be brown and cracked, with broken nails, lay smooth and almost transparent on the white quilt. She wore a blue bed-jacket, and her hair, brushed flat and shiny, seemed as if it could never again become wispy or disordered.

Her manner, too, was quite changed. She kissed us both and held us closely against her, asking all sorts of questions about how we did at school and whether we missed her. Before we left, she took a bunch of grapes from her table and divided it between us, telling us not to eat them too quickly, and to be good children until she grew well again.

I think that it was this interview and, as much as anything, the sweetness of the grapes which I had never tasted before, that first gave me the impression that my baby sister was something precious and happy, a source of great goodness.

This feeling was strengthened when the child came home. She soon grew fat and strong, and began to recognise us, responding with laughs and gurgles when we appeared. She was a pretty baby, with creased wrists and dimpled elbows and she was extraordinarily good-natured. She used to lie for hours, kicking her fat brown legs and murmuring to herself.

My mother kept her beautifully—the coverlets of her bassinette were always spotless, and her frocks and napkins were washed as white as snow. She was so well fed that little rivulets of milk spilled out from the corner of her mouth when she smiled. Most vividly do I remember the smell of her—a combination of very clean clothes, olive oil and baby powder. Even now, when I encounter that smell on a baby, I experience again the feeling of goodness and comfort that emanated from Sally.

When she cried it seemed to me that the whole world was filled with an infinite sadness, and when, as sometimes happened, she screamed with temper, my brother and I used to run from the room and were so embarrassed that we never mentioned such incidents afterwards, even to each other.

MY brother's name was Derek. He and I were not good children. We were always in trouble for tearing our clothes, getting dirty, fighting with the neighbourhood children or making too much noise. My particular sin was the losing of my hair ribbons, which happened nearly every day.

"You come home looking like a dirty little hooligan!" my mother would say, shaking me angrily by the shoulder. "I slave and slave to keep you decent and this is how you repay me. Do you think I'm made of money?" We were always being scolded. I know now that our parents were quite poor, and my mother was always tired and harassed. Nagging us gave relief to her pent-up anxiety.

"Hellions!" she used to say of us, "absolute hellions! I don't know how

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I came to have such children!"

But when she looked at the baby, her face softened and became quite lovely. This strengthened our conviction that Sally was full of peace and goodness.

To me, her babyhood seemed endless. The appearance of her first tooth, the moment when she pulled herself up into a standing position, her first tottering steps—all these exciting moments were separated from each other by aeons of unmarked time. For countless long, long days, as I threshed about like an inexperienced swimmer in the vortex of living—fighting, shouting, weeping, laughing, receiving buffets and slaps and scoldings—the thought of her lay always at the back of my mind, filling me with a deep and fundamental peace. Yet as time is reckoned this happy state lasted barely two years.

I SUPPOSE that an adult stranger, watching our family, would have seen the change come as gradually as one season merges into the next, a hundred tiny incidents marking its progress. But to me, it seemed as though it were all accomplished in the short span of an autumnal afternoon.

It was a Saturday, a warm, grey day, impregnated with the suppressed melancholy of the fall. When we had our dinner of sausages, cabbage and potato, my mother, irritable with scrubbing and cleaning, pushed Derek and me out into the yard.

"For Heaven's sake, keep out of my way!" She scolded in her sharp, high voice. "I've had enough of you making marks all over the clean floor. What do you think I scrub it for? Just for you to muck it up again?"

We wandered disconsolately into our tiny garden. Sally was in her playpen on the lawn. In her sunbonnet and her starched muslin frock she looked like a captured fairy. She called to us, swaying against the bars and chuckling, and for a while we amused ourselves tickling her through the slats and tossing a rubber ball into the pen. We soon tired of that, however, and moped listlessly about the yard, a prey to that profound sense of dejection and helplessness boredom, which so often attacks little children.

I cannot remember when or how the idea of blackberries, those luscious and forbidden fruits which grew in the field adjoining our garden, first came into our heads, but on such an afternoon no angel child could have resisted the temptation, far less such "hellions" as my little brother and myself. We sidled through the hedge to the lovely free-



dom of the field beyond, impervious to Sally's wail as we disappeared from her sight.

The brambles, rifled already by half the village, retained only the most miserable of small, dried fruit, but we, uncritical, plunged our hands into the depths, retrieving them joyously and cramming our mouths with the unappetising fare. The afternoon, which had begun so badly, became, alive with high adventure and rich rewards.

WHEN we had been picking for some minutes, I heard a little bubble of laughter breaking on the garden side of the bushes, and, peering out, I saw a white sunbonnet bobbing about in the paddock. Sally was swaying drunkenly along towards us, laughing uproariously, as the long grasses tickled her chin. We were awed and delighted by the fact that she had escaped and followed us. We swooped upon her like two young hawks on a white lamb and rolled her over and over in the grass till we were all breathless. I buried my head in her clean fragrant dress and I cannot describe the sense of goodness and purity that swept over me then. I felt shriven and blessed.

Later we took her down to the bramble patch and vied with each other to find the sweetest berries for her to eat. She sat on the ground and chewed contentedly and the purple juice, trickling down her chin, dripped steadily on to her dress till a big damp stain spread like a map across her chest. It would not be truthful to say that I did not see this happening, but I saw it with the eyes of childhood which see the present but not the past or the future—the dress stained, but not the dress in its pristine cleanliness, nor the dress which must, by painful labour, be restored to that state.

At first we were very happy, but as we shrieked louder, ran faster and plunged our way deeper and deeper into the brambles, the world seemed to slip from my control and the higher my excitement soared the more troubled and uncertain did I grow within. It was almost a relief when the afternoon's

bright bubble burst as Sally stumbled, and crashed into the deepest of the blackberry thickets.

By the time Derek and I had heaved her free she was sobbing with pain and fear, and smears of blood from her scratched arms had joined the unholy union of dirt and juice on the tattered muslin dress. I stumbled home with her, a heavy burden in my arms, and I felt forlorn and lonely. The grey sky seemed heavy with threat and I desperately wanted my mother, but was afraid to encounter her.

The manner of our reception, my mother's words when she saw the dress, whether we were smacked or merely scolded—all that has now completely faded. Indeed, I can bring to the surface of my mind only one other memory from the whole occurrence, but that is the all important one for me, the moment from which I again drifted rudderless in an unfriendly world.

The three of us were sitting miserably in our bedroom—awaiting punishment, perhaps—and the little room was darkening and shadowed in the corners. I crouched on my bed, hugging my knees and staring at the ragged bare patches on the wall where Derek had ripped the paper away. From the kitchen, very clear and loud, I heard my mother talking.

"Yes," she was saying, "the little one was in it, too. Came home filthy, her dress all stained and ripped! Ruined, it is! And her hair ribbon gone! Oh, she needs a firm hand, that one! A real hellion, the worst of the lot!" Her voice rang painfully in the twilight room.

I turned my eyes to the small figure lolling against the opposite bed and saw her, in that dim light, very clearly—a fat, untidy child with a dirty face and ragged wispy hair. I sprang from the bed and cruelly, furiously I slapped my little sister till her baby face was distorted with terror. Tears were streaming from my eyes and my throat was choking with sniffling sobs.

For it seemed to me that goodness and purity had died that afternoon, and I was betrayed and the world was desolate.

N.Z. LISTENER, AUGUST 14, 1953.