

*Telltale of Stray Bright Thread* is the first chapter of Alan Gould's latest, as yet unpublished novel, *The Seaglass Spiral*.

## Synopsis

*The Seaglass Spiral* is part family saga, part Bildungsroman, tracing the lives of Ralf Sebright and Susan Ravenglass from birth to middle age. Framed by a first and last chapter set on an Australian beach in the present, the main story unfolds between these in three concurrent strands. Two of these strands tell the story of the Sebright and Ravenglass families respectively, the third strand, comprising twenty-three short 'Intaglios', describes the unpromising night when hero and heroine declared their love for each other. In this way, the structure of the novel is designed to resemble a DNA spiral, the 'Intaglios' being the staircase for the double helix narration of the Sebright and Ravenglass saga. The major theme of the novel is befittingly that of inherited characteristics.

At the opening of the novel, Ralf perceives he is drowning. Shortly before this he has given Susan an intriguing brooch and announced that he had completed a quiet twenty-three year research into their respective families. Something of the élan in their relationship is portrayed, and in the badinage, they discuss the nature of enchantment. The final chapter reveals the particular mission that took the pair to the beach, and resolves tensions set up at the opening.

As the saga of the Ravenglass family unfolds from its origins in the English Civil war and the curse placed upon it in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, two contradictory traits emerge as Ravenglass characteristics; a capacity for uncommon detachment from human concerns and awkwardness, occasional storminess, in their relations with others.

The career of Clarence Ravenglass is followed in England, New Zealand, and elsewhere, his brief marriage to, and desertion of Isabella Carroll, their son, Charles de Clair.

We follow Charles' adventures and the formation of his attitudes, his extraordinary meeting with his father, his marriage to Kate Driscoll, their four sons and the cessation of the 18<sup>th</sup> century curse. Of the sons, it is the story of the eldest, Robert that we follow, first in New Zealand, then at war in the New Zealand Navy, then as a scientist involved with the early exploration of genetics. Conjoined with his story is that of Rizka, a Sudetenland Jew. We hear of her pre-war family, her wartime experiences in Prague, Auschwitz, post-war Prague and escape to New Zealand. Robert and Rizka marry and raise two children, whereupon the story focuses on the life of their eldest, Susan, through her childhood and womanhood, her meeting with Ralf, and the character of their relationship.

The Sebright story begins with eleven-year old Jesse arriving in London in 1880 to commence work. The traits here are an acute self-consciousness, a tendency toward piety – both within a faith and not. We follow Jesse's determination of self-improve, his care for his blind sister, and his crises of faith that lead to his unemployment. At the late age of forty he marries Maisie Wilbraham and they have four sons. Maisie's adventures during World War One are described, and Jesse's recognition of his task in life. The Sebright story is continued principally through the third son, Edmund, his education at grammar school, Oxford, desultory employment, enlistment in the army, wartime experience to 1942 where he meets his Icelandic wife, Steinunn. Her story is conjoined to that of the Sebrights, in India, then in post-war Britain, where Ralf is born Ralf's life takes centre stage at this point and we follow his experiences on the several army garrisons, at boarding school, and then in Australia when the Sebrights move to Canberra.

He is involved with the protest movement, but also discovers within himself the peculiar fulfilment to be had from writing works of imagination. His story is taken to the point where he meets Susan, and then toward the conclusion of the novel. For its interest and suspense, the novel relies on its fabric, which is rich with incident, coincidence, characterisation, verbal exchange, but most importantly, with the continuum of family characteristics from which individual character plays its variations in succeeding generations. In the tradition of Saga and Bildungsroman, this narrative fabric tries to make all its characters, but most particularly Ralf and Susan, engaging, even lovable.

“Within the fabric I have tried to give a sense of historical epoch or particularity of place as my imagination allows. My preoccupation, in this novel as with all those I have written, is with character, which is to say the play between what is determined and what can be chosen – the ice which locks and the fire which frees. My ambition for this novel exceeds that of my earlier work because I have been at pains to try to depict how character works, not merely with one individual, but across generations”. Alan Gould.

*Telltales of Stray Bright Thread*  
By Alan Gould © 2006

There was a fellow called Ralf Sebright, decent, glad for the most part to be alive, respectful of how his person (like everyone's) was the very tip of qualities inherited and modified from a million-year lineage of forbears. And on an August day early in our new century, this Ralf recognised his existence was in trouble.

Saltwater with its bloodtaste hackled through his air passages. His eyes stung, his nostrils and throat were slimed with the mucus triggered by his intake of Pacific Ocean, while questions coursed through his mind, more pell-mell than he could quite cope with.

One query was, *Why is simple composure so impossible for a person who is choking?* Another asked, *Could this be me who might now (as it were) drown?*

And hard upon these issues, a third reflection recalled how, not half an hour since, his darling had said to him, 'Well! You have been *dark*, Sealocks!'

The surface of seawater viewed from below (he could see now) was like someone shaking a dress of fabulous silver silk. Intermittently, whenever he thrashed to the surface, he could glimpse the laminate rocks of the headland, tilted by some geological upheaval far more ancient than his own remotest lineage, and now eroded to the razory platforms he had stepped across earlier. Beneath these the yellow cunjevoi welled and collapsed in the emerald swell, and as he sank again Ralf decided *OK, terra firma is now impossible for me*. For his limbs were leaden with fatigue.

And yet.

If somehow his fair-minded self might be spared, so that he did not bring sorrow to his darling and their two teenage boys, if somehow there were a filament of kindness coded into all extreme situations, and that charity might (please, very soon) find him, and if, O, if there were not quite so much choking to cope with, then Ralf Sebright, male, fifty three, might very well...

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Half an hour earlier on this same August morning a woman called Susan Ravenglass striding some paces ahead of her companion, turned back toward him and called, 'Well, you have been dark, Sealocks.'

Her wrap-around skirt swayed in generous folds as she walked, her curls bounced about her neck and her observation carried back to him as they descended a grassed lane beside the dishevelled coastal gardens. Her companion, Sealocks, wore a small backpack, in which there was a container the size of a large thermos, its contents vibrating with a granular shoof-shoof in time with his own stride. Before the pair a rank of Norfolk Pines showed its dark profile and behind this the sea had gathered an immense pool of platinum light.

August is Australia's winter spring. Along their path were collapsed fences rife with florets of plumbago, Christmas bush, and the vermilion bells of cape honeysuckle, while rainbow lorikeets prattled busily in the bottlebrush. How marvellous it felt to be alive amid this florescence and chirrup, as though windows had been thrown open after the dormant winter months, and the world, certainly not so youthful as once, could nonetheless achieve anything it wished.

*Yes, he could be dark, this Ralf person,* Susan reflected. He intrigued her by the way purposes could work in him, subterranean like a stream that nosed through long caverns of limestone to pop into daylight on some unexpected hillside.

Two decades of watching how he used these surprises to bring her pleasure. Two decades, and still, how natural it was for her to objectify him as 'this Ralf person'.

Now she admitted, 'I had forgotten about your funny old spiral pledge.' She touched the intaglio brooch he had given her this morning as a memento of their 'shacking up' together, the verb she preferred to use so that she might downplay the marriage aspect of the peculiar situation she had allowed to happen to her those years ago. The ornament was an elegant helix design, twin gold tendrils curled around an incised green silicon chip.

'We'll sit on the beach and I'll explain it,' he called.

A buzzcutter churred into the buffalo grass of a neighbouring garden. High up and tightly curled like a judge's wig, a patch of cirrus drifted inland across an otherwise blue sky. The dense Norfolk pines of Brou Rise absorbed the sea breeze with scarcely a stir in their green, pagoda-like branches. Now Sealocks caught up and gave her a sidelong glance over his spectacles.

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In the instant he gave her this glance, we (who will watch the lives of centuries curl like tendrils around the disclosures of an evening) may glimpse the resemblance between Ralf Sebright and Maisie (Wilbraham) Sebright, his English grandmother, now twenty years inside her chapelyard grave. As it happened, the old lady departed her life in the same week Ralf began to pay attention to the presence of Susan Ravenglass, one life yielding to further lives, so at least might superstitious folk calculate the coincidence.

Yielding? Or finding a new means of continuity? Certainly the old lady's physical likeness had resumed psychological life in Sealocks' features as he had grown older. What may the dimple on a cheek not suggest by way of a temperament that is guileless, expectant? What may the jut of a chin imply of a resolution, fierce if not always shrewd?

Here were characteristics, not fixed, but dynamic, travelling the generations, not repetitive, but allusive, like a pattern of cirrus cloud or a variant on a folk tune. Certainly we will see how the fleeting impishness which used to lighten the old lady's piety, came gradually, but surely to Sealocks' own solemn features in the months after he learned to live at ease with Shoeshine Ravenglass, his shining girl, for even the most inadvertent inheritances are hived with story.

And most significant of all was the wit by which these fine tendrils of inheritance, year by year, outplayed glum extinction. It was this play that could elate and intrigue Ralf Sebright, and had very much to do with the helical brooch he had given her and was about to explain.

'I'm not a forgetter, Ravenglass,' he said now.

'I do know *that!*'

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In their 'shacking up' they had been companionly, sometimes irreverent to each other. Yet they retained in their banter a commodious distance, like two equable schoolfellows. Indeed his name for her at one time was Shawn, which she had accepted, noting how he was forever trying such sobriquets on her, as others had done before him. Susannah, Shoshone, Shoeshine, *Shushan, white lily of Persia*. 'Ancient peoples named and re-named their deities,' he had once elaborated for the guests at one of their rare dinner parties. 'Name-garlands, name-weft, the more you name a thing, the more abundantly you establish its spirit.' 'Spirit pooh!' she had replied on this occasion. And it was their frisson, whether public or private, Sealocks' penchant for stately spiels, versus her reflex to puncture high falutin'.

'To remember is to be in an enchantment,' he said now.

'Ha.'

As they surmounted the dunes the sea rose toward them, flaring-blue. He thrilled to the perpetual sea-drama, the crash and slip of water. The sea wind was fresher here and rummaged in their hair. Ralf's 'sealocks' were now silver, coiling in unruly profile like metal tailings from a lathe, sparser at the crown than formerly.

Susan's ringlets swarmed as densely as they had done (if the photo albums can be trusted) since the day of her birth. At fifty these curls had turned a gingery brown on top, but remained dark as coffee beans around the nape of her neck. She wore sunglasses, a jacaranda-blue tee shirt and dark vest on which was pinned the helical brooch. Her figure was shapely, strong, moved with purposeful grace, and her wrap-around, patterned with an Egyptian motif, flapped and lifted about her bare legs.

Ralf and Susan did not yet regard themselves as elderly. But the body, hived with twinge and change, had allowed them, in each case, to imagine what the sensation of old age might be like. Incredible to have arrived at this threshold.

A fellow with surfboard and dripping wetsuit paused briefly as he passed them and indicated the ocean. 'Whales out there this morn'n. Humpbacks comin' through.'

'We'll watch for them.'

They chose a spot on the beach where, with a sovereign lift of her eyebrows she declined his offer of a helping hand to sit down, doing so with an undignified plonk. He watched her with a pang of affection. Once, even when she was pregnant with their two boys, he might have observed her fold herself with a gracile economy of movement, legs tucked beneath her skirt, dark curls framing her humorous, lovely eyes. As the decades have passed, it was no less heartrending to adore a person.

Ralf set down his backpack, steadied himself with one arm then plonked beside her with a small 'Uh!' because the nerve in his hip joint had pinched him sharply as he knew it would.

'What's the matter?' she asked brusquely, needing a brusque tone as part of the means by which she could express affection.

'My corporeal archive just pinched me.'

'Stop complaining.'

Was the damage done while hoicking those atrociously heavy fire doors during the labouring stint of '71? Or was it the 'rheumatically' gene from Grandma Maisie, dormant for the generation of his father, now woken to hell-raise in his own latter life? At the microscopic level of atom or gene, one could picture Tolkien-like battles raging in that hip-joint. Especially after whisky. Does that gene already sleep in his sons? Will it wake in his grandchildren, if such unimaginable beings could be made the subjects of thought? Dimples, chins, hip joints, every tiny created thing packed with antecedents.

'Our gravestone shall read, "Sealocks and Shoeshine, who groaned together.'"

'Sounds smutty, ' she replied nonchalantly.

'Of course.' And he nuzzled the curls on the nape of her neck.

'Concentrate your mind on looking for those whales,' she instructed. For the few people on the beach made her self-conscious about nuzzling. Besides, this womanly body that he appeared to adore was one she herself did not hold in very high esteem at all.

They scanned the middle distance for the creatures, which were not in evidence, then settled to watch the rhythm of the breakers. Broil and inrush, susurrus and ebb, it was delicious to see each comber looming in, how it impended, gathered its brief strength, the sunlight running like lacquer along its ridge.

As though to downplay his elation at the movement of water, he commented, 'It is an image for ego-disintegration, you know, the breaking of a wave.'

Susan continued to watch the scene impassively, so he pursued. 'Do you know psychologists describe one's fifties as the period of ego-disintegration?'

'Not yours, Sealocks. Bouncy little thing.'

When, eighteen years before, they had finally married, she was for making a fix-it hybrid of their names. 'Seaglass, what's wrong with that?' she had put to him.

'Surnames are organisms,' was his protest of the time. 'Telltales of stray bright thread. You can't cut-and-paste something as complex as a surname.'

'Seaglass is practical, musical, what more do you want?'

'Continuity,' he had rejoined, because continuity was the most resilient poetic instinct in his person.

But she had wanted the last word on the subject. 'Seaglass,' she encouraged the two syllables, which seemed to bob freely like a bright buoy. 'I like it.'

'Anyway,' he said now.

'Yes,' she prompted, 'your funny old spiral pledge.'

His explanation of the brooch's meaning was deliberate, probably rehearsed. 'My mandate,' he remembered from that night of avowals, 'was to see how finely we deserved each other.'

'Ha!' she interposed, conscious that once or twice a year they blazed at each other, over politics as a rule. She remembered the anger of these occasions more vividly than he did. His father, Edmund Gower Sebright, used to blaze – over politics as a rule.

But Ralf was recalling the origin of the pledge for her. 'On a night twenty years ago, we strolled around these very streets and beaches for hours. Our topic was enchantment and in my opinion we were in one.'

'No such thing,' she teased him.

They paused to watch the very moment of a breaker's fold. It was a cavern of translucent aquamarine. Perfect! And of course she knew how these momentary sea-caverns exhilarated him. Indeed, she was gladdened by his pleasure. His Byronics were part of the original package.

'You directed the romantic lead should go to the world's end, locate the Just-so spiral, and return with it in order to win your favour. He pledged. He went. Now you're wearing it.'

'Golly,' she said, deadpan, then queried, 'Weren't we being flippant?' and must further ask, 'Remind me what I then considered to be my favour?'

'Momentous,' he replied. 'It was to choose a life with Sealocks...' his answer would brook no flippancy, '... and therefore forfeit the life of elsewhere.'

'I was keen for the life of elsewhere.'

'Isn't everyone?'

'I remember,' she conceded. 'I truly thought I was incapable of attachment.'

'A dead end?'

He had expected her to reject this insinuation outright, but her rejoinder was more moderate. 'I believed it was good for a person to be committed to the life of elsewhere.'

'Well, I thought I was outside anyone's consideration,' he rejoined. 'A dead end.'

'Doesn't everyone believe that of themselves at some stage?'

'I don't think so. You can watch some loves arrive inevitable as the spring, and you can see some that are miraculous.'

'Over the top, Sealocks,' she pounced on his rhetoric, then conceded her curiosity. 'So you claim we tripped over an enchantment?'

'Exactly.'

'An enchantment being what?'

He paused before delivering his definition. '...Being when all the good particles in a person and all those in the world come into alignment. Just-so.'

'Good particles?' This sounded to her more like spirit than science.

'Good particles, Ravenglass,' he affirmed, for he would stick by the convenient phrase. 'My notion is that enchantment is when your life runs into a patch of supercharged time-stuff. It allows you to know more intensely what it is to be *in* time.' She was quiet, so he added, 'Anyway, I've traced how the good particles aligned themselves in our instance.'

'I don't understand.'

He touched the brooch. 'I've looked into our respective family trees, told the story of our forbears, but have done so in the light of how we ourselves turned out. Like ... how an attitude will have its shadow-attitudes, predispositions you can trace right back wherever the records survive, like ... how a characteristic, genetic or acculturated, persists, modifies, drops out for a generation. Etcetera. I wanted our scale, but without loss of detail.'

This part was earnest. It was the substance of quest he had brought to closure, the Just-so Spiral. He added casually, 'Anyway, it's all written onto that silicon chip.'

'This!' she looked at the brooch with wonderment.

'I've kept a more accessible copy.'

'*Very* dark, Sealocks!' She unpinned the ornament and scrutinised the greenish material caged behind the gold tendrils.

'You don't think the gold chasing is too flashy?' he asked her.

'It is discreet and beautiful!' She gave him one of her hugs, spontaneous, clumsy, like something from a rugby game.

Thus had he pleased her, causing him to feel a marvellous lightness in his being. 'What have I done to deserve it?' she enquired. So he told her that twenty years ago, out of the blue, a change came into his life where he found it easier to behave for the best, and that the world appeared to reciprocate. The dead end, with its bedrock of despair had transformed into an enchantment. 'A woman called Ravenglass was involved,' he concluded his oratory.

'Don't know the person,' she deflected. His expressions of gratitude for her part in his life always left her feeling a little helpless.

'Enchantment is time's wild card,' he continued. 'Old as the Big Bang. Some scientists reckon carbon-based life itself is a bit of enchantment.'

'Carbon-based life doesn't always behave for the best,' she observed, her mother's experience in mind.

Yet for all her scepticism, Susan liked Sealocks' patter about the alignment of the good particles and enchantment being history's wild, benevolent card. His patter was always her attraction to him. She held the brooch in her hands and contemplated it. For her, the love-business was the pure imminence of the other; she liked having him within her vicinity.

Yet it seemed his idea of love must include the nuzzling-thing, which was tolerably pleasant if not quite comprehensible. Below them a further wave gathered, the lacquery light racing along it like a flame on touchpaper. They sat quietly watching for some minutes. The judge's wig of cirrus was now over the mountains.

'I wanted to see how character travels across the centuries,' he now added to his earlier explanation. 'I printed off a version the night before last. Hard copy you can read if you want. Alternatively, you can wear it on your person, unless ...' he gave her a sly look, '... you prefer to inhale it.'

'I'll inhale it,' she responded to the family in-joke immediately.

'Truly in the Ravenglass manner.'

'You would have got on with my grandfather,' she allowed his allusion.

Ralf patted the backpack. 'The boys are coming down later this morning. I'll do the disposal of remains before they arrive.' He reflected upon the long crumbling of the surf for some moments. 'Ego-disintegration,' he commented.

'Bouncy,' she replied, put her arm around him impulsively and gave him another affectionate shake, brusquely, like someone shaking coal from a sack.

## *Intaglio 1*

So what was it, that occasion twenty years earlier when Sealocks and Shoeshine could be said to have first clicked?

In the middle of August 1982 there was a black, pelting night. Four unattached adults had arranged themselves variously in the living room of a Brou Rise beach house on the far south coast of New South Wales. At a table sat Ralf Sebright and Hotz de Baar, embroiled in a protracted political argument. Hotz leaned forward, his arms folded, his thickset body suggesting the blunt purpose of a moderately small bulldozer.

Ralf leaned away, his legs straight before him, his face set in the stony attitude of one believing he had heard every argument on earth.

On a tatty sofa nearby, Susan Ravenglass turned the pages of her novel with the negligent gesture of someone placing aside a filament of cobweb without wishing to break it. On a second sofa, Diane Peploe, engaged in a game of patience with two packs of cards that were decorated on their reverse side by cavaliers and roundheads from the English Civil War, had just paused to stare vacantly through the sliding doors as rain gusted against the glass ...

"Don't you think," offered Ralf, seeking to prick Diane's distraction and also gain a momentary respite from the polemics at the table, "that rain on the glass sounds like a person having bouts of inspiration at a typewriter?" Years ago Ralf had gone out with Diane for an interval. His image for the rainsqualls caused a tolerant smile.

The four had eaten dinner. Some bottles of red wine had been drunk; the washing up had been done. The four had settled into their evening of play, of argument. Every quarter hour a ridiculous cuckoo popped from its roost in a cheap wall-clock and chirped.

But under their wrangle, under the cuckoo-chirp and click of playing cards, ceaselessly from afar, indifferent to effect, came the worldwide cannoning of the ocean. Its concussions rose along the grass laneways of Brou Rise, reverberated though the opulent villas that loomed cheek-by-jowl with the tumbledown shacks. It was such a deep undermusic, as though time itself were palpable, could rub and knead the earth and its creatures.

The wrangle of Hotz and Ralf churned. Susan read on, Diane took up her cards again, laying down here a Royalist Cavalier, here a Cromwellian Roundhead

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