



# Samphire

by Patrick O'Brian

<Samphire is the story of an attempted murder by a newly-wed wife. It reveals that being human, one has limits to one's capacity for enduring pain and suffering. This story, strong on *characterization*, provides an insight into the *thoughts* and *feelings* of the main characters.>

Sheer, sheer, the white cliff rising, straight up from the sea, so far that the riding waves were nothing but ripples on a huge calm. Up there, unless you leaned over, you did not see them break, but for all the distance the thunder of the water came loud. The wind, too, tearing in from the sea, rushing from a clear, high sky, brought the salt tang of the spray on their lips.

They were two, standing up there on the very edge of the cliff: they had left the leveled path and come down to the break itself and the man was crouched, leaning over as far as he dared.

'It *is* a clump of samphire, Molly,' he said; then louder, half turning, 'Molly, it *is* samphire, I *said* it was samphire didn't I?' He had a high, rather unmasculine voice, and he emphasized his words.

His wife did not reply, although she had heard him the first time. The round of her chin was trembling like a child's before it cries: there was something in her throat so strong that she could not have spoken it if it had been for her life.

She stepped a little closer, feeling cautiously for a firm foothold, and she was right on him and she caught the smell of his hairy tweed jacket. He straightened so suddenly that he brushed against her. 'Hey, look out,' he said, 'I almost trod on your foot. Yes, it was samphire. I said so as soon as I saw it from down there. Have a look.'

She could not answer, so she knelt and crawled to the edge. Heights terrified her, always had. She could not close her eyes; that only made it worse. She stared unseeing, while the brilliant air and the sea and the noise of the sea assaulted her terrified mind and she clung insanely to the thin grass. Three times he pointed it out, and the third time she heard him so as to be able to understand his words. '... fleshy leaves. You see the fleshy leaves? They used them for pickles. Samphire pickles!' He laughed, excited by the wind, and put his hand on her shoulder. Even then, she writhed away, covering it by getting up and returning to the path.

He followed her. 'You noted the *fleshy leaves*, didn't you, Molly? They allow the plant to store its nourishment. Like a cactus. Our *native* cactus, I *said* it was samphire at once, didn't I, although I have never actually seen it before. We could almost get it with a stick.'

He was pleased with her for having looked over, and said that she was coming along very well: she remembered - didn't she? - how he had had to persuade her and persuade her to come up even the smallest cliff at first, how he had even to be a little firm. And now there she was going up the highest of them all, as bold as brass; and

*suspense* created by graphic description of the peril of being on top of a high cliff

cliff is *symbolic* of surmounting difficulty in life (note *violence* in the weather which also *represents* the state of tension in the relationship of the couple)

conveys man's *opinionated* way of speaking, his *insecurity* – needs to feel *right*

wife *crushed* by his domination her deep *fear*: chin trembling

wife's *fear* of heights

husband's *self-centeredness*: repetitious use of *first* person pronoun  
observe use of *dramatic monologue*  
wife feels *crushed* – silence speaks volumes  
*acrophobia*  
*panic; terrified*

clung *insanely*  
man is seen to be *insensitive*

repressed *resentment*: husband's touch is *repulsive*

man's *domineering* personality vs. wife's *submission*

husband *gloats* over his success in compelling her to climb to upper limits, in spite of herself

he is a *bully* – forces wife up the cliff even though she is afraid of heights

it was quite a dangerous cliff too, he said, with a keen glance out to sea, jutting his chin; but there she was as bold as brass looking over the top of it. He had been quite right insisting, hadn't he? It was worth it when you were there, wasn't it? Between these questions he waited for a reply, a 'yes' or hum of agreement. If he had not insisted she would always have stayed down there on the beach, wouldn't she? Like a lazy puss. He said, wagging his finger to show that he was not quite in earnest, that she should always listen to her Lacey (this was a pet name that he had coined for himself). Lacey was her lord and master, wasn't he? Love, honor, and obey?

He put his arm round her when they came to a sheltered turn of the path and began to fondle her, whispering in his secret night-voice, Tss-tss-tss, but he dropped her at once when some coast-guards appeared.

As they passed he said, 'Good day, men,' and wanted to stop to ask them what they were doing but they walked quickly on.

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In the morning she said she would like to see the samphire again. He was very pleased and told the hotel-keeper that she was becoming quite the little botanist. He had already told him and the nice couple from Letchworth (they were called Jones and had a greedy daughter: he was an influential solicitor, and Molly would be a clever girl to be nice to them), he had already told them about the samphire, and he had said how he had recognized it at once from lower down, where the path turned, although he had only seen specimens in a *hortus siccus* and illustrations in books.

On the way he stopped at the tobacconist on the promenade to buy a stick. He was in high spirits. He told the man at once that he did not smoke, and made a joke about the shop being a house of *ill-fume*; but the tobacconist did not understand. He looked at the sticks that were in the shop but he did not find one for his money and they went out. At the next tobacconist, by the pier, he made the same joke to the man there. She stood near the door, not looking at anything. In the end he paid the marked price for an ash walking stick with a crook, though at first he had proposed a shilling less: he told the man that they were not ordinary summer people, because they were going to have a villa there.

Walking along past the pier towards the cliff path, he put the stick on his shoulder with a comical gesture, and when they came to the car park where a great many people were coming down to the beach with picnics and pneumatic rubber toys he sang, 'We are the boys that nothing can tire; we are the boys that gather samphire.' When a man who was staying in the same hotel passed near them, he called out that they were going to see if they could get a bunch of jolly good samphire that they had seen on the cliff yesterday. The man nodded.

It was a long way to the highest cliff, and he fell silent for a little while. When they began to climb he said that he would never go out without a stick again; it was a fine, honest thing, an ashplant, and a great help. Didn't she think it was a great help? Had she noticed how he had chosen the best one in the shop, and really it was very cheap, though perhaps they had better go without tea tomorrow to make it up. She remembered, didn't she, what they had agreed after

man invites himself to be compared to Mussolini, the Italian *dictator*

expects strict *compliance* (being the dictator)  
gloating over his *hollow* success

note *effeminate* name  
the *dictator* that he has been: her *lord* and *master* ... *obey*

voice of *childishness*

man is an *extrovert*

*pleased* at having *dominated* her

talking down to Molly – *domination* is complete

deep sense of *insecurity* – needs to be seen as being self-assured  
herbarium (collection of dried plants)

stick is *symbolic*: like a scepter to a king – it represents *authority*; needs it to shore up his deep sense of *insecurity* / *inadequacy*

*extrovert*, a jolly talker and attention-seeker

feeling *inadequate*, hence the need to show-off

note Lacey's *cheerfulness* and *ebullience*; an attention-seeker

stick not quite necessary for cliff-climbing; more as a prop to his sense of *insecurity* – to assure him of his *domination* over his wife

*insensitive* of him to impose himself on wife – makes decision for her

their discussion about an exact allowance for every day? He was walking a few feet ahead of her, so that each time he had to turn his head for her answer.

It was blowing harder than the day before on the top, and for the last hundred yards he kept silent, or at least she did not hear him say anything.

At the turn of the path he cried, 'It is still there. Oh jolly good. It is still there, Molly,' and he pointed out how he had first seen the samphire, and repeated, shouting over the wind, that he had been sure of it at once.

For a moment she looked at him curiously while he stared over and up where the plant grew on the face of the cliff, the wind ruffling the thin, fluffy hair that covered his baldness, and a keen expression on his face; and for a moment she wondered whether it was perhaps possible that he saw beauty there. But the moment was past and the voice took up again its unceasing dumb cry: Go on, oh, go on, for Christ's sake, go on, go on, go on, oh go on.

They were there. He had made her look over. 'Note the fleshy leaves,' he had said; and he had said something about samphire pickle! and how the people at the hotel would stare when they brought it back. That was just before he began to crouch over, turned from her so that his voice was lost.

He was leaning right over. It was quite true when he said that he had no fear of heights: once he had astonished the workmen on the steeple of her uncle's church by walking among the scaffolding and planks with all the aplomb of a steeplejack. He was reaching down with his left arm, his right leg doubled under him and his right arm extended on the grass: his other leg was stretched out along the break of the cliff.

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Once again there was the strong grip in her throat; her stomach was rigid and she could not keep her lip from trembling. She could hardly see, but as he began to get up her eyes focused. She was already there, close on him - she had never gone back to the path this time. God give me strength, but as she pushed him she felt her arms weak like jelly.

Instantly his face turned; absurd, baby-face surprise and a shout unworded. The extreme of horror on it, too. He had been half up when she thrust at him, with his knee off the ground, the stick hand over and the other clear of the grass. He rose, swaying out. For a second the wind bore his body and the stick scrabbled furiously for a purchase on the cliff. There where the samphire grew, a little above; it found a hard ledge, gripped. Motionless in equilibrium for one timeless space - a cinema stopped in action - then his right hand gripped the soil, tore, ripped the grass and he was up, from the edge, crouched, gasping huge sobbing draughts of air on the path.

He was screaming at her in an agonized falsetto interrupted by painful gasps, searching for air and life. 'You pushed me, Molly you - pushed me. You - pushed me.'

She stood silent, looking down and the voice rushed over her. You pushed - you pushed me - Molly. She found she could swallow again, and the hammering in her throat was less. By now his voice had dropped an octave: he had been speaking without a pause but

man needs to be seen in *heroic* light: he is *all-knowing*

poking fun at Lacey: not so perfect after all - he is balding

*incompatibility* of couple - worlds apart in terms of perception being *pushy* and *insensitive* (*domineering*)

Lacey needs to be the *hero*: showing off - no fear of heights (as a cover for his deep-seated sense of *insecurity*)

strong feelings involved: out of *desperation*, kill Lacey!

each person has a capacity to endure pain but when taxed beyond endurance, may react violently

*infantilism*, not heroic after all

stick saves his life

very high male voice - like a *child* (?)

for his gasping - the gasping had stopped now, and he was sitting there normally ' . . . not well; a spasm. Wasn't it, Molly?' he was saying; and she heard him say 'accident' sometimes.

Still she stood, stone-still and grey and later he was saying '... *possibly* live together? How can we *possibly* look at one another? After this?' And some time after it seemed to her that he had been saying something about their having taken their room for the month ... accident was the word, and spasm, and not well - fainting? It was, wasn't it, Molly? There was an unheard note in his voice.

She turned and began to walk down the path. He followed at once. By her side he was, and his face was turned to hers, peering into her face, closed face. His visage, his whole face, everything, had fallen to pieces: she looked at it momentarily - a very old terribly frightened comforting-itself small child. He had fallen off a cliff all right.

He touched her arm, still speaking, pleading, 'It was that, wasn't it, Molly? You didn't push me, Molly. It was an accident. . . '

She turned her dying face to the ground, and there were her feet marching on the path; one, the other; one, the other; down, down, down.

collapse to wheedling tone proves that he is not really the tough nut he makes himself out to be – he is *deluding* himself

*infantilism* – not such a hero after all

Molly is *guilt*-ridden

moral of the story: marriage should not be based on complete domination by one partner over the other – need to have regard for each other's feelings