

TRUE TILDA

CHAPTER I

AT THE SIGN OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

“Tha it may please Thee to preserve all that travel by land or by water . . . all sick persons, and young children.”—*The Litany*.

“ I LOVE my love with a H’aitch, because he’s ’and-some——”

Tilda turned over on her right side—she could do so now, without pain—and lifting herself a little, eyed the occupant of the next bed. The other six beds in the ward were empty.

“ I ’ate ’im, because—look ’ere, I don’t believe you’re listenin’ ? ”

The figure in the next bed stirred feebly; the figure of a woman, straight and gaunt under the hospital bed-clothes. A tress of her hair had come uncoiled and looped itself across the pillow—reddish auburn hair, streaked with grey. She had been brought in, three nights ago, drenched, bedraggled, chattering in a high fever; a case of acute pneumonia. Her delirium had kept Tilda—who was preternaturally sharp for her nine years—awake and curious during the better part of two night watches. Thereafter, for a day and a night and half a day, the patient had lain somnolent, breathing hard, at intervals feebly conscious. In one of these intervals

her eyes had wandered and found the child ; and since then had painfully sought her a dozen times, and found her again and rested on her.

Tilda, meeting that look, had done her best. The code of the show-folk, to whom she belonged, ruled that persons in trouble were to be helped. Moreover, the long whitewashed ward, with its seven oblong windows, set high in the wall—the smell of it, the solitude, the silence bored her inexpressibly. She had lain here three weeks with a hurt thigh-bone bruised, but luckily not splintered, by the kick of a performing pony.

The ward reeked of yellow soap and iodoförm. She would have exchanged these odours at the price of her soul—but souls are not vendible, and besides she did not know she possessed one—for the familiar redolences of naphtha and horse-dung and trodden turf. These were far away : they had quite forsaken her, or at best floated idly across her dreams. What held her to fortitude had been the drone and intermittent hoot of a steam-organ many streets away. It belonged to a roundabout, and regularly tuned up towards evening ; so distant that Tilda could not distinguish one tune from another ; only the thud of its bass mingled with the buzz of a fly, on the window and with the hard breathing of the sick woman.

Sick persons must be amused : and Tilda, after trying the patient unsuccessfully with a few jokes from the *répertoire* of her own favourite clown, had fallen back upon “ I love my love ”—about the only game known to her that dispensed with physical exertion.

“ Sleepin’, are you ? . . . Well, I’ll chance it and go on. I ’ate ’im because he’s ’aughty—or ’igh-born, if you like——”

The figure beneath the bedclothes did not stir. Tilda lifted herself an inch higher on the elbow ; lifted her voice too as she went on :

“ And I’ll take ’im to—’OLMNESS——”

She had been watching, expecting some effect. But it scared her when, after a moment, the woman raised herself slowly, steadily, until half-erect from the waisé. A

ray of the afternoon sun fell slantwise from one of the high windows, and, crossed by it, her eyes blazed like lamps in their sockets.

"——and feed 'im on 'am!" concluded Tilda hurriedly, slipping down within her bedclothes and drawing them tight about her. For the apparition was stretching out a hand. The hand drew nearer. "It's—it's a name came into my 'ead," quavered the child.

"Who . . . told . . . you?" the fingers of the hand had hooked themselves like a bird's claw.

"Told me yerself. I 'eard you, night before last, when you was talkin' wild. . . . If you try to do me any 'arm, I'll call the Sister."

"Holmness?"

"You said it. Strike me dead if you didn'!" Tilda fetched a grip on herself; but the hand, its fingers closing on air, drew back and dropped, as though cut off from the galvanising current. She had even presence of mind to note that the other hand—the hand on which the body propped itself, still half-erect, wore a plain ring of gold. "You talked a lot about 'Olmness—and Arthur. 'Oo's Arthur?"

But the patient had fallen back, and lay breathing hard. When she spoke again all the vibration had gone out of her voice.

"Tell them . . . Arthur . . . fetch Arthur . . ."

The words tailed off into a whisper. Still the lips moved as though speech fluttered upon them; but no speech came.

"You just tell me where he is, and maybe we'll fetch 'im," said Tilda encouragingly.

The eyes, which had been fixed on the child's, and with just that look you may note in a dog's eyes when he waits for his master's word, wandered to the table by the bedside, and grew troubled, distressful.

"Which of 'em?" asked Tilda, touching the medicine bottles and glasses there one by one.

But the patient seemed to shake her head, though with a motion scarcely perceptible.

She could talk no more.

Tilda lay back thinking.

"Sister!" she said, twenty minutes later, when the Second Nurse entered the ward. The Second Nurse had charge just now, the matron being away on her August holiday.

"Well, dear?"

"She wants something." Tilda nodded towards the next bed.

"To be sure she does, and I'm going to give it to her." The Second Nurse, composed in all her movements, bent over the medicine table.

"Garn!" retorted Tilda. "It's easy seen you wasn't brought up along with animals. Look at the eyes of her."

"Well?" The Second Nurse, after a long look at the patient, turned to Tilda again.

"You mind my tellin' you about Black Sultan?"

"Of course I do. He was the one with the bearing rein and the white martingale. Miss Montagu rode him."

"Right-O!" Tilda nodded. "Well, they used to come on next turn to mine, which was the Zambra Family, as before the Crowned 'eads—only there wasn't no family about it, nor yet no 'eads. Me bein' 'andy an' dressed up, with frizzy 'air, they stood me on a tub with a 'oop, makin' believe 'twas for Miss Montagu to jump through; but of course she didn't, reely. When she came round to me she'd only smile and touch me playful under the chin; and that made the sixpenny seats say, 'Ow womanly!' or, 'Only think! able to ride like that and so fond of children!' Matter of fact, she 'ad none; and her 'usband, Mike O'Halloran, used to beat her for it sometimes, when he'd had a drop of What-killed-Aunty. He was an Irishman."

"You didn't start to tell me about Mr. O'Halloran."

"No. He wasn't your sort at all; and besides, he's dead. But about Black Sultan—Miss Montagu used to rest 'im, 'alf-way in his turn, while the clown they called Bimbo—but his real name was Ernest Stanley—as't a

riddle about a policeman and a red 'errin' in a newspaper. She always rested alongside o' me; and I always stood in the same place, right over a ring-bolt where they made fast one of the stays for the trapeze; and regular as Black Sultan rested, he'd up with his off hind foot and rub the pastern-bone, very soft, on the ring-bolt. So one day I unscrewed an' sneaked it, jus' to see what he'd do. When he felt for it an' missed it, he gave me a look. That's all. An' that's what's the matter with 'er."

"But what can she be missing?" asked the Second Nurse. "She had nothing about her but an old purse, and nothing in the purse but a penny-ha'penny."

"It don't sound much, but we might try it."

"Nonsense!" said the Second Nurse; but later in the evening she brought the purse, and set it on the table where the patient's eyes might rest on it. For aught she could detect, they expressed no thanks, gave no flicker of recognition. But the child had been watching them too, and was quicker—by one-fifth of a second, perhaps.

It was half-past eight, and the sister turned low the single gas-jet. She would retire now to her own room, change her dress for the night-watching, and return in about twenty minutes. The door had no sooner closed upon her than Tilda stretched out a hand. The sick woman watched, panting feebly, making no sign. The purse—a cheap thing, stamped with forget-me-nots, and much worn at the edges where the papier-mâché showed through its sham leather—contained a penny and a halfpenny; these, and in an inner stamp-pocket a scrap of paper, folded small, and greasy with handling.

Still peering across in the dim light, Tilda undid the broken folds and scrambled up to her knees on the bed. It cost her a twinge of pain, but only by standing upright on the bed's edge could she reach the gas-bracket to turn the flame higher. This meant pain sharper and more prolonged, yet she managed it, and, with that, clenched her teeth hard to keep down a cry. The child could swear, on occasion, like a trooper; but this was a fancy accom-

plishment. Just now, when an oath would have come naturally to a man, she felt only a choking in the throat, and swallowed it down with a sob.

On the paper were four lines, written in pencil in a cramped hand; and, alas! though Tilda could read print, she had next to no acquaintance with handwriting.

The words were a blur to her. She stared at them; but what she saw was the gaze of the sick woman, upturned to her from the bed. The scrap of paper hid it, and yet she saw. She must act quickly.

She gave a reassuring nod, turned the gas-jet low, and slid down into bed with the paper clenched in her hand. But as her head touched the pillow she heard a rustling noise, and craned up her neck again. The patient had rolled over on her left side, facing her, fighting for breath.

"Yes, yes," Tilda lied hardily. "To-morrow—Arthur—they shall send for him to-morrow."

"Four," said the sick woman. The word was quite distinct. Another word followed which Tilda could not catch.

"Four o'clock, or may be earlier," she promised.

"L—l—lozenges," the tongue babbled.

Tilda glanced towards the medicine table.

"Diamonds," said the voice with momentary firmness; "four diamonds . . . on his coat . . . his father's . . . his . . ."

"Four diamonds, yes?" the child repeated.

"Ned did them . . . he told me . . . told me . . ."

But here the voice wavered and trailed off into babble, meaningless as a year-old infant's. Tilda listened hard for a minute, two minutes, then dropped her head back on her pillow as the door-handle rattled. It was the Second Nurse returning for night duty.

Early next morning the doctor came—a thin young man with a stoop, and a crop of sandy hair that stood upright from his forehead. Tilda detested him.

He and the Second Nurse talked apart for quite a long

while, and paid no attention to the child, who lay shamming a doze, but with her ears open.

She heard the doctor say—

“She? Oh, move her to the far end of the ward.”

The Second Nurse muttered something, and he went on—

“She is well, practically. All she wants now is someone to keep an eye on her, make her lie up for a couple of hours every day, and box her ears if she won’t.”

“That’s me,” thought Tilda. “I’m to be moved out of the way because t’other’s going to die; and if she’s going to die, there’s no time to be lost.”

She stirred, lifted her head, and piped—

“Doctor!”

“Hullo, imp! I thought you were sleeping.”

“So I was. I sleep ’eaps better now.” She drew her hurt leg up and down in the bed. “Doctor, I’d be all right, certain sure, if you let me out for arf-an-hour. Sister let me sit out for ever so long yestiday, an’ while she was dustin’ out the men’s ward I practised walkin’—all the lenth of the room an’ back.”

“When I told you never, on any account!” the Sister scolded.

“If I’d only the loan of a crutch!” pleaded Tilda; “an’ it couldn’ do me no ’arm in this weather.”

“Pining for liberty, hey?” said the doctor. (She saw what was passing through his mind, and despised him for it.) “Well, suppose, now, we let you out for just half an hour?”

Tilda clapped her palms together, and her eyes shone. To herself she said: “Kiddin’ of me, that’s what they are. Want to get me out of the way while they shift the beddin’. Lemme get back my clothes, that’s all, an’ I’ll teach him about pinin’ for liberty.”

“But,” said the doctor severely, lifting a finger, “you’re to keep to the pavement, mind—just outside, where it’s nice and shady. Only so far as the next turning and back: no crossing anywhere or getting in the way of traffic, and only for half an hour. The

chimes from St. Barnabas will tell you, if you can't read the clock."

She had learnt to read the time before she was five years old, and had a mind to tell him, but checked herself and merely nodded her head.

"Half an hour, and the pavement only. Is that understood?"

"Honest!"

It annoyed her—when, an hour later, she began to dress for the adventure—to find herself weaker than she had at all supposed. Although she forbore to mention it to the Second Nurse, there was an irresponsible funny feeling in her legs. They seemed to belong to her but by fits and starts. But the clothes were hers: the merino skirt a deal too short for her—she had grown almost an inch in her bed-lying—the chip hat, more badly crushed than ever, a scandal of a hat, but still hers. The dear, dear clothes! She held them in both hands and nuzzled into them, inhaling her lost self in the new-old scent of liberty.

When at length her hat was donned, the notion took her to stand by the sick woman's bed to show herself.

Consciousness had drained away deep into the sick woman's eyes. It wavered there darkly, submerged, half-suspended, as you may see the weed waver in a dim seapool. Did a bubble, a gleam, float up from the depths? At any rate, the child nodded bravely.

"Goin' to fetch 'im, don't you fret!"