

CHAPTER X

THE FOUR DIAMONDS

“Where the hazel bank is steepest,
Where the shadow falls the deepest,
Where the clustering nuts fall free,
That’s the way for Billy and me.”—JAMES HOGG.

THE spot was a hollow between two grassy meadows where a brook came winding with a gentle fall, under coverts of hazel, willow and alder, to feed the canal. It was a quite diminutive brook, and its inflow, by the wharf known as Ibbetson’s, troubled the stagnant canal water for a very short distance. But it availed, a mile above, to turn a mill, and—a marvel in this country of factories—it had escaped pollution. Below the mill-dam it hurried down a pretty steep declivity, dodging its channel from side to side, but always undercutting the bank on one side, while on the other it left miniature creeks or shoals and spits where the minnows played and the water-flies dried their wings on the warm pebbles; always, save that twice or thrice before finding its outlet it paused below one of these pebbly spits to widen and deepen itself into a pool where it was odds that the sun, slanting through the bushes, showed a brown trout lurking.

By such a pool—but they had scared away the trout—our two children were busy. Tilda, her ablutions over, had handed the cake of soap to Arthur Miles, scrambled out on the deeper side, and ensconced herself in the fork of an overhanging hazel-mote; where, having reached

for a cluster of nuts and cracked them, she sat and munched, with petticoat dripping and bare legs dangling over the pool.

"Be sure you don't fergit be'ind the ears," she admonished the boy. "You may think you're on'y a small boy an' nobody's goin' to search yer corners; but back at the Good Samaritan there was a tex' nailed up—*Thou Gawd seest me*; and Sister said 'E was most partic'lar just in the little places you wouldn't think."

By her orders the boy had stripped off shirt and stockings, and stood now almost knee-deep in the water, lathering his hair and face and neck and shoulders with vigour. Tilda observed that his skin was delicately fair and white. She had never seen a more beautiful boy. But he was slender, and would need mothering.

"You're comin' to it nicely," she called down to him. "It feels funny to start with, but in the end you'll a'most get to like it."

"I *do* like it."

She considered for a while.

"If that's so," she said, "you'd better strip all over an' 'ave done with it. I was bringin' you to it gradual."

"But——"

"Oh, *that's* all right. I knows my manners. Be quick as you can, so's not to catch cold, an' I'll take a stroll up the bank an' give a call if anyone's comin'."

She scrambled back to firm ground and set off for a saunter up stream, pausing here to reach for a nut, there to pluck a ripe blackberry, and again to examine a tangle of bryony, or the deep-red fruit of the honeysuckle; for almost all her waking life had been spent in towns among crowds, and these things were new and strange to her. She met no one on her way until, where the stream twisted between a double fold of green pasture slopes, she came to the mill—a tall rickety building, with a tiled roof that time had darkened and greened with lichens, and a tall wheel turning slowly in a splash of water, and bright water dancing over a weir below. In the doorway leaned a middle-aged man, powdered

all over with white, even to the eyelids. He caught sight of her, and she was afraid he would be angry, and warn her off for trespassing; but he nodded and called out something in a friendly manner—"Good day," perhaps. She could not hear the words for the hum of the weir and the roaring of the machinery within the building.

It was time to retrace her steps, and she went back leisurably, peering for trout and plucking on the way a trail of the bryony, berried with orange and scarlet and yellow and palest green, to exhibit to Arthur Miles.

She found him seated on the near bank, close beside her hazel-mote. He did not hear her barefooted approach, being absorbed in the movements of a wagtail that had come down to the pebbly spit for its bath; and Tilda started scolding forthwith. For he sat there naked to the waist, with his shirt spread to dry on the grass. He had given it a thorough soaping, and washed it and wrung it out: his stockings too.

"You'll catch yer death!" threatened Tilda.

But he was not shivering—so blandly fell the sun's rays, and so gently played the breeze.

"I can't make you out," she confessed. "First when I came on yer—an' that was on'y yestiddy—you was like a thing afraid o' yer own shadder. An' now you don't appear to mind nothin'—not even the chance o' bein' found an' took back."

The boy drew a long breath.

"You're shakin' with cold, though. There! What did I tell yer?" But a moment later she owned herself mistaken. He was not cold at all.

"It's all so—so good," he murmured, more to himself than to her.

"What's good?"

He reached out for the trail of bryony in her lap and fingered it wonderingly, without speaking for a while. Then, lifting his hand, he laid it for a moment against her upper arm—the lightest touch—no more.

"You" he said. "You—and everything."

“Of all the queer boys——” she began, and broke off with a catch of the breath. “Hulloa!”

The boy looked up to see her eyes fixed, round and wide, on his naked shoulder.

“What’s that mark you got there?” she demanded.

“This?” He put up a hand to it. “I don’t know. I’ve wondered sometimes——”

“But you must ‘ave come by it some’ow. Can’t you remember?”

He shook his head.

“It has been there always. And yet I couldn’t have been born with it.”

“‘Course yer couldn’,” she agreed. For this was the mark—



pencilled in thin lines of red a little below the right shoulder, ‘across the width of the deltoid muscle, and in figures about half an inch tall. “‘Course yer couldn’,” she repeated. “That’s tattooin’, if ever there was tattooin’; an’ what’s more,” she went on, nodding her head with great positiveness, “I know who done it, leastways I know part of ‘is name . . . Don’t stare, now; lemme *think* . . . Yes, it’s plain as plain. ‘Four di’monds,’ she said; an’ di’monds they are, same as on a pack o’ cards—me all the time thinkin’ of them as the ladies wear on their fingers. But ‘on his coat,’ she said; nothin’ about yer shoulder.”

“‘She’? Who was ‘she’?” asked the boy.

“Never you mind,” said Tilda hurriedly. “But him as done it was called Ned. Now try to think if you ever came across a party as was called Ned?”

“There was a boy called Ned at Holy Innocents; but he died in the time we all had sore throats—and, besides, he was the youngest of us. I don’t remember any other.”

“Any sailor-man, then? It’s mostly sailors that know about tattooin’.”

“Oh, yes,” he answered promptly, to her surprise.

"There were lots of sailors—five or six, I think. They had long glasses, and used to watch the sea. And one played music on a thing that went so."

He brought his hands together, drew them wide, and brought them together again—the palms open.

"That would be a concertina," nodded Tilda, "or elst an accordion. Now try to think, becos' all this is very important . . . Where was this place? and what like was it?"

He considered for a while, frowning to help his memory.

"There was a line of white houses, and one had red flowers in the window . . . and a pole, with flags on it . . . and ships passing . . . and from the houses a path went down to the sea. I remember quite well what it was like down there . . . with waves coming in, but not reaching to us, and sand where I played, and rocks, and pools full of shells and brown flowers. There were shells, too, on the rocks, with live things inside—though they never moved. I don't think I knew their name; but I know it now. They were called 'scammels.'"

"I've ate limpets," said Tilda; "limpets an' whelks. But I never 'eard o' scammels. An' you don't remember the name o' this place?"

"It must have been the Island," said the boy slowly.

"Wot Island? Island's a sort o' place, but no place in partic'lar."

"I don't know . . . It must have been the Island, though."

"Now listen. Did you ever 'appen to 'ear tell of 'Olmness?"

She asked it eagerly, watching his face. But it gave no answer to her hopes. His eyes were dreamy. The word, if it struck at all on his hearing, struck dully.

"I don't see that the name matters," he said after a long pause, "so long as it's the Island. We're going there, and we shall find out all about it when we get to Stratford."

"Shall we?" asked Tilda, considerably astonished.
"But *why*, in the world?"

"Because . . . Didn't you hear Mr. Mortimer say that Shakespeare was born there?"

"I did," said Tilda. "'Ow's that goin' to 'elp us?"

"I don't know," the boy confessed, dragging a book from his pocket. It was a ragged copy of the "Globe" Shakespeare, lacking its covers and smeared with dirt and blacking. "But he knows all about the Island."

"So *that*," said Tilda, "is what 'urt me in the night! It made my ribs all sore. I fergot the book, an' thought you must be sufferin' from some kind o' growth; but didn't like to arsk till I knew yer better—deformed folks bein' mostly touchy about it. When you stripped jus' now, an' nothin' the matter, it puzzled me more'n ever. 'Ere—show me where 'e tells about it," she demanded, taking the volume and opening it on her lap.

"It's all at the beginnin', and he calls it *The Tempest* . . . But it will take you ever so long to find out. There was a ship wrecked, with a wicked duke on board, and he thought his son was drowned, but really it was all brought about by magic . . . In the book it's mostly names and speeches, and you only pick up here and there what the Island was like."

"But what makes you sure it's *your* Island?"

"You wait till we get to Stratford and ask *him*," said the boy, nodding, bright and confident.

"Arsk 'oo? Shakespeare? Sakes alive, child! Don't yer know 'e's been dead these 'undreds o' years?"

"Has he?" His face fell, but after a moment grew cheerful again. "But that needn't matter. There must be heaps of people left to tell us about it."

Tilda closed the book. She had learnt a little, but had been disappointed in more. She felt desperately sorry for the child with this craze in his head about an Island. She had a suspicion that the memories he related were all mixed up with fictions from the play. As she put it to herself, "'E don't mean to kid, but 'e can't 'elp 'isself." But there was one question she had omitted and must yet ask.

"You said, jus' now, you used to play by the sea, somewheres beneath that line o' white houses you was tellin' of. Well, you couldn' a-got down there on your own, at that age—could yer, now? W'ich means you must a-been carried."

"I suppose so."

"No supposin' about it. You *must* a-been. Wot's more, you talked about the waves comin' in an' not reachin'—'us,' you said. 'Oo was it with yer? Think now! Man or woman?"

"A woman," he answered after a pause, knitting his brows.

"Wot like?"

Then happened something for which—so quiet his words had been—Tilda was in no wise prepared. He turned his eyes on her; and they were as the eyes of a child born blind; blank, yet they sought; tortured, yet dry of tears. His head was tilted back, and a little sideways. So may you see an infant's as he nuzzles to his mother's breast. The two hands seemed to grope for a moment, then fell limp at his side.

"Oh, 'ush!" besought Tilda, though in fact he had uttered no sound. "'Ush, an' put on your shirt, an' come 'ome! We'll get Mrs. Mortimer to dry it off by the stove."

She helped him on with it, took him by the hand, and led him back unresisting.

They reached the canal bank in time to see Sam Bossom leading Old Jubilee down the towpath, on his way to borrow a cart at Ibbetson's. And 'Dolph—whom Tilda had left with strict orders to remain on board—no sooner caught sight of the children than he leapt ashore and came cringing.

The dog appeared to be in mortal terror; a terror at which the children no longer wondered as they drew near the boat. Terrible sounds issued from the cabin—cries of a woman imploring mercy, fierce guttural oaths of a man determined to grant none.

"Good Lord!" exclaimed Tilda, gripping Arthur

Miles more tightly by the hand and hurrying him into a run. "Whatever's taken the couple?"

She paused at the gangway and listened, peering forward.

"Oh, banish me, my lord, but kill me not!" wailed the voice of Mrs. Mortimer.

"Down, base one!" shouted her husband's.

"Kill me to-morrow; let me live to-night!"

"Nay, if you strive—a little more stress, dear, on 'to-night,' if I may suggest—Nay, if you strive——!"

"Shall we take it again, Stanislas? You used to take the pillow at 'Kill me not.'"

"I believe I did, my bud. We are rusty—a trifle rusty—the both of us."

"Kill me to-morrow; let me live——" entreated Mrs. Mortimer.

"What's all this, you two?" demanded Tilda, springing down the cabin steps and hurling herself between them.

"Hullo! Come in!" answered Mr. Mortimer genially. "This? Well, I hope it is an intellectual treat. I have always looked upon Mrs. Mortimer's Desdemona as such, even at rehearsal."

