CHAPTER XI

THE " STRATFORD-ON-AVON "

" Day after day, day after day
We stuck."
COLERIDGE, *Rime of the Ancient Mariner.*

" WELL, and 'ow did the performance go off ? "

When Tilda awoke at seven o'clock next morning, the *Success to Commerce* had made three good miles in the cool of the dawn, and come to anchor again (so to speak) outside the gates of Knowsley top lock, where, as Sam Bossom explained, later, the canal began to drop from its summit level. Six locks, set pretty close together, here formed a stairway for its descent, and Sam would hear no word of breakfast until they had navigated the whole flight.

The work was laborious, and cost him the best part of an hour. For he had to open and shut each pair of gates single-handed, using a large iron key to lift and close the sluices ; and, moreover, Mr. Mortimer, though he did his best, was inexpert at guiding the boat into the lock-chamber and handling her when there. A dozen times Sam had to call to him to haul closer down towards the bottom gates and avoid fouling his rudder.

The children watched the whole operation from shore, now and then lending their small weight to push open the long gate-beams. 'Dolph, too, watched from shore ; suspiciously at first, afterwards with a studied air of boredom, which he relieved by affecting, whenever the heel of a stern-post squeaked in its quoin, to mistake it for a rat—an excuse for aimless snuffling, whining and barking. And Mrs. Mortimer looked on from the well by the cabin door, saucepan in hand, prepared to cook at the shortest notice. It was fascinating to see

her, at first in the almost brimming lock, majestically erect (she was a regal figure) challenging the horizon with a gaze at once proud, prescient of martyrdom, and prepared; and then, as Sam opened the sluices, to watch her descend, inch by inch, into the dark lock-chamber. Each time this happened Mr. Mortimer exhorted her—"Courage, my heart's best!"—and she made answer each time, "Nay, Stanislas, I have no terrors."

Mr. Mortimer, at the fifth lock, left Old Jubilee and walked around to remark to Tilda that on the boards some such apparatus—"if it could be contrived at moderate expense"—would be remarkably effective in the drowning scene of *The Colleen Bawn;* or, in the legitimate drama, for the descent of Faustus into hell; "or, by means of a gauze transparency, the death of Ophelia might be indicated. I mention Ophelia because it was in that part my Arabella won what—if the expression may be used without impropriety—I will term her spurs. I am given to understand, however," added Mr. Mortimer, "that the apparatus requires a considerable reservoir, and a reservoir of any size is only compatible with fixity of tenure. An Ishmael—a wanderer upon the face of the earth—buffeted this way and that by the chill blast of man's ingratitude, more keenly toothed (as our divine Shakespeare observed) than winter's actual storm—but this by the way; it is not mine to anticipate more stable fortune, but rather to say with Lear—

"'Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks!'

I merely drop the suggestion—and I pass on."

He folded his arms and passed on. That is to say, he strode off in a hurry at a summons from Sam to stand by and pole the boat clear as the lower lock-gates were opened.

Somehow Tilda divined that Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer were in high spirits this morning, and it was with reasonable confidence that, after they had moored below locks and breakfasted, she sought Sam—who had withdrawn

to the bows with his account book—and inquired how the performance had gone off.

"There was a small misunderstandin' at the close," he answered, looking up and pausing to moisten the lead of his pencil, "owin' to what the bills said about carriages at ten-thirty. Which the people at Tizzer's Green took it that carriages was to be part of the show, an' everyone to be taken 'ome like a lord. There was a man in the gallery, which is otherwise back seats at threppence, got up an' said he'd a-come on that contrack, an' no other. Mortimer made 'im a speech, and when that wouldn't do I copped 'im on the back o' the neck."

"An' after that, I s'pose, there was a free fight?"

"No," said Sam; "you'd be surprised how quiet 'e took it. 'E was unconscious."

She eyed him thoughtfully.

"It don't seem like you, neither," she said, "to strike a man so 'ard, first blow."

"You're right, there; it *ain't* like me, an' I felt sorry for the fella'. But I 'ad to relieve my feelin's."

"What was the matter with yer feelin's?"

"'Arrowed—fairly 'arrowed." Sam shot an uneasy glance aft towards the cabin top where Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer sat amicably side by side, he conning a part while she mended a broken string of her guitar. Beyond them, stretched on the after-deck with 'Dolph for company, Arthur Miles leaned over the gunwale, apparently studying the boat's reflection in the water. "Between you an' me," Sam confessed, "I can't get no grip on play-actors; an' I'm sorry I ever took up with 'em." He consulted his accounts. "He cleared three pound twelve an' nine las' night—but 'ow? That Mortimer carried on something 'ateful. There was 'is wife—you wouldn' think it in ordinary life, but, dressed up she goes to your 'eart; an' she wore, first an' last, more dresses than you could count. First of-all she 'it a little tambourine, an' said she was a gipsy maid. 'I'm a narch little gipsy,' she said, 'an' I never gets tipsy'——"

"Why *should* she?"

"'But I laugh an' play,' she said, 'the whole o' the day, such a nartless life is mine, ha, ha!' which wasn' none of it true, except about the drink, but you could see she only done it to make 'erself pleasant. An' then she told us 'ow when they rang a bell somebody was goin' to put Mortimer to death, an' 'ow she stopped that by climbin' up to the bell and 'angin' on to the clapper. Then in came Mortimer an' sang a song with 'er—as well e might—about 'is true love 'avin' 'is 'eart an' 'is 'avin' 'ers, an' everyone clappin' an' stampin' an' ancorein' in the best of tempers. Well, an' what does the man do after an interval o' five minutes, but dress hisself up in black an' call 'er names for 'avin' married his uncle? This was too much for the back seats, an' some o' them told 'im to go 'ome an' boil 'is 'ead. But it 'ad no effect; for he only got worse, till he ended up by blackin' 'is face an' smotherin' 'er with a pillow for something quite different. After that he got better, an' they ended up by playin' a thing that made everybody laugh. I didn' 'ear it, but took a walk outside to blow off steam, an' only came back just as the fuss began about the carriages. Fact is, missy, I can't abear to see a woman used abuseful."

"That's because you're in love," said Tilda. "But, if you'll listen to me, women ain't always what you take 'em for."

"Ain't they?" he queried. "I'd be sorry to believe that; though 'twould be 'elpful, I don't mind tellin' you."

"I've known cases—that is, if you *want* to be cured——"

"I do, an' I don't," he groaned. But it was clear that in the main he did not; for he changed the subject hastily. "See 'ere, would you mind takin' 'old o' the book an' checkin' while I counts out the money. Total takin's—four, three, three—less 'ire of 'all, four-an'-six——"

"I can read figures an' print," owned Tilda, "but 'andwriting's too much for me; an' yours, I dare say, isn' none o' the best."

"I've improved it a lot at the night school. But what is it puzzlin' you?" he asked, looking up as he counted.

She held out the book, but not as he had handed it. The light breeze had blown over two or three of its leaves, covering the page of accounts.

"Oh, *that?*" he stammered, and a blush spread to his ears. "I didn' mean you to see——"

"What is it?"

"Well—it's potery, if you must know. Leastways it's meant to be potery. I make it sometimes."

"Why?"

"To relieve my feelin's."

"'Pears to me your feelin's want a deal o' relievin', one way an' another. Read me some."

"You're sure you won't laugh?"

"Bless the man! 'Ow can I tell till I've 'eard it? Is it meant to be funny?"

"No."

"Well, then, I'm not likely to laugh. It don't come easy to me, any'ow: I seen too many clowns."

She handed him the book. He chose a poem, conquered his diffidence, and began—

"'Stratford-on-Avon, Stratford-on-Avon—
My heart is full of woe:
Formerly, once upon a time
It was not ever so.

"'The love that then I faltered
I now am forced to stifle;
For the case is completely altered
And I wish I had a rifle.

"'I wish I was wrecked
Like Robinson Crusoe,
But you cannot expect
A canal-boat to do so.'

Perhaps I ought to explain, though?" he suggested, breaking off.

"If you don't mind."

"You see I got a brother—a nelder brother, an' by

name 'Enery; an' last year he went for a miner in South Africa, at a place that I can't neither spell nor pronounce till it winds up with 'bosh.' So we'll call it Bosh."

"Right-o! But why did he go for that miner? To relieve 'is feelin's?"

"You don't understand. He went out *as* a miner, havin' been a pit-hand at the Blackstone Colliery, north o' Bursfield. Well, one week-end—about a month before he started—he took a noliday an' went a trip with me to Stratford aboard this very boat. Which for six months past I'd 'ad a neye upon a girl in Stratford. She was a General——"

"Salvation Army?"

"—A Cook-general, in a very respectable 'ouse'old—a publican's, at the 'Four Alls' by Binton Bridges. Me bein' shy—as you may 'ave noticed—I 'adn't, as you might say, put it to 'er; an' likewise until the matter was settled I didn' like to tell 'Enery. But I interjuced 'im—the same bein' 'er Sunday out; an' afterwards, when he called 'er a monstrous fine girl, I felt as 'appy as if he'd given me ten shillin'. Which only proves," Sam commented bitterly, "what I say in the next verse—

"'I'd rather be in prison
Than in this earthly dwellin',
Where nothin' is but it isn'——
An there ain't no means of tellin'!'

—which, when, the night before he started, he comes to me an' says that he an' Mary 'ave made a match of it, an' would I mind keepin' an eye on 'er an' writin' regilar to say 'ow she was gettin' on, it fair knocked me out."

"You never told 'im?"

"I didn' like to. To start with 'e was always my fav'rite brother, an' I couldn' bear his startin' in low sperits an' South Africa such a distance off; beside which, I told mysel', the girl must surely know 'er own mind. So now you know," concluded Sam, "what I means by the nex' verse—

" ' Stratford-on-Avon, Stratford-on-Avon—
My true love she is false ;
I'd rather not go to Stratford-on-Avon
If I could go anywheres else.' "

" But you promised to keep an eye on her."

" 'Enery 'ears from me regilar," said Sam evasively.

" If you don't pay 'er no visits," Tilda insisted, " the more you write the more you must be tellin' lies ; an' that's not fair to 'Enery."

Sam considered this for a while, and ended by drawing a folded scrap of paper from his trouser-pocket.

" I don't tell no more than can't be 'elped, missie. You just list'n to this."

He read :—

" DEAR BROTHER 'ENERY,—This comes opin' to find you well as it leaves me at Stratford. M. sends her love, an' you will be pleased to 'ear she grows beautifuller every day an' in character likewise. It do seem to me this world is a better place for containin' of her ; an' a man ought to be 'appy, dear 'Enery, when you can call 'er mine——"

" That don't seem right to me some'ow," commented Tilda.

Sam scratched his head.

" What's wrong with it ? "

" 'Pears to me it ought to be ' yours '—' When you can call her yours.' "

" I don't like that neither, not altogether. S'pose we scratch it out an' say, ' A man ought to be 'appy when 'e can call 'er 'isn' ? That what schoolmaster calls the third person."

" There didn' ought to be no third person about it," said Tilda severely ; " on'y 'Enery an' 'er. Well, go on."

" I can't. That's so far as I've written up to the present. It's a rough copy, you understand ; an' at Stratford I allow to write it out fair an' post it."

Tilda took a turn at considering.

"The further I go on this v'yage," she announced—"w'ich, per'aps, 'twould be truthfuller to say the longer it takes—the more I seems to get mixed up in other folks' business. But you've done me a good turn, Sam Bossom; an' you've been open with me; an' I reckon I got to keep you straight in this 'ere. There! put up yer verses while I sit an' think it out."

"You don't like 'em?"

Sam was evidently dashed.

"If on'y I 'ad Bill 'ere——"

"Ha, yes: *'im! 'E*'d put a boiler inside 'em, no doubt; an' a donkey-engin', an'——"

"What'yer talkin' about? . . . Oh, yer verses! Bless the man, I wasn' thinkin' of yer verses. I was wantin' Bill 'ere, to advise somethin' practical. Lor' sake! Look at Arthur Miles there, the way 'e's leanin' overboard! The child'll drown 'isself, nex' news!" She rose up and ran to prevent the disaster. "'Pears to me there's a deal o' motherin' to be done aboard this boat. Trouble aft, an' trouble forrard——"

She was hurrying aft when Mr. Mortimer intercepted her amidships. He held a book in one hand, and two slips of paper in the other.

"Child," he asked, "could you learn a part?—a very small part?"

"'Course I could," answered Tilda promptly; "but I ain't goin' to play it, an' don't yer make any mistake. 'Ere, let me get to Arthur Miles before 'e tumbles overboard."

She darted aft and dragged the boy back by his collar.

"What d'yer mean by it, givin' folks a shock like that?" she demanded.

"I was looking at the pictures," he explained, and showed her.

The *Success to Commerce* bore on her stern panels two gaily painted landscapes, the one of Warwick Castle, the other of ruined Kenilworth. Tilda leaned over the side and saw them mirrored in the still water.

"And then," the boy pursued, "down below the pictures I saw a great ship lying in the seaweed with guns and drowned men on the deck and the fishes swimming over them. Deep in the ship a bell was tolling——"

"Nonsense!" Tilda interrupted, and catching up a pole, thrust it down overside. "Four feet at the most," she reported, as the pole found bottom. "You must be sickenin' for somethin'. Put out your tongue."

"A child of imagination," observed Mr. Mortimer, who had followed her. "Full fathom five thy father lies——"

"'Ush!" cried Tilda.

"—Of his bones are coral made. Those are pearls that were his eyes——"

The boy sat and looked up at the speaker, staring, shivering a little.

"You know? You know too?" he stammered.

"He knows nothin' about it," insisted Tilda. "Please go away, Mr. Mortimer."

"A young Shakespearean? This is indeed delightful! You shall have a part, sir. Your delivery will be immature, doubtless; but with some tuition from me——"

"If you try it on, I'll tell 'Ucks," the girl threatened, by this time desperate. "You're like all the actors—leastways you're like all that I ever met; an', take it 'ow you will, I got to say it. Once get started on yer own lay, an' everything elst goes out o' yer 'eads. You don't mean to 'urt, but selfish you are and 'eedless, an' somebody 'as al'ays the world's trouble clearin' up the mess. 'Ere, 'and me the part you was tellin' about; an' I'll learn it an' say it, though not within a 'undred miles of Glasson—which," she added, "I'll be an old woman before that, at the rate we're goin'. But you don't drag Arthur Miles into it, an' I give you fair warnin'. For, to start with, 'e's 'idin', an' 'tis only to keep 'im 'id that I got 'Ucks to let yer loose. An' nex' 'e's a gentleman, and why you should want to mix 'im up with yer Shakespeares I can't think."

It is doubtful if Mr. Mortimer heard the conclusion of her outburst. At the mention of Mr. Hucks he pressed

a palm dramatically to his forehead; and now, withdrawing it, he handed her the two slips of paper with great politeness.

"True, I had forgotten," he murmured. "Take your time, child—you will take your time, I beg."

He waved his hand, and withdrew to rejoin his wife on the cabin-top. Tilda studied the slips of paper, while Arthur Miles edged away again towards the gunwale for another look into the magic water.

"Stop that!" she commanded, glancing up and catching him in the act. Stop that, and read these for me: I can't manage handwriting."

The boy took the first slip obediently and read aloud—

"*Madam, a horseman comes riding across the hill. The sun flashes full on his arms. By my halidame 'tis the Knight Hospitaller!*"

"That seems pretty fair rot," criticised Tilda. "Let's 'ave the other."

"*Madam, he has reined up his steed. He stands without.*"

Here Arthur Miles paused and drew breath.

"Without what?"

"It doesn't say. *He stands without: he waves a hand. Shall I go ask his errand?*"

"Is that all? . . . And Mortimer reckons I'll take from 'ere to Stratford learnin' that little lot! Why, I can do it in arf-a-minute, an' on my 'ead. You just listen. *Madam, a 'orseman*—— No, wait a moment. *Madam, a Norseman*——" Tilda hesitated and came to a halt. "Would you mind sayin' it over again, Arthur Miles?" she asked politely.

"*Madam, a horseman comes riding*——"

"That'll do. *Madam, a—H—h—horseman*—— Is that better?"

"You needn't strain at it so," said the boy. "Why, you're quite red in the face!"

"Oh, yes, I need," said Tilda; "first-along, any'ow." She fell silent for a space. "That Mortimer," she conceded, "isn' quite the ass that 'e looks. This 'as got to take time, after all." She paused a moment in

thought, and then broke out, "Oh, Arthur Miles, the trouble you're layin' on me—First, to be a mother—an' that's not 'ard. But, on top o' that, a lady!"

"Why should you be a lady?" he asked.

"Why?" Tilda echoed almost bitterly. "Oh, you needn' think I'll want to marry yer when all's done. Why? Oh, merely to 'elp you, bein' the sort you are. All you've got to do, bein' the sort you are, is to sit quiet an' teach me. But I got to be a lady, if it costs me my shift."