CHAPTER XII

PURSUED

AT ten o'clock Sam harnessed up again, and shortly before noon our travellers left the waterway by which they had travelled hitherto, and passed out to the right through a cut, less than a quarter of a mile long, where a rising lock took them into the Stratford-on-Avon Canal.

Said Sam as he worked the lock, the two children standing beside and watching—

"Now see here, when you meet your clever friend Bill, you put him two questions from me. First, why, when the boat's through, am I goin' to draw the water off an' leave the lock empty?"

Before Tilda could answer, Arthur Miles exclaimed—

"I know! It's because we're going uphill, and at the other locks, when we were going downhill, the water emptied itself."

"Right, so far as you go," nodded Sam. "But why should a lock be left empty?"

The boy thought for a moment.

"Because you don't want the water to waste, and top gates hold it better than lower ones."

"Why do the top gates hold it better?"

"Because they shut *with* the water, and the water holds them fast; and because they are smaller than the bottom gates, and don't leak so much."

"That's very cleverly noticed," said Sam. "Now you keep your eyes alive while we work this one, an' tell me what you see."

They watched the operation carefully.

"Well?" he asked as, having passed the *Success to*

Commerce through, he went back to open the lower paddles—or slats, as he called them.

"I saw nothing," the boy confessed disappointedly, "except that you seemed to use more water than at the others."

"Well, and that's just it. But why?"

"It has something to do, of course, with going uphill instead of down . . . And—and I've got the reason somewhere inside my head, but I can't catch hold of it."

"I'll put it another way. This boat's mod'rate well laden, an' she takes more water lockin' up than if she was empty; but if she was empty, she'd take more water lockin' down. That's a fac'; an' if you can give me a reason for it you'll be doin' me a kindness. For I never could find one, an' I've lain awake at nights puzzlin' it over."

"I bet Bill would know," said Tilda.

Sam eyed her.

"I'd give somethin'," he said, "to be sure this Bill, as you make such a gawd of, is a real person—or whether, bein' born different to the rest of yer sex, you've 'ad to invent 'im."

Many locks encumber the descending levels of the Stratford-on-Avon Canal, and they kept Sam busy. In the intervals the boat glided deeper and deeper into a green pastoral country, parcelled out with hedgerows and lines of elms, behind which here and there lay a village half hidden—a grey tower and a few red-tiled roofs visible between the trees. Cattle dotted the near pastures, till away behind the trees—for summer had passed into late September—the children heard now and again the guns of partridge shooters cracking from fields of stubble. But no human folk frequented the banks of the canal, which wound its way past scented meadows edged with willow-herb, late meadow-sweet, yellow tansy and purple loosestrife, this last showing a blood-red stalk as its bloom died away. Out beyond, green arrowheads floated on the water; the *Success to*

Commerce ploughed through beds of them, and they rose from under her keel and spread themselves again in her wake. Very little traffic passed over these waters. In all the way to Preston Bagot our travellers met but three boats. One, at Lowsonford Lock, had a pair of donkeys ("animals" Sam called them) to haul it; the other two, they met, coming up light by Fiwood Green. "Hold in!" "Hold out!" called the steersmen as the boats met. Sam held wide, and by shouts instructed Mr. Mortimer how to cross the towropes; and Mr. Mortimer put on an extremely knowledgeable air, but obeyed him with so signal a clumsiness that the bargees desired to know where the *Success to Commerce* had shipped her new mate.

The question, though put with good humour, appeared to disturb Sam, who for the rest of the way steered in silence. There are three locks at Preston Bagot, and at the first Mr. Mortimer took occasion to apologise for his performance, adding that practice made perfect.

"I wonder, now," said Sam delicately, "if you could practise leavin' off that fur collar? A little unhandiness'll pass off, an' no account taken; but with a furred overcoat 'tis different, an' I ought to a-mentioned it before. We don't want the children tracked, do we? An' unfort'nitly you're not one to pass in a crowd."

"You pay me a compliment," Mr. Mortimer answered. "Speaking, however, as man to man, let me say that I would gladly waive whatever show my overcoat may contribute to the—er—total effect to which you refer. But"—here he unbuttoned the front of his garment—"I leave it to you to judge if, without it, I shall attract less attention. *Laudatur*, my dear Smiles, *et alget. Paupertas, dura paupertas*—I might, perhaps, satisfy the curious gazer by producing the—er—pawntickets for the missing articles. But it would hardly—eh, I put it to you?"

"No, it wouldn'," decided Sam. "But it's unfort'nit all the same, an' in more ways 'n one. You see, there's a nasty 'abit folks 'ave in these parts. Anywheres

between Warwick an' Birming'am a native can't 'ardly pass a canal-boat without wantin' to arsk, ''Oo stole the rabbit-skin ?' I don't know why they arsk it ; but when it 'appens, you've got to fight the man—or elst *I* must."

"I would suggest that, you being the younger man——"

"Well, I don't mind," said Sam. "On'y the p'int is I don't scarcely never fight without attractin' notice. The last time 'twas five shillin' an' costs or ten days. An' there's the children to be considered."

During this debate Tilda and Arthur Miles had wandered ashore with 'Dolph, and the dog, by habit inquisitive, had headed at once for a wooden storehouse that stood a little way back from the waterside—a large building of two storeys, with a beam and pulley projecting from the upper one, and heavy folding-doors below. One of these doors stood open, and 'Dolph, dashing within, at once set up a frantic barking.

"Hullo!" Tilda stepped quickly in front of the boy to cover him. "There's somebody incide."

The barking continued for almost half a minute, and then Godolphus emerged, capering absurdly on his hind legs and revolving like a dervish, flung up his head, yapped thrice in a kind of ecstasy, and again plunged into the store.

"That's funny, too," mused Tilda. "I never knew 'im be'ave like that 'cept when he met with a friend. Arthur Miles, you stay where you are——" She tiptoed forward and peered within. "Lord sake, come an' look 'ere!" she called after a moment.

The boy followed, and stared past her shoulder into the gloom. There, in the centre of the earthen floor, wrapped around with straw bands, stood a wooden horse.

It was painted grey, with beautiful dapples, and nostrils of fierce scarlet. It had a tail of real horsehair and a golden mane, and on its near shoulder a blue scroll with its name *Kitchener* thereon in letters of gold. Its legs were extended at a gallop.

"Gavel's!" said Tilda. "Gavel's, at ten to one an' no takers! . . . But why? 'Ow?"

She turned on 'Dolph, scolding, commanding him to be quiet; and 'Dolph subsided on his haunches and watched her, his stump tail jerking to and fro beneath him like an unweighted pendulum. There was a label attached to the straw bands. She turned it over and read: *James Gavel, Proprietor, Imperial Steam Roundabouts, Henley-in-Arden. Deliver Immediately* . . . "An' me thinkin' Bill 'ad gone north to Wolver'ampton!" she breathed.

Before the boy could ask her meaning they heard the rumble of wheels outside; and Tilda, catching him by the arm, hurried him back to the doors just as a two-horse wagon rolled down to the wharf, in charge of an elderly driver—a sour-visaged man in a smock-frock, with a weather-stained top hat on the back of his head, and in his hand a whip adorned with rings of polished brass.

He pulled up, eyed the two children, and demanded to know what they meant by trespassing in the store.

"We were admirin' the 'orse," answered Tilda.

"An' likewise truantin' from school," the wagoner suggested. "But that's the way of it in England nowadays; the likes o' me payin' rates to eddicate the likes o' you. An' that's your Conservative Government . . . Eddication!" he went on after a pause. "What's Eddication? Did either o' you ever 'ear tell of Joseph Arch?"

"Can't say we 'ave."

"He was born no farther away than Barford—Barford-on-Avon. But I s'pose your schoolmaster's too busy teachin' you the pianner."

Tilda digested the somewhat close reasoning for a moment, and answered—

"It's fair sickenin' the amount o' time spent on the pianner. Betwéen you an' me, that's partly why we cut an' run. You mustn' think we 'ate school—if on'y they'd teach us what's useful. Oo's Joseph Arch?"

"He was born at Barford," said the wagoner; "an' at Barford he lives."

"'E must be a remarkable man," said Tilda, "an' I'm sorry I don't know more of 'im. But I know Gavel."

"Gavel?"

"'Im as the 'orse belongs to: an' Bill. Gavel's a remarkable man too in 'is way; though not a patch on Bill. Bill tells me Gavel can get drunk twice any day; separate drunk, that is."

"Liberal or Conservative?"

"Well," hesitated Tilda, playing for safety, "I dunno as he'd tell, under a pint; but mos' likely it depends on the time o' day."

"I arsked," said the wagoner, "because he's hired by the Primrose Feet; an' if he's the kind of man to sell 'is princerples, I don't so much mind 'ow bad the news I breaks to him."

"What news?"

The man searched in his pocket, and drew forth a greasy post card.

"He sent word to me there was six painted 'osses comin' by canal from Burning'am, to be delivered at the Wharf this mornin'; an' would I fetch 'em along to the Feet Ground, Henley-in-Arden, without delay?"

"Henley-in-Arden!" exclaimed a voice behind the children; whereat Tilda turned about with a start. It was the voice of Mr. Mortimer, who had strolled across from the lock bank, and stood conning the wagon and team. "Henley-in-Arden? O Helicon! If you'll excuse the remark, sir. O Parnassus!"

"Maybe I might," said the wagoner guardedly, "if I understood its bearin's."

"Name redolent of Shakespeare! Of Rosalind and Touchstone, Jaques and Amiens, sheepcrooks and venison feasts, and ballads pinned to oaks! What shall he have who killed the deer, Mr.——?"

"'Olly," said the wagoner.

"I beg your pardon?"

"'Olly—James 'Olly and Son, Carters an' 'Auliers."

"Is it possible? . . . better and better! Sing heigho! the Holly, this life is most jolly. I trust you find it so, Mr. Holly?"

"If you want to know," Mr. Holly answered sourly, "I don't."

"You pain and astonish me, Mr Holly. The penalty of Adam, the season's difference"—Mr. Mortimer turned up his furred collar—"surely, sir, you will allow no worse to afflict you? You, a dweller on the confines of Henley-in-Arden, within measurable distance, as I gathered?"

"Mile an' a 'arf."

"No more? O Phœbus and the Nine!"

"There *was*," said Mr. Holly, "to 'a been six. An' by consequence here I be with a pair of 'osses an' the big wagon. Best go home-along, I reckon, an' fetch out the cart," he grumbled, with a jerk of his thumb indicating a red-tiled building on the hillside, half a mile away.

"Not so." Mr. Mortimer tapped his brow. "An idea occurs to me—if you will spare me a moment to consult with my—er—partner. A Primrose Fête, you said? I am no politician, Mr. Holly, but I understand the Primrose League exists—primarily—or ultimately—to save our world-wide empire. And how shall an empire stand without its Shakespeare? Our tent and appliances will just load your wagon. As the younger Dumas observed, 'Give me two boards, two trestles, three actors'—but the great Æschylus did with two—'two actors,' let us say—'and a passion'—provided your terms are not prohibitive. . . Hi, Smiles! Approach, Smiles, and be introduced to Thespis. His charge is three shillings. At the price of three shillings behold, Smiles, the golden age returned! Comedy carted home through leafy ways shall trill her woodnotes—her native woodnotes wild—in Henley-in-Arden!"

The wagon had been packed and had departed, Mrs.

Mortimer perched high on a pile of tent cloths, and Mr. Mortimer waving farewells from the tailboard.

The two children, left with instructions to keep near the boat and in hiding, had made a nest for themselves among the stalks of loosestrife, and sat watching the canal for sign of a moorhen or a water-rat. The afternoon was bright and very still, with a dazzle on the water and a faint touch of autumn in the air—the afterglow of summer soon to pass into grey chills and gusts of rain. For many minutes neither had spoken.

"Look!" said Tilda, pointing to a distant ripple drawn straight across the surface. "There goes a rat, and I've won!"

The boy said—

"A boat takes up room in the water, doesn't it?"

"O' course it does. But what's that got to do with rats?"

"Nothing. I was thinking of Sam's puzzle, and I've guessed it. A boat going downwards through a lock would want a lock full, all but the water it pushes out from the room it takes up. Wouldn't it?"

"I s'pose so," said Tilda doubtfully.

"But a boat going up will want a lock full, and that water too. And that's why an empty boat going downhill takes more water than a loaded one, and less going up."

To Tilda the puzzle remained a puzzle.

"It *sounds* all right," she allowed. "But what makes you so clever about boats?"

"I've *got* to know about them. Else how shall we ever find the Island?"

She thought for half a minute.

"You're sure about that Island?" she asked, a trifle anxiously.

Arthur Miles turned to her with a confident smile.

"Of course I'm sure."

"Well, we'll arsk about it when we get to Stratford-on-Avon."

She was about to say more, but checked herself at sight of a barge coming down the canal—slowly, and

as yet so far away that the tramp of the tow-horse's hoofs on the path was scarcely audible. She laid a hand on 'Dolph's collar and pressed him down in the long grass, commanding him to be quiet, whilst she and the boy wriggled away towards an alder bush that stood a furlong back from the bank.

Stretched at length behind the bush, she had, between the fork of its stem a clear view of the approaching boat. Its well coverings were loose, and by the upper lock gate the steersman laid it close along shore and put out a gang-plank. His mate, after fitting a nosebag on the horse, came at a call to assist him, and together they lifted out a painted wooden steed wrapped in straw, and carried it to the store.

Having deposited it there, they returned and unloaded another. Five horses they disembarked and housed thus; and then, like men relieved of a job, spat on their hands and turned to work their boat down through the locks. For twenty minutes the children lay prone and watched them, Tilda still keeping a hand on the scruff of 'Dolph's neck. Then, as the boat, having gained a clear reach of water, faded down in the gathering dusk, she arose and stretched herself.

"For anyone but Bill I wouldn' risk it," she said. "But maybe his credit depends on gettin' them 'osses delivered to-night."

She took Arthur Miles by the hand, found the road, and dragged him uphill at a trot towards the group of red brick buildings that showed between the trees.

The buildings consisted of a cottage and a long stable or coach-house contiguous. This presented a blank white-washed wall to the road, but a Gloire de Dijon rose spread itself over the cottage front, almost smothering a board with the inscription: *S. Holly and Son, Carters and Hauliers.*

Tilda knocked, and her knock was answered by a sour-visaged woman.

"Well, an' what can I do for you?" asked the woman, staring down from her doorstep on the children.

"If you please, ma'am, is Mr. 'Olly at 'ome?"

"No, he ain't."

"I knew it," said Tilda tranquilly. "But by all accounts 'e's got a son."

"Eh?"

The woman still stared, divided between surprise and mistrust.

"You're mistakin'," Tilda pursued. "I ain't come with any scandal about the fam'ly. A grown-up son, I mean—with a 'orse an' cart. Because, if so, there's five gallopin' 'orses down at the wharf waitin' to be taken over to Henley-in-Arden."

"Oh?" said the woman. "My 'usband left word Gustavus was to fetch 'em along if they arrived. But who sent you with the message?"

"I've a friend in Gavel's business," Tilda answered with dignity. "'E's what you might call Gavel's right 'and man—an' 'e's 'andy with 'is right, too, when 'e's put out. If 'e should 'ear—I'm advisin' for yer *good*, mind—if 'e should 'ear as five 'orses was 'ung up on the wharf 'ere through S. 'Olly an' Son's neglect, you may look out for ructions. An' that's all I promise."

She turned back towards the wharf, and even as Arthur Miles turned to follow they could hear the woman calling loudly, summoning her son from his tea in the kitchen.

"I reckon," commented Tilda, "I put the fear o' Bill into that woman. You may 'a noticed I didn' like her looks."

She led the way back to the wharf in some elation. Twilight was gathering there and over the canal. She had rounded the corner of the store, when, happening to glance towards the *Success to Commerce*, moored under the bank, a bare twenty yards away, she halted, and with a gasp shrank close into the shadow.

"Collar 'Dolph! Grip 'old on 'im for the Lord's sake!" she whispered, and clutched Arthur Miles by the arm.

On the bank beside the boat stood a man.

"But what's the matter?" the boy demanded.

"'Ush! Oh, 'ush an' lie close! It's Glasson!"