

CHAPTER XIII

ADVENTURE OF THE FURRED COLLAR

“ ‘Do you know me, my lord?’
‘Excellent well; you are a fishmonger.’ ”—*Hamlet*.

HE stood on the edge of the wharf—a black figure in an Inverness cape—with his back towards the angle of the store where the children hid. There was no mistaking him. For two nights he had haunted Tilda's dreams; and she could have picked him out, even in the twilight, from among a thousand.

She gave another gasp, and with that her presence of mind returned. He had not seen them; he was watching the barge. The angle of the store would still hide them if they tip-toed to the wharf gate. But they must be noiseless as mice; they must reach the road, and then——

She caught up 'Dolph by the scruff of his neck, tucked him under her arm, and whispered to Arthur Miles to steal after her. But before she had taken three paces another fright brought her heart into her mouth.

Footsteps were coming down the road. They could not belong to the wagoner's son. He would be bringing his horse and cart. The footsteps were light, too—light and hurried, and not to be associated with hobnailed boots.

Almost desperate at this cutting off of retreat, Tilda pulled Arthur Miles towards a wooden stairway, unrailed, painted over with Stockholm tar, built against the outside of the store, and leading to its upper chamber.

“Up! and quick!” she commanded, pushing him before her. She followed panting, leaning against the wall for support, for 'Dolph was no light burden, and his weight taxed her hurt leg painfully.

The door of the loft stood ajar. She staggered in after the boy, dropped the dog, and closed all but a chink, at which she posted herself, drawing quick breaths.

In the darkness behind her Arthur Miles listened. The footsteps drew nearer, paused, and after a moment were audible again in the yard below.

“ Good Lord—it’s Gavel ! ”

“ Eh ? ” The boy drew closer to her shoulder.

“ It’s Gavel, come in a sweat for ’is ’orses. • I didn’ reckernise ’im for the moment—dressed out in a fur coat an’ Trilby ’at. But it’s Gavel, an’ ’e’s walkin’ straight into Glasson’s arms. Stand by to do a bolt soon as ’e turns the corner.”

“ But I don’t see what he has to do with—with——” Arthur Miles hesitated before the terrible name.

“ Glasson ? Oh, nothin’ ; on’y ten to one Gavel’s met with the Mortimers, an’ Glasson bein’ on the track already—— W’y, what elst is the man ’ere for ? ”

“ He shan’t take me,” said the boy after a pause, and in a strained low voice which, nevertheless, had no tremor in it. “ Not if I throw myself off the ladder.”

“ You stop that talk, please,” threatened Tilda. “ It’s wicked ; an’ besides, they ’aven’t caught us yet. Do what I tell yer, an’ stand by to bolt.”

She crept to the other door, which commanded the canal front, unbarred it softly, and opened the upper hatch a few inches. Through this aperture, by standing on tip-toe, she could watch the meeting of the two men.

“ When I call, run for yer life.”

But a minute—two minutes—passed, and the command did not come. Arthur Miles, posted by the bolt-hole, held his breath at the sound of voices without, by the waterside. The tones of one he recognised with a shiver. They were raised, and although he could not catch the words, apparently in altercation. Forgetting orders, he tip-toed across to Tilda’s elbow.

Mr. James Gavel, proprietor of Imperial Steam Roundabouts—as well as of half a dozen side-shows, including

a Fat Lady and a Try-your-Strength machine—was a small man with a purplish nose and a temper kept irritable by alcohol; and to-day the Fates had conspired to rub that temper on the raw. He swore aloud, and partly believed, that ever since coming to Henley-in-Arden he was bewitched.

He had come at the instance, and upon the guarantee, of Sir Elphinstone Breward, Baronet, C.B., K.C.V.O., a local landowner, who, happening to visit Warwick on County Council business, which in its turn happened to coincide with a fair day, had been greatly struck by the title "Imperial" painted over Mr. Gavel's show, and with soldierly promptness had engaged the whole outfit—Roundabouts, Fat Lady, and all—for his forthcoming Primrose Fête.

If beside his addiction to alcohol Mr. Gavel had a weakness, it was the equally British one of worshipping a title. Flattered by the honest baronet's invitation, he had met it almost more than half-way; and had dispatched six of his shabbiest horses to Birmingham to be repainted for the fête, and labelled "Kitchener," "Bobs," "Cecil Rhodes," "Doctor Jim," "Our Joe," and "Strathcona"—names (as he observed) altogether more up to date than the "Black Prince," "Brown Bess," "Saladin," and others they superseded.

Respect for his patron had further prompted Mr. Gavel, on the morning of the fête, to don a furred overcoat, and to swear off drink for the day. This abstinence, laudable in itself, disastrously affected his temper, and brought him before noon into wordy conflict with his engineer. The quarrel, suppressed for the time, flamed out afresh in the afternoon, and, unfortunately, at a moment when Sir Elphinstone, as chairman, was introducing the star orator from London. Opprobrious words had reached the ears of the company gathered on the platform, and Sir Elphinstone had interrupted his remarks about Bucking Up and Thinking Imperially to send a policeman through the crowd with instructions to stop that damned brawling.

If the great Napoleon may be forgiven for losing his temper when at five in the afternoon from the slope of La Belle Alliance he watched the Prussians breaking through the opposite woods, while Grouchy yet tarried, let it be pleaded in excuse for Mr. Gavel that ever since eleven a.m. he had been awaiting the arrival of his six newly-painted horses. The Birmingham decorator had pledged himself to deliver them early at Preston Bagot, and Mr. Gavel knew him for a man of his word. He had made arrangements for their prompt conveyance to the field. He did not doubt, but he was undeniably anxious.

Imagine, then, his feelings when at four o'clock or a little later a wagon—the wagon of his hiring—rolled into the enclosure bringing one horse only, and in place of the others a pile of tent-cloths and theatrical boxes, on which sat and smiled Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer, his professional rivals.

He had been drinking ginger-ale all day, and in copious draughts. It must be confessed that he lost his temper woefully, and so vociferously that Sir Elphinstone this time descended from the platform, and strode across the meadow to demand what the devil he meant by it. Nor was even this the last drop in the cup of Mr. Gavel's bitterness; for the baronet, struck by Mr. Mortimer's appearance and genteel address, at once invited him to set up his tent and save the situation so desperately compromised.

Sam Bossom, perceiving that the wagon stood on ground well adapted for pitching a tent, cheerfully proceeded to unload. Mr. Gavel watched in speechless rage. Old Holly, the carrier, suggested that there was no need to give up hope of the horses. They might turn up yet before dark. Boats came down the canal at all hours of the day.

"Then why couldn't you have waited and given 'em a chance?" foamed the proprietor; and commanding Holly to turn the empty wagon and follow, he strode off in the direction of the Wharf. The afternoon was

hot. His furred coat oppressed him; his shoes—of patent leather, bought ready-made—pinched his feet. On the road he came to a public-house, entered, and gulped down two “goes” of whisky. Still the wagon lagged behind. Re-emerging, he took the road again, his whole man hot within his furred coat as a teapot within a cosy.

In this temper, then, Mr. Gavel came to the wharf at Preston Bagot locks, and finding the *Success to Commerce* moored there with a tall man apparently in charge, demanded if he came from Birmingham.

“Or thereabouts,” answered the tall man, eyeing him. “From there or thereabouts. And, if I mistake not, you are the—er—person of whom I came in search.”

The man’s voice took Mr. Gavel somewhat aback. It did not resemble an ordinary bargee’s. But at the moment he could no more check the explosion of his wrath than you can hold back a cork in the act of popping from a bottle of soda-water.

“Curse your laziness!” exploded Mr. Gavel; “and this is your notion of searching for me, is it?”

“It appears to be a pretty successful one,” said Dr. Glasson. “I’ve discovered you, anyhow; and now I suggest to you that swearing won’t help the reckoning between us.”

“Oh, stop your fine talk! I’ve heard of sea-lawyers, and I suppose you’re a canal specimen. Carriage was paid at the other end, and you know it. I catch you here loafing, and I’m going to dispute the bill—which means that you’ll get the sack, my friend, whether I recover the money or no. Pounds out of pocket I am by this, not to speak of reputation. Where are they? Where have you put ’em?”

“That’s what I’ll trouble you to answer, sir.”

“My hosses! . . . You don’t mean to tell me——” Mr. Gavel smote his brow. “But you said just now you were looking for me!” he cried.

“You act well, sir,” said Dr. Glasson sternly. “It

is your profession. But, as it happens, I have made inquiries along the canal, and am proof against your bluster. A boat, the *Success to Commerce*—a bargeman in a furred overcoat—the combination is unusual, and not (I put it to you) likely to be repeated on this short stretch of waterway. Confess, Mr.—confess, sir, your game is up. Kidnapping is an ugly offence in this country, and, in short, I advise you without more ado to hand over the two children.”

Mr. Gavel leaned back against a crane for support.

“Children? What children?” he repeated, staring.

Clearly here was some hideous blunder, and he perceived at length that the person addressing him in no way resembled a bargee.

“But—but my hosses?” he gasped.

Just then the sound of wheels fell on his ears, and both men faced about. Mr. Gavel made sure that this must be old Holly with his wagon. But no; there came around the corner a cart with a single horse, driven by a lad; and the lad, pulling up before the store, went in, and in less than a minute reappeared staggering under a heavy burden.

“But, hullo!” cried Mr. Gavel, pulling himself together, and striding towards the cart. “It is——” he began incredulously; but after a second look raised his voice in triumphant recognition and demand. “My hosses! What are you doing with my hosses?”

“Yours, be they?” the lad answered. “Well, I’m takin’ ’em to Henley, as you sent word.”

“I sent word?” echoed Mr. Gavel.

“Somebody sent word,” the lad persisted. “An’ in the devil of a ’urry, ’cordin’ to the child what brought it. But, as I said to mother, where’s the sense in sendin’ messages by children?”

“Children?”

“There was two on ’em—a boy an’ a girl——”

“Ah!” interrupted Dr. Glasson. “Describe them, please.”

The lad scratched his head.

"Mother took the message. I was indoors, havin' tea, an' didn' see more'n a glimpse. But here comes father," he added briskly, as again wheels were heard on the road, and old Holly drove into the yard with his belated wagon.

"You must admit, sir," said Dr. Glasson, addressing Mr. Gavel, "that circumstances are beginning to look too strong for you."

"Oh, to — with circumstances!" retorted Mr. Gavel. "Mortimer's in this, for a fiver. I don't see how—I don't make head 'or tail of it; but the tail you've got hold of belongs to the wrong dog. Kidnapping, is it? A couple of children you want? Suspect me, do you? Well, suspect away. I don't mind. I've got my hosses; and when we're loaded up you can climb on board the wagon, if you like, and we'll pay a call on Mortimer. I bet he's your man; and the harder you pinch Mortimer to make him squeal, the better you'll please me."

"Arthur Miles," demanded Tilda in a harsh whisper, "what're yer doin' 'ere?"

"Listening," answered the boy simply.

"I 'opes yer likes it! . . . We're in a tight corner, Arthur Miles, an' nothing for it but bolt while they're talkin'."

"We might hide here in the dark—but, of course, you know best."

"O' course I do," Tilda agreed. "'Ide 'ere? An' who's to warn the Mortimers?"

She stooped and again caught 'Dolph under her arm. Then she straightened herself up and stood listening to the voices, clearly audible from the entrance of the store below.

"Tip-toe, mind! There's on'y a board between us—and quiet, for your life!"

They stole to the steps and paused for a moment, peering into the gloom. Here too their enemies' voices were audible, but around the corner of the store. The

coast was clear. They crept down the steps and gained the road. In the highway Tilda drew breath.

"Things look pretty bad," she said; "but things ain't altogether so bad as they look. Where we're goin' we'll find Bill; an' Bill's a tower o' strength."

"But we don't even know the way," objected Arthur Miles.

"No, but 'Dolph does. 'Ere, 'Dolph"—she set down the dog—"you got to lead us where the others went; an' at the end of it there's a little surprise for yer. 'Ere?"

'Dolph heard, shook himself, wagged his tail, and padded forward into the gathering darkness; ran a little way and halted, until they overtook him. He understood.

"If they catch up with us we must nip into a gateway," panted Tilda.

But as yet there was no sound of wheels on the road behind. They passed the Hollys' cottage and stable, and braved the undiscovered country. The road twisted between tall hedgerows, black in the shadow of elms. No rain had fallen for many days, and the powdered dust lay so thick underfoot, that twice or thrice Tilda halted—still holding the boy's hand—in doubt if they had wandered off upon turf. But always, as they hesitated thus, 'Dolph came trotting back to reassure them.

In this manner, trotting and pausing, they had covered a bare three-quarters of a mile when there smote on their ears a throbbing of the air—a thud-thud which Arthur Miles took for the beat of a factory engine, so like it was to the echoes that had floated daily, and all day long, across the Orphanage wall; but Tilda, after hearkening a moment, announced it to be the bass of Gavel's steam organ. The hoot of a whistle presently confirmed her guess.

'Dolph was steering them steadily towards the sound; and a glow in the sky, right ahead and easily discernible, would have guided them even without his help. Tilda recognised that glow also.

“ And the best is, it means Bill,” she promised.

But they did not catch the tune itself until they were close upon the meadow. At the top of a rise in the road it broke on them, the scene almost simultaneously with its music ; and a strange scene it was, and curiously beautiful—a slope, and below the slope a grassy meadow set with elms ; a blaze of light, here and there in the open spaces ; in one space a steam roundabout revolving with mirrors, in another the soft glow of naphtha-lamps through tent cloth ; glints of light on the boughs, dark shadows of foliage, a moving crowd, its murmur so silenced by music and the beat of a drum that it seemed to sway to and fro without sound, now pressing forward into the glare, now dissolving into the penumbra.

Arthur Miles paused, trembling. He had never seen the like. But Tilda had recovered all her courage.

“ This,” she assured him, “ is a little bit of all right,” and taking his hand, led him down the slope and posted him in the shadow of a thorn-bush.

“ Wait here,” she enjoined ; and he waited, while she descended cautiously towards the roundabout with its revolving mirrors.

He lost sight of her. He lay still where she had commanded him to lie, watching the many twinkling lights, watching the roundabout turn and flash and come to a stop, watching the horseplay of boys and maidens as one set clambered off laughing and another pressed forward into their places. The tune droned in his ears, came to an end, went on again. He drowsed to its recurrent beat. From his couch in the wet shadow he gazed up at the stars riding overhead, above the elms.

At the end of twenty minutes Tilda stole back to him ; and, softly though she came, her footfall woke him out of his dreams with a start. Yet, and though he could barely discern her from the shadow of the thorn-bush, he knew on the instant that she brought disappointment.

“ What’s the matter ? ” he asked.

“ Everything’s the matter. Bill’s gone ! ”