CHAPTER XIV

ADVENTURE OF THE PRIMROSE FÊTE

"Confusion and Exeunt."—*Old Stage Direction.*

"GONE?" echoed the boy blankly.

"'Ad a row with Gavel this very aft'rnoon. Got the sack, with a week's pay, an' packed up his kit after tea an' 'ooked it. Bess Burton told me all about it, knowin' me an' Bill to be friends—she's the woman sits at the pay-table an' gives the change. 'E wouldn' tell nobody where 'e was goin'. Ain't cryin' about it, are yer?"

"No," he answered, as she peered close to him in the darkness. "Only we'd built everything on Bill, hadn't we?"

Tilda did not answer this question.

"That's the way with Bill," she said loyally. "Folks never know 'is worth till they miss 'im. Bess allowed to me that before the evenin's out Gavel will be offerin' 'is shirt to 'ave 'im back — an' Bess don't know the worst neither. They've put on a boy to work the engine, an' Bill 'as told me things about that boiler o' Gavel's . . . I couldn' get near enough to read the pressure, but by the way 'e was pilin' in coal——"

She broke off and gazed down the slope. Even as once the poet Gray looked down from the Windsor's heights up the distant prospect of Eton College, so did she regard the cluster of naphtha lights around the galloping horses on which, unconscious of their doom, the little victims played.

"But there's no call to give up an' cry about it," she resumed bravely. "We're in a tight place, but it's our turn to play. (That's another sayin' o' Bill's.

Oh, dear, I wish you'd known 'im !) You see, we know where Glasson is an' what 'e's up to, an' can look out accordin'. That's one card to us. An' the next is, I've seen Sam Bossom an' warned 'im. 'E was standin' outside 'is show, an' not darin' to go in ; the reason bein' Mortimer 'ad picked up a girl from the shootin' gallery, that used to belong to 'is company, and 'e an' she an' Mrs. Mortimer are doing the last act of *Othello* life size an' tuppence coloured, an' Sam says 'e can't look on an' command 'is feelin's. 'E was considerable surprised to see me, an' started scoldin' ; but I left 'im promisin' that 'e'd put a stop to Glasson some'ow, if it had to be on the point o' the jaw ; an' we're to nip across and 'ide under the Grand Stand until he comes for us or sends word. See it ? "

She pointed across to a crowded platform on the farther slope—a structure of timber draped with scarlet cloth, and adorned with palms and fairy lamps. It stood on the rise a little above and to the left of the roundabout, the flares of which lit up the faces and gay dresses of Sir Elphinstone's guests gathered there to watch the show.

The two children made down the slope towards it, very cautiously, fetching a circuit of the crowd. But as they reached the bottom of the dip, on a sudden the crowd spread itself in lines right across their path. Along these lines three or four men ran shouting, with ropes and lanterns in their hands ; and for one horrible moment it flashed on Tilda that all this agitation must be the hue-and-cry.

" Clear the course ! Course, course ! Just startin'—the great Ladies' Race ! Clear the course ! "

So it was only a race, after all ! Tilda gripped the boy's hand tightly, and held him at stand-still some paces in rear of the crowd. But of this caution there was little need. All the faces were turned the other way ; all the crowd pressed forwards against the ropes which the lantern-bearers drew taut to fence off the course. A pistol-shot cracked out. Someone cried, " They're

off!" and a murmur grew and rolled nearer—rising, as it approached, from a murmur into great waves—waves of Homeric laughter.

The race went by, and a stranger race Tilda had never beheld. The competitors were all women, of all ages—village girls, buxom matrons, withered crones—and each woman held a ladle before her in which an egg lay balanced. Some were in sun-bonnets, others in their best Sunday headdress. Some had kilted their skirts high. Others were all dishevelled with the ardour of the race. The leader—a gaunt figure with spoon held rigidly before her, with white stockinged legs, and a truly magnificent stride—had come and passed before Tilda could believe her eyes. After a long interval three others tottered by in a cluster. The fifth dropped her egg and collapsed beside it, to be hauled to her feet and revived by the stewards amid inextinguishable laughter from the crowd. In all, fourteen competitors rolled in, some with empty ladles, some laughing and protesting that not a step farther could they stir. But, long before the crowd closed in, Tilda saw the winner breast a glimmering line of tape stretched at the end of the course, and heard the shouts saluting her victory.

"But who is it?"

"Miss Sally!"

"Miss Sally, if ever you heard the like! . . . But there! blood will tell."

"It's years since I seen her," said a woman. "You don't say! Never feared man nor devil, my mother used to tell. An' to run in a race along with the likes of Jane Pratt! But you never can reckon wi' the gentry—what they'll do, or what they won't."

"With half the county, too, lookin' on from the Grand Stand! I bet Sir Elphinstone's cussin'."

"And I'll bet Miss Sally don't care how hard he cusses. She could do a bit o' that too in her time, by all accounts."

"Ay, a monstrous free-spoken lady always. Swearin' don't sit well upon womankind, I allow—not as a rule. But when there's blood, a damn up or down—what is it?

For my part I never knew a real gentleman—or lady for that matter—let out a downright thumper but I want to cry 'Old England for ever!'"

Finding it hopeless to skirt the crowd, the children made a plunge through it, with 'Dolph at their heels. But as the crush abated and they breasted the farther slope, Tilda made two discoveries; the first, that whereas a few minutes since the platform had held a company of people among its palms and fairy-lamps, it was now deserted; the second, that the mob at the winning-post had actually shouldered Miss Sally, and was carrying her in triumph towards the platform, with a brass band bobbing ahead and blaring *See, the Conquering Hero comes!*

This second discovery was serious, for the procession's line of march threatened to intercept them. But luckily the bandsmen, who set the pace, moved slowly, and by taking hands and running the children reached the platform in time, skirted its darker side, and dived under its scarlet draperies into the cavernous darkness beneath the boards.

Here they drew breath, and Tilda again clutched the dog. They were in time, but with a very little to spare. In less than a minute the mob surged all around the platform, shouting, hooraying.

"Three cheers for Miss Sally! The Ham—where's the Ham? Give Miss Sally the Ham! Silence, there—silence for Sir Elphinstone! Speech from Sir Elphinstone! Speech!"

By and by the hubbub died down a little, but still there were cries of "Sir Elphinstone for ever!" "Miss Sally for ever!" and "Your sister's won the Ham, sir!" A high-pitched voice on the outskirts of the throng began to chant—

"For really it was a remarkable 'am!"

but got no further, being drowned first by sporadic, uneasy laughter, and then by a storm of hisses. A tre-

mendous roar of laughter followed, and this (although Tilda could not guess it) was evoked by Miss Sally's finding the ham where it stood derelict on a table among the greenhouse plants, lifting it off its plate, and brandishing it before the eyes of her admirers.

Tilda could see nothing of this. But she was listening with all her might, and as the uproar died down again she caught the accents of a man's voice attempting a speech.

"My friends," it was saying, still lifting itself higher against the good-humoured interruptions, "my very good friends—impossible not to be gratified—expression of good will—venture to say, on the whole—thoroughly enjoyable afternoon. My sister"—(interruptions and cheers for Miss Sally)—"my sister begs me to say—highly gratified—spirit of the thing—but, if I may plead, some degree of fatigue only natural—won't misunderstand if I ask—disperse—quietly as possible—eh? Oh, yes. 'God save the King,' by all means—much obliged, reminder—thank you—yes, certainly."

Thereupon the band played the National Anthem, and the throng, after yet another outbreak of cheering, dispersed. Followed a silence in the darkness under the platform, broken only by the distant thudding bass of the roundabout's steam organ; and then between the boards there sounded a liquid chuckle, much like a blackbird's, and a woman's voice said—

"Come, my dear brother, say it out! The Countess has gone; everybody has gone—she must have stampeded 'em, by the way—and as the Jew said, when a thunderstorm broke on the picnic, 'Here's a fuss over a little bit of ham!' Well, my dear, there has always been this about Sally—a man can swear before her *sans gêne*. So, to give you a start, how did they take it?"

"If after these years I didn't know you to be incorrigible——" growled the voice of Sir Elphinstone.

"'For ladies of all ages,' the bills said."

"'Ladies!'"

"I am quoting your own bill—I'll bet a fiver, too,

that you drafted it. Anyway, I'm rising forty—though I'd defy 'em to tell it by my teeth. And since they passed me for a lady—oh, Elphinstone, it *was* a lark! And I never thought I had the wind for it. You remember Kipling—you are always quoting that young man—

"'The dun he fled like a stag of ten, but the mare like a barren doe.'

Well, that's how it was: 'Like a barren doe,' I give you my word."

"My dear Sally!"

"Shameless, was it? My dear Elphinstone, you've only to bill it, and I'll do Lady Godiva for 'em next year—at *my* time of life. But if you don't like Kipling, what do you say to this?

"'For really this was a remarkable Ham,
A twenty-pound solid Imperial Ham,
And old Mrs. Liddicott
Tucked up her petticoat——'

Which reminds me that the crowd specially cheered my white Balbriggans. They are out of date, but I could never fancy my legs in anything but white."

"What on earth are you reading?"

"The local paper—Opposition. Haven't you seen it? There's a whole column in verse about you, Elphinstone; hits you off to a hair, and none so badly written. I'd a mind to show it to the Countess and Lady Mary, but slipped it under the table cloth and at the last moment forgot it in your eloquence. You really must listen—

"'Sir Elphinstone Breward
He rang for his steward,
And "Damme," said he, looking up from his letters,
"This side of the county
That feeds on my bounty
's forgotten all proper respect of its betters."'"

"The devil!" interrupted Sir Elphinstone. "It's that dirty little Radical, Wrightson."

"You recognise the style? It gets neater, to my thinking, as it goes on—

" 'Agitators and pillagers
Stir up my villagers—
Worst of those fellows, so easily led!
Some haven't food enough,
Else it ain't good enough,
Others object to sleep three in a bed.

" 'Deuce take their gratitude!
"Life"—that's the attitude—
"Dullish and hard, on the parish half-crown!"
Dull? Give 'em circuses!
Hard? Ain't there work'uses?
What *can* they see to attract 'em to town?'

—Neat, in its way," commented Miss Sally, pausing.

"Neat? *I* call it subversive and damnable!"

"Listen! The next is a stinger—

" 'Something quite recent, now:
"Drainage ain't decent," now:
Damme, when *was* it? I've known, if you please,
Old tenants, better ones,
Crimean veterans—
Never heard *they* required w.c.'s—' "

"My *dear* Sally!"

"I read you the thing as it's printed," said Miss Sally, with another liquid chuckle.

["Ain't it just 'eavingly?" whispered Tilda below, clutching the boy's arm while she listened.

"What?"

"The voice of 'er. If I could on'y speak words that way!"]

"He goes on," pursued Miss Sally, "to tell how you and Saunders—that's your new bailiff's name, is it not?—cooked up this woman's race between you as a step towards saving the Empire. The language is ribald in places, I allow; but I shouldn't greatly wonder if that, more or less, is how it happened. And any way I've come to the rescue, and kept the Imperial Ham in the family."

"I have sometimes thought, Sally—if you will forgive my putting it brutally—that you are half a Radical yourself."

Thereat, after a moment's pause, the lady laughed

musically. Almost in the darkness you could see her throwing back her head and laughing. She had a noble contralto voice, with a rich mannish purr in it.

"You are mistaken, Elphinstone. But even so, my excellent brother, you might understand it—if your estate lay in the west and ran with Miles Chandon's."

Tilda's small body stiffened with a gasp, 'Miles Chandon'—the name had sounded on her hearing distinct as the note of a bell. There was no mistake: it hummed in her ears yet. Or was it the blood rushing to her ears as she sat bolt upright in the darkness, listening, breathing hard?

Sir Elphinstone, for some reason, had not answered his sister. When at length he spoke, it was in a changed tone, at once careless and more affectionate.

"See anything of Chandon in these days?"

"Nothing at all; or—to put the same thing differently—just so much of him as his tenants see. We were talking of tenantry. Miles Chandon leaves everything to his steward. Now, between ourselves, all stewards, land agents, bailiffs—whatever you choose to call 'em—are the curse of our system, and Miles Chandon's happens to be the worst specimen."

"H'm," said Sir Elphinstone reflectively. "Poor devil!" he added, a few moments later, and then—Miss Sally giving him no encouragement to pursue the subject—"Ten minutes past seven—the car will be waiting. What do you say to getting home for dinner?"

"If I may bring the Ham." Miss Sally laughed and pushed back her chair. "Wait a minute—we will wrap it up in the poem. 'Exit Atalanta, carrying her Ham in a newspaper'—how deliciously vulgar! Elphinstone, you have always been the best of brothers; you are behaving beautifully—and—and I never could resist shocking you; but we're pretty fond of one another, eh?"

"I've consistently spoilt you; if that's what you mean," he grumbled.

They were leaving the platform. Tilda whispered to the boy to take hold of 'Dolph.

"And I'm goin' to leave yer for a bit." She edged past him on hands and knees towards the vallance draperies. "You 'eard what she said? Well, keep quiet 'ere an' don't be frightened. If Sam comes, tell 'im I'll be back in five minutes."

She dived out beneath the vallance, caught a glimpse of Miss Sally and Sir Elphinstone making their way at a brisk pace through the crowd, and hurried up the slope in pursuit. It was difficult to keep them in sight, for everyone made way upon recognising them, but showed less consideration for a small panting child; and the head of the field, by the exit gate, was packed by a most exasperating throng pressing to admire a giant motor-car that waited in the roadway with lamps blazing and a couple of men in chauffeurs' dress keeping guard in attitudes of sublime *hauteur*. Sir Elphinstone, with Miss Sally on his arm, reached the car while yet Tilda struggled in the gateway. A policeman roughly ordered her back. She feigned to obey, and dropping out of sight, crawled forth past the policeman's boots, with her head almost butting the calves of a slow-moving yeoman farmer. Before she could straighten herself up Sir Elphinstone had climbed into the car after his sister, and the pair were settling down in their rugs. One of the chauffeurs was already seated, the other, having set the machine throbbing, was already clambering to his seat. The crowd set up three parting cheers, and Miss Sally, remembering her Ham, held it aloft in farewell.

But while Miss Sally waved and laughed, of a sudden, amid the laughter and cheers and throbbing of the motor, a small child sprang out of the darkness and clung upon the step.

"Lady! Lady!"

Miss Sally stared down upon the upturned face.

"Miles Chandon, lady?—where does 'e live?—For the Lord's sake——"

But already Sir Elphinstone had called the order. The car shot away smoothly.

"Elphinstone—a moment, please! Stop! The child——"

"Eh? . . . Stop the car! . . . Anything wrong?"

Miss Sally peered back into the darkness.

"There was a child . . . We have hurt her, I fear. Tell George to jump down and inquire."

But Tilda was not hurt. On the contrary, she was running and dodging the crowd at that moment as fast as her hurt leg permitted. For in the press of it, not three yards away, by the light of the side lamp, she had caught sight of Dr. Glasson and Gavel.

They were on foot, and Gavel had seen her, she could make no doubt. He was bearing down straight upon her.

Not until she had run fifty yards did she pluck up courage to look back. Gavel was nowhere in sight. The car had come to a standstill, and the people were yelling. Was it after her? Was *this* the hue-and-cry?

They were certainly yelling—and behaving too, in the strangest fashion. They seemed by one impulse to be running from the car and crowding back towards the gate. They were fighting—positively fighting—their way into the field. The police could not stop them, but were driven in with a rush; and in the centre of this rush Tilda caught sight of Gavel again. His back was turned to her. He was struggling for admission, and like a maniac. Glasson she could not see.

Sir Elphinstone had climbed out of the car, and came striding back demanding to know what was the matter. It stuck in his head that a child had been hurt, perhaps killed.

A dozen voices answered—

"The roundabouts!" "Explosion at the roundabouts!" "Engine blown up—twenty killed an' injured, they say!"

"Explosion? . . . Nonsense!"

Tilda saw him thrust his way into the gateway, his tall figure towering above the pack there as he halted

and gazed down the hill. In the darkness and confusion it was easy enough for her to scramble upon the hedge unobserved, and at the cost of a few scratches only. From the top of the hedge she too gazed.

The roundabout had come to a standstill. Around it, at a decent distance, stood a dark circle of folk. But its lights still blazed, its mirrors still twinkled. She could detect nothing amiss.

What had happened? Tilda had forgotten Miss Sally, and was anxious now but for Arthur Miles. A dozen fears suggested themselves. She ought never to have left him . . .

She dropped from the hedge into the field, and ran downhill to the platform. It stood deserted, the last few fairy-lamps dying down amid the palms and greenery. In the darkness at its rear there was no need of caution, and she plunged under the vallance boldly.

"Arthur! Arthur Miles! Are you all right? . . . Where are you?"

A thin squeal answered her, and she drew back, her skin contracting in a shudder, even to the roots of her hair. For, putting out her hand, she had touched flesh—naked, human flesh.

"Wh—who are you?" she stammered, drawing back her fingers.

"I'm the Fat Lady," quavered a voice. "Oh, help me! I'm wedged here and can't move!"