CHAPTER XV

ADVENTURE OF THE FAT LADY

"Gin a body meet a body."—BURNS.

"BUT what's 'appened?" demanded Tilda, recovering herself a little. "And 'ow? And oh! what's become of the boy, Arthur Miles?"

"There is a boy, somewhere at the back of me," the Fat Lady answered; "and a dog too. You can talk to them across me; but I couldn't move, not if I was crushin' them ever so."

Tilda called softly to the prisoners, and to her relief Arthur Miles answered out of the darkness, assuring her, albeit in a muffled voice, that they were both safe.

"But what's the *meanin'* of it?" Tilda demanded again.

"The igsplosion's the meanin' of it."

"But there ain't *been* no explosh'n. And anyway," said Tilda, "you ain t tellin' me you been *blown* 'ere?"

"Igsplosion or no igsplosion," replied the Fat Lady incontestably, "'ere I h'am."

"*Sure* yer can't move?" Tilda coaxed.

At this the Fat Lady showed some irritation.

"I ought to know what I'm capable of by this time . . . If you could run along and fetch somebody with a tackle and pulley now——"

"I got a friend comin' presently. 'E's quite a 'andy young feller, *an'* tender-'earted: 'e won't leave yer like this, no fear . . . But, o' course, it'll be a shock to 'im, 'appening in upon us an' findin'—well, so much *more* 'n 'e expected. I'm thinkin' 'ow to break it to 'im gently, 'ere in the dark." Tilda considered for a while. It might 'elp if I knew yer name. 'Twouldn't be fair—

would it ?—to start off that we'd got a surprise for 'im, an' would 'e guess ? "

" He'll find out, fast enough, when he strikes a light," said the Fat Lady between resigned despair and professional pride. " But my name's Mrs. Lobb, when you introjuice him."

" Widow ? "

" I don't know why you should suppose it."

" No," said Tilda after musing a moment ; " there ain't no real reason, o' course. On'y I thought—— An' you not mentionin' a husband, under the circumstances."

To her astonishment, Mrs. Lobb gave way and shook with mountainous sobs.

" I'm a maiden lady," she confessed, " and I'll conceal it no longer, when, God knows, I may be lyin' here punished for my vanity . . . But 'twasn't all vanity, neither : it sounded more comfortable. If it had been vanity, I'd ha' chosen Montmorency or St. Clair—not Lobb. Wouldn't I now ? . . . Of course, you won't understand, at your age ; but there's a sort of *sheltered* feelin'. An' I'm a bundle of nerves. You should see me," wound up Mrs. Lobb enigmatically, " with a mouse."

But at this moment Tilda whispered " 'Ush ! " Someone was stealthily lifting the vallance. " Is that you, Sam ? " she challenged.

" Aye, aye, missie. All safe ? "

" *And* snug . . . Can yer risk striking a match ? Fact is, we got a lady friend 'ere, an' she wants yer 'elp badly."

Sam struck a sulphur match.

" Good Lord ! " he breathed, staring across the blue flame, and still as he stared his eyes grew larger and rounder.

" 'Er name's Lobb," explained Tilda. ' I oughter a-told yer."

" 'Ow did it 'appen ? " asked Sam in an awed voice.

" Igsplosion," said the Fat Lady.

" Is—is there *goin'* to be one ? "

The match burned low in Sam's trembling fingers, and he dropped it with an exclamation of pain.

"There *was* one," said the Fat Lady. "At Gavel's roundabouts. Leastways, the folks came chargin' into my tent, which is next door, cryin' out that the boiler was blowin' up. I travel with Gavel, sir—as his Fat Lady——"

"Oh!" Sam drew a long breath.

"Which, when I heard it, sir, and the outcries, I burst out through the back of the tent—bein' a timorous woman—and ran for shelter. My fright, sir, I'll leave you to imagine. And then, as I crawled under the boards here, a dog flew at me—and bein' taken unawares—on all fours, too—I rolled over with my legs twisted—and here I am stuck. There's one joist pinnin' my left shoulder, and my leg's jammed under another; and stir I cannot."

Sam lit another match.

"I was fearin'——" he began, but broke off. "If you could manage, ma'am, to draw up your knee an inch or so—or if you wouldn' mind my takin' a pull——"

"Not at all," said Mrs. Lobb. "I'm used to bein' pinched."

Sam gripped the knee-pan firmly, and hauled. "O—ow!" cried Mrs. Lobb. But the wrench had set her free to uncross her legs, and she did so, murmuring her gratitude.

There had been (Sam now explained) a false alarm. In the midst of the merry-making, and while the roundabouts were crowded and gonig at full speed, the boy in charge of the engine had taken occasion to announce to the lady at the pay-table that his pressure was a hundred-and-forty-seven, and what had taken the safety valve he couldn't think. Whereupon the lady at the pay-table had started up, scattering her coins, and shrieked; and this had started the stampede. "Which," added Sam in a whisper to Tilda, "was lucky for us in a way; becos Glasson, after tacklin' Mortimer be'ind the scenes an' threatening to have his blood in a bottle, had started off with Gavel to fetch the perlice. An' the question is if they won't be watchin' the gates by this time."

"In *my* young days," announced the Fat Lady, with disconcerting suddenness, "it was thought rude to whisper."

Tilda took a swift resolution.

"The truth is, ma'am, we're in trouble, an' 'idin' 'ere. I wouldn' dare to tell yer, on'y they say that people o' your—I mean, in your——"

"Profession," suggested the Fat Lady.

"—are kind-'earted by nature. I belongs, ma'am—leastways, I *did*—to Maggs's Circus—if you know it——"

"I've heard Maggs's troupe very well spoken of. But as you'll understand, I do very little visitin'."

"I was 'appy enough with Maggs's, ma'am. But first of all a pony laid me up with a kick, an' then I stole Arthur Miles 'ere out of the 'Oly Innercents——"

Tilda broke down for a moment, recovered herself, and with sobs told her story.

For a while, after she had ended it, the Fat Lady kept silence. Sam, breathing hard, still doubtful of the child's bold policy, feared what this silence might portend.

"Give me your hand, young man," said the Fat Lady at length.

Sam reached out in the darkness, and grasped hers fervently.

"I didn't ask you to shake it. I want to be helped out to the fresh air, and then these children'll march straight home with me to my caravan."

"But," stammered Sam, not yet clear that he had found an ally, "—but that's leadin' 'em straight into Gavel's arms!"

"Young man," replied the lady austerely, "it leads into no man's arms." But a moment later she dropped her voice, and added with a touch of pathos, "I'm the loneliest woman in the world, outside of show hours; and if you thought a little you might know it."

"I see," said Sam contritely.

"And, what's more, inside my own caravan I've my wits about me. Outside and among folks—well, maybe you've seen an owl in the daylight with the small birds.

mobbin' him . . . Now about yourself and the Mortimers—from this child's story there's no evidence yet to connect her or the boy with either of you. The man Hucks knows, and that carrier fellow at the wharf saw them for a minute, with Mortimer standin' by. But that's no evidence for the police; and, anyway, this Glasson can't touch you until he gets hold of the children. If you'll leave it to me, he shan't do that for twenty-four hours. And now—isn't it time you were packing up your show? You'll be gettin' back to the boat to-night, I suppose? What about the Mortimers?"

Sam explained that he would be driving back with the tent, and intended to sleep on board. The Mortimers would repose themselves at a small public-house, "The Vine Leaf." In the morning they would join forces again and proceed to Stratford. Address there: "The Red Cow."

He delivered this explanation jerkily, in the intervals of lugging the lady forth from her durance. Tilda, scrambling forth ahead of her, noted with inexpressible relief that the aspect of the field was entirely changed. The crowd had melted away, the flares of the roundabout were extinguished, and a faint glow of lamplight through canvas told where the Mortimers' tent, far to the left, awaited dismemberment. Five or six lanterns dotted the lower slopes, where the smaller shows—the Aunt Sally, the cocoa-nut shies, and the swing-boats—were being hastily packed. Overhead, in a clean heaven, rode the stars, and by their glimmer the children saw their new protectress draw herself up in all her Amazonian amplitude. She wore a low bodice of pink, with spangles, and a spangled skirt descended to her knees. Beneath them her columnar calves were bare as an infant's. She extended an arm, and pointed towards her caravan.

"Bear around to the right," she commanded. "Keep a look-out on me wnen I get to the van, and creep up as quietly as you can when I reach the step and bend to pull up my socks. Good-night, young man—one good

turn deserves another: and now be off, you two . . Yes, you may bring the dog. Only I hope he doesn't suffer from fleas, for a flea with me is a serious matter."

They ran around, gained the steps in safety, and were admitted to the Fat Lady's virgin bower. It lay in darkness, and enjoining them to stand still and keep silence, she drew the blinds discreetly before lighting her lamp. She did this (Tilda noted) with extreme deftness, reaching out a hand to a dark shelf and picking up the match-box as accurately as though she saw it. At once, too, Tilda noted that in the lamp's rays the whole interior of the caravan shone like a new pin. A stove stood at the end facing the doorway, and beside the stove a closed washstand of polished teak. A dressing-table, a wardrobe, and a dresser-sideboard fitted with lockers occupied one side; along the other ran a couch with a padded back, which, let down, became a mattress and converted the couch into a bed. All the lockers gleamed with brasswork; all the draperies were of muslin or dimity, immaculately white; and looking-glass panelled the doors of every cupboard. These many mirrors caused the interior to appear even fuller of the Fat Lady than it actually was. They reflected her from every angle, and multiplied her into a crowd.

"Dear me!" she said, glancing around on these reflections, "I'll have to turn you out again while I undress. But that won't take long, and you'll be safe enough beneath the van."

So after providing them with a hunk of cake apiece from one of the sideboard lockers, and peeping forth to make sure the coast was clear, she dismissed them with instructions to creep into the darkness under the steps, and there lie quiet until she summoned them.

Ten minutes later she leaned forth again and called "Coo-ee!" very softly, and they returned to find her in the white bed, recumbent in a coquettish nightgown. She had folded and stowed her day garments away—Tilda could not imagine where—and a mattress and rugs lay on the floor, ready spread for the children. Nor was

this all. On the sideboard stood a plateful of biscuits, and on the stove a spirit-lamp, with a kettle already beginning to sing, and a teapot and three cups and saucers.

With a turn of the hand, scarcely stirring from her recumbent posture, the Fat Lady closed the door and shot its small brass bolt. Then with a quick series of movements, reaching forward as soon as the kettle boiled, she filled the teapot, emptied the rest of the boiling water into the flashing nickel basin of the washstand, set down the kettle, turned and shut a cold-water tap, and invited the ch ldren to wash before supping.

The aroma of the tea—real China tea it was—and the fragrance of scented soap—genuine Old Brown Windsor—went straight through their senses to the children's hearts. In all their lives they had known no experience so delicious.

Mrs. Lobb noted with approval that the boy drew aside and yielded Tilda the first turn at the basin. When his came she watched him, and by and by observed, " He washes like a gentleman, too."

" Not," she explained as the children drank their tea —" not that I have ever seen a gentleman wash. But women know what's dainty." Here she fell into a muse. " I've often pictered Mr. Lobb washing. These little things make so much difference." She sighed. " Well now, if you've finished your supper, we'll say our prayers and get to sleep."

" Prayers ? " queried Tilda.

As a rule, when anything happened outside her experience she sat quiet and let it happen, reserving criticism. But, chancing to look up, she had seen the boy wince at the word.

Mrs. Lobb, less observant, had taken down a Bible from the shelf above her. She opened it and read—

" ' And they departed from Kibroth-hattaavah, and encamped at Hazeroth. And they departed from Hazeroth, and pitched at Rithmah. And they departed from Rithmah, and pitched at Rimmoth-parez——

"It don't always apply," she explained, breaking off, "but takin' it straight through, you'd be surprised how often it sends you to sleep with a bit of comfort."

She read half a dozen verses, closed the book, and recited the Lord's Prayer—

"'. . . For Thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.' Now we'll go to sleep, and don't be frightened when they harness up in an hour or two. We'll be in Stratford before daybreak. Good-night, my dears—you may reach up and give me a kiss apiece if you're so minded; and I hope to goodness you don't snore!"

When they awoke, sure enough Mrs. Lobb announced that they had reached Stratford. In their dreams they had felt the van moving; but now it had come to a standstill, and, peeping forth, they saw that it stood in a broad green meadow and but a little way from a river. There were swans on the river, paddling about or slowly drifting in the pale light; and across the river they saw many clustered roofs, with a church spire to the left set among noble elms.

"That's where Shakespeare's buried," said the Fat Lady; "and the great brick building yonder—to the right, between us and the bridge—that's the Memorial Theatre where they act his plays. There's his statue, too, beside the water, and back in the town they keep the house he was born in. You can't get away from Shakespeare here. If you buy a bottle of beer, he's on the label; and if you want a tobacco-jar, they'll sell you his head and shoulders in china, with the bald top fited for a cover. It's a queer place, is Stratford."

The boy gazed. To him it was a marvellous place; and somewhere it held his secret—the secret of the Island.

"Talkin' of beer," said Tilda, "we mustn' forget Sam Bossom. At the 'Red Cow,' he said."

"But that won't be till evening," the Fat Lady warned her. "And meantime what am I to do with you?

You can't hide here all day; for one reason, I got to get up and dress. And it may be dangerous in the town for you before nightfall. Luckily, Gavel don't know either one of you by sight; but there's the chance of this Glasson havin' come along with him. For all I know, Gavel may have given him a shake-down, and Gavel's is the next van but one."

The children implored her to let them forth before the rest of the show-people awoke. They would fend for themselves, Tilda engaged, and remain in hiding all day along the river-bank below the town. Really, when the Fat Lady thought it over, this appeared the only feasible plan. But first she insisted on cooking them a breakfast of fried sausages and boiled eggs, which she managed to do without stirring from her couch, directing Tilda how to light the stove, and where to find the utensils and the provender; and next she packed a basket for them with a loaf of bread and some slices of cold ham.

Thus furnished, they bade her good-bye for the day, left the dubious 'Dolph in her charge, and tip-toeing past the rear of the caravan where slept the dreaded Gavel, gained the meadow's end, passed a weed-grown ruinated lock below the churchyard, and struck into a footpath that led down-stream between the river and a pretty hanging copse. Below this a high road crossed the river. Following it, they passed over a small tributary stream that wound between lines of pollard willows, and so headed off to their right and regained the Avon's bank.

The boy led. It seemed that the westward-running stream called to him, and that his feet trod to the tune of it. Tilda remembered this later. He was always a silent boy, and he gave no explanation; but she saw that the running water woke a new excitement in him. So long as they had followed the stagnant canal he had been curious, alert, inquisitive of every bend and bush. It was as if he had understood water by instinct, and yet the water had hitherto baffled and disappointed him.

Now it ran, and he ran too. She had much ado to keep pace with him. By and by she halted by a clump of willows and seated herself, announcing hypocritically that she was tired.

He heard, and came back contritely.

"I forgot," he said. "What has become of your crutch?"

"I left it be'ind yesterday, in the boat. There wasn' no time to go back for it."

"I am very sorry."

Tilda's conscience smote her.

"There ain't no reason to fret about *me*," she said reassuringly. "But what's taken you? There's no catchin' up with the water, however fast you run."

"It leads down to the Island. It *must*," he announced, conning the stream.

"Think so?"

She too conned it, but could read nothing of his faith in the wimpled surface.

"Sure."

The light in his eyes impressed if it did not convince her.

"Well, maybe we'll 'ave a try to-morrow," she conceded after a while. "But business is business. We must get back to Stratford an' consult Sam Bossom. And then there's a letter to be written to 'Ucks. I promised 'im, you know."

They shared their meal by the river bank; and when it was eaten, sat for a time on the scooped-out brink, while Avon ran at their feet—Arthur Miles searching again in the thumbed pages of *The Tempest* for a hint that might perchance have escaped him; Tilda assiduously intent on a page of a ladies' newspaper in which the bread had been wrapped.

It informed her under the heading of *Answers to Correspondents by "Smart Set,"* of an excellent home for Anglo-Indian children (gravel soil), of a new way to clean Brussels lace; of the number of gowns required in these days for a week-end visit; of a scale of tips for

gamekeepers. It directed her to a manicure, and instructed her how to build a pergola for an Italian garden, supposing that she lived in Suffolk and could spare half an acre facing east. She drank in all this information with an impartial appetite.

"'What a favourite it is still, the mushroom 'at!" she spelled out slowly. "W'y the other day, at Messrs. Freebody and Williams's in Regent Street, there it confronted me again in a whole bevy of new model shapes. The medium, in brown Ottoman silk, fronted with wings of fine brown or blue lustre, is quite ridiculously cheap at 27s. 6d. And a large hat in black satin, swathed with black chiffon in which lurks just a touch of real ermine, asks you no more than 35s. 9d. Truly age cannot wither nor custom stale the infinite variety of the mushroom.'"

"What nonsense are you reading?" the boy demanded.

"Nonsense?" echoed Tilda. "What's nonsense? It's—it's 'eavingly—and anyway it ain't no farther off than your Island."

They resumed their way, slightly huffed one with another; passed a group of willows; and came to a halt, surprised and irresolute.

In the centre of a small sunny clearing they beheld a tent, with the litter of a camp equipage scattered on the turf about it; and between the tent and the river, where shone the flank of a bass-wood canoe moored between the alders, an artist had set up his easel. He was a young man, tall and gaunt, and stood back a little way from his canvas with paint-brush held at a slope, while across it he studied the subject of his picture—a grey bridge and the butt-end of a grey building, with a sign-board overtopping the autumnal willows.

For a few seconds the children observed him in silence. But some sound must have warned him; for by and by he turned a quick, eager face, and caught sight of them.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, scanning them rapidly up and down. "The very thing!—that is to say,"—after a

second and more prolonged scrutiny—" the boy. He just fills the bill. 'Youthful Shakespeare Mews his Mighty Youth. The scene: Binton Bridges, beside Avon.'"

"Binton Bridges?" echoed Tilda, and walked forward to scan the sign-board.

"I must put that down," said the artist, drawing out a notebook and pencil. "Ignorance of Juvenile Population in respect of Immediate Surroundings. Implied Reproach against Britain's Primary Schools."

But by this time the girl was standing under the sign-board and staring up at it. Four figures were depicted thereon in gay colours—a king, a priest, a soldier, and a John Bull farmer. Around them ran this legend—

"RULE ALL,
PRAY ALL,
FIGHT ALL,
PAY ALL."

"Do you 'appen to know, sir," she asked, coming back, "if there's a young woman employed 'ere?"

"There is," answered the artist. "I happen to know, because she won't let me paint her, although I offered ten dollars."

"That's a good sign," said Tilda.

"Oh, is it now?" he queried, staring after her as she marched boldly towards the house and was lost to sight between the willow-stems.