

CHAPTER XVI

ADVENTURES OF THE "FOUR-ALLS" AND OF THE CELESTIAL CHEMIST

"'Friend Sancho,' said Don Quixote, 'this Island that I promised you can neither stir nor fly.'"—CERVANTES.

"Now what precisely did your sister mean by that?" asked the artist, withdrawing his gaze and fixing it on Arthur Miles.

"She is not my sister," said the boy.

The artist—he was an extraordinarily tall young man, with a keen hatchet face, restless brown eyes, and straight auburn hair parted accurately in the middle—considered for a moment, then nodded.

"That's so. It comes out, soon as you talk . . . Well, see here now, we'll start right away. That's how Art hits me—once I take hold of a notion, I must sling in and get going. It's my temperament; and what's Art—right *there*, please—what's Art, after all, but expressed temperament? You catch the idea? You're the Infant Shakespeare, the youth to fortune and to fame unknown—

"'His listless length at noontide would he stretch'—

Stretch what you have of it—

"'And pore upon the brook that babbles by.'" "

But I don't want you to paint me," rebelled the boy.

"Goodness! Why not?"

For a moment or two Arthur Miles faced the question almost sullenly.

"I don't want my likeness taken," he explained at length.

"My young friend," the artist cheerfully assured him, "if that's your trouble, dismiss it. I can't paint a likeness for nuts."

"You are sure?"

"Well, I should say I have a grounded expectation, seeing that I claim a bigger circle of friends than any other fellow that ever studied with Carolus; and apart from their liking for me, their conviction that never under any circumstances could I catch a likeness is about the only thing they have in common. I don't say it's the cement of their friendship; but, anyway, it's an added tie."

"If Tilda doesn't mind——"

The boy hesitated, with a glance over his shoulder.

"We'll consult the lady when the portrait's finished. If she recognises you, I'll destroy the canvas; and I can't say fairer than that . . . No, I shan't regret it. We'll call it an offering to the gods . . . And now," pursued the young man, flinging in a charcoal outline in fiery haste, "we'll consider the brakes open."

It took him perhaps thirty seconds to block in the figure, and at once he fell to mixing his palette, his fingers moving with a nervous, delicate haste. He held a brush between his teeth during the operation; but no sooner was it over, and the gag removed, than his speech began to gush in quick, impetuous jerks, each jerk marking an interval as, after flinging a fresh splash of paint upon the canvas, he stepped back half a pace to eye its effect.

"That's my theory—what's Art but temperament? expressed temperament? Now I'm a fellow that could never stick long to a thing—never in my life. I've not told you that I'm American, by the way. My name's Jessup—George Pulteney Jessup, of Boise City, Idaho. My father—he's about the most prominent citizen in the State of Idaho. You don't get any ways far west of the Rockies before you bump against Nahm P.

Jessup—and you'll be apt to hurt yourself by bumping too hard . . . My father began by setting it down to fickleness. He said it came of having too much money to play with. Mind you, he didn't complain. He sent for me into his office, and 'George,' he said, 'there's some fathers, finding you so *volatile*, would take the line of cutting down your allowance; but that's no line for me. To begin with,' he said, 'it would set up a constraint between us, and constraint in my family relations is what, God helping me, I'll never allow. And next, whatever I saved on you I'd just have to re-invest, and I'm over-capitalised as it is—you'd never guess the straits I'm put to daily in keeping fair abreast of fifteen per cent., which is my notion of making two ends meet. And, lastly, it ain't natural. If a man's born *volatile*, *volatile* he is; and the sensible plan, I take it, is to lean your ear to Nature, the Mighty Mother, and find a career that has some use for that kind of temperament. Now,' said my father, 'I know a little about most legitimate careers, from ticket-punching up to lobbying, and there's not one in which a man would hand in testimonials that he was *volatile*. But,' says my father, 'what about Art? I've never taken stock of that occupation myself; I never had time. But I remember once in New York going to a theatre and seeing Booth act William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*; and not twenty minutes later, after all the ghosts and murderings, I happened into a restaurant, and saw the same man drinking cocktails and eating Blue Point oysters—with twice my appetite too. And Booth was at the very top of his profession.' "

"Yes," said Arthur Miles, by this time greatly interested. "That's like Mr. Mortimer, too."

"Mortimer?" Mr. Jessup queried; and then, getting no answer, "Is he an actor?"

The boy nodded.

"A prominent one?"

"I—I believe so. I mean, he says he *ought* to be."

"I'd like to make his acquaintance. It's queer, too,

a child like you knowing about actors. What's your name?"

"I don't know," said Arthur Miles, with another glance in the direction of the inn, "that Tilda would like me to tell."

The young artist eyed him.

"Well, never mind; we were talking about my father. That's how he came to send me to Paris to study Art. And since then I've done some thinking. It works out like this," he pursued, stepping back and studying his daub between half-closed eyes, "the old man had struck ore as usual. I never knew a mind fuller of common sense—just homely common sense—but he hadn't the time to work it. Yet it works easy enough if you keep hold of the argument. The Old Masters—we're always having it dinned into us—didn't hustle; they mugged away at a Saint, or a Virgin and Child, and never minded if it took 'em half a lifetime. Well, putting aside their being paid by time and not by the job—because comparisons on a monetary basis ain't fair, one way or another—for better or worse, Carpaccio hadn't a dad in the Oil Trust—I say, putting this aside, the credit goes to their temperament, or, if you like, part to that and part to their environment. It wasn't *in* them to hustle: they felt no call for it, but just sat and painted and took their meals regular. Now that spacious holy sauntering don't figure in my bill. When I get hold of a notion—same as this Infant Shakespeare, f'r instance—it's apt to take hold on me as a mighty fine proposition; and then, before I can slap it on canvas, the thing's gone, faded, extinct, like a sunset." He paused and snapped his fingers expressively. "I paint like Hades, but it beats me by a head every time.

—"And what's the reason? I'm fickle, you say. But that's my temperament, and before a man kicks against *that*, he ought to be clear whether it's original sin or the outcome of his environment. See what I mean?"

Arthur Miles was too truthful to say that he *did*. Indeed, he understood next to nothing of this harangue.

But the young American's manner, so eager, so boyishly confidential, set him at his ease; while beneath this voluble flow of talk there moved a deeper current for which, all unconsciously, the child's spirit thirsted. He did not realise this at all, but his eyes shone while he listened.

"I'll put it this way: We're in the twentieth century. Between the old masters and us something has happened. What? Why Speed, sir—modern civilisation has discovered Speed. Railways—telegraphs—'phones—elevators—automobiles—Atlantic records. These inventions, sir"—here as will happen to Americans when they philosophise, Mr. Jessup slipped into an oratorical style—"have altered man's whole environment. Velasquez, sir, was a great artist, and Velasquez could paint, in his day, to beat the band. But I argue that, if you resurrected Velasquez to-day, he'd have to alter his outlook, and everything along with it, right away down to his brush-work. And I go on to argue that if I can't paint like Velasquez—which is a cold fact—it's equally a fact that, if I could, I oughtn't. Speed, sir: that's the great proposition—the principles of Speed as applied to the Fine Arts——"

Here he glanced towards the clearing between the willows, where at this moment Tilda reappeared in a hurry, followed—at a sedate pace—by a young woman in a pale blue sunbonnet.

"Oh, Arthur Miles, it's just splendid!" she announced, waving a letter in her hand. And with that, noting the boy's attitude, she checked herself and stared suspiciously from him to the artist. "Wot yer doin' to 'im?" she demanded.

"Painting his portrait."

"Then you didn't ought, an' 'e'd no business to allow it!"

She stepped to the canvas, examined it quickly, anxiously, then with a puzzled frown, that seemed to relax in a sigh of relief—

"Well, it don't seem as you've done much 'arm as yet. But all the same, you didn't ought."

"I want to know what's splendid?" the artist inquired, looking from her to the girl in the sunbonnet, who blushed rosily.

Tilda, for her part, looked at Arthur Miles and to him addressed her answer—

"'Enery's broke it off!"

"Oh!" said the boy. He reflected a moment, and added with a bright smile, "And what about Sam?"

"It's all 'ere"—she held out the letter; "an' we got to take it to 'im. 'Enery says that waitin's a weary business, but 'e leaves it to 'er; on'y 'e's just found out there's insanity on 'is side o' the family. That's a bit 'ard on Sam, o' course; but 'Enery doesn' know about Sam's feelin's. 'E was just tryin' to be tactful."

"You'll pardon my curiosity," put in young Mr. Jessup; "but I don't seem to get the hang of this. So far as I figure it up, you two children jump out of nowhere and find yourselves here for the first time in your lives; and before I can paint one of you—and I'm no snail—the other walks into a public-house, freezes on to an absolute stranger, bustles her through one matrimonial affair and has pretty well fixed her with another. As a student of locomotion"—he turned and stared down upon Tilda—"I'd like you to tell me how you did it."

"Well," she answered, "I felt a bit nervous at startin'. So I walked straight in an' ordered two-penn'orth o' beer—an' then it all came out."

"Was that so?" He perpended this, and went on, "I remember reading somewhere in Ruskin that the more a man can do his job the more he can't say how. It's rough on learners."

But Tilda was not to be drawn into a disputation on Art.

"Come along," she called to the boy.

"You mean to take him from me in this hurry? . . . Well, that breaks another record. I never up to now lost a model before I'd weakened on him; it's not their way."

“That young man,” said Tilda as, holding Arthur Miles by the hand, she drew him away and left the pair standing where the level sun slanted through the willows—“that young man,” she repeated, turning for a last wave of the hand to the girl in the sunbonnet, “is ‘e a bit touched in ‘is ‘ead, now?”

The dusk gathered as they retraced their way along Avon bank, and by the time they reached the fair meadow the shows were hanging out their lights. The children gave the field a wide berth, and fetching a circuit, reached a grey stone bridge over which the road led into the town.

They crossed it. They were now in Stratford, in a street lit with gas-lamps and lined with bright shop-windows; and Tilda had scarcely proceeded a dozen yards before she turned, aware of something wrong with the boy. In truth, he had never before made acquaintance with a town at night. Lamps and shop-fronts alike bewildered him. He had halted, irresolute. He needed her hand to pilot him.

She gave it, puzzled; for this world so strange to him was the world she knew best. She could not understand what ailed him. But it was characteristic of Tilda that she helped first and asked questions afterwards, if she asked them at all. Usually she found that, given time, they answered themselves. It was well, perhaps, that she asked none now. For how could the boy have explained that he seriously believed these shops and lighted windows to be Eastcheap, Illyria, Verona, and these passers-by, brushing briskly along the pavements, to be Shakespeare’s people—the authentic persons of the plays? He halted, gazing, striving to identify this figure and that as it hurried between the lights. Which was Mercutio ruffling to meet a Capulet? Was this the watch passing?—Dogberry’s watch? That broad-shouldered man—could he be Antonio, Sebastian’s friend, looking by to his beaport lodging? . . .

They were deep in the town, when he halted with a

gasp and a start that half withdrew his hand from her clasp. A pale green light shone on his face. It shone out on the roadway from a gigantic illuminated bottle in a chemist's shop; and in the window stood three similar bottles, each with a gas-jet behind it—one yellow, one amethystine violet, one ruby red.

His grip, relaxed for a second, closed on her fingers again. He was drawing her towards the window. They stared through it together, almost pressing their faces to the pane.

Beyond it, within the shop, surrounded by countless spotlessly polished bottles, his features reflected in a flashing mirror, stood an old man, bending over a mahogany counter, while with delicate fingers he rearranged a line of gallipots in a glass-covered case.

“Is—is he——”

The boy paused, and Tilda heard him gulp down something in his throat.

“Suppose,” he whispered, “if—if it should be God?”

“Ga'r'n!” said Tilda, pulling herself together.

“You're sure it's only Prospero?” he asked, still in a whisper.

Before she could answer him—but indeed she could have found no answer, never having heard of Prospero—the boy had dragged her forward and thrust open one of the glass swing-doors. It was he who now showed the courage.

“My lord!”

“Hey?” The old chemist looked up over his spectacles, held for an instant a gallipot suspended between finger and thumb, and set it down with nice judgment. He was extremely bald, and he pushed his spectacles high up on his scalp. Then he smiled benevolently. “What can I do for you, my dears?”

The boy stepped forward bravely; while Tilda—the game for once taken out, of her hands—could only admire.

“If you would tell us where the Island is—it is called Holmness——”

Tilda caught her breath. But the old chemist still bent forward, and still with his kindly smile.

"Holmness?—an island?" he repeated in a musing echo. "Let me see——"

"We ain't *sure* it's an island, sir," put in Tilda, plucking up her courage a little.

"It will be in the Gazetteer, of course," said the old chemist with a happy thought; "and you'll find that in the Free Library."

"Gazetteer"—"Free Library." To Tilda these were strange words—names of wide oceans, perhaps, or of far foreign countries. But the boy caught at the last word: he remembered Prospero's

"Me, poor man, my library
Was dukedom large enough,"

and this made him more confident than ever.

"But why do you want to know?" the old chemist went on. "Is it home lessons?"

"'E," said Tilda, indicating Arthur Miles, "'e wants to find a relation 'e's got there—a kind of uncle—in 'Olmness, w'ich is in the Gazetteer," she repeated, as though the scent lay hidden in a nest of boxes, w'ich is in the Free Library."

"If you don't mind waiting a moment, I'll take you there."

The children gasped.

He turned and trotted around the back of his mirrored screen. They heard him call and announce to someone in the back parlour—but the boy made sure that it was to Miranda in her inner cave—that he was going out for a few minutes; and by and by he reappeared, wearing a dark skull-cap, with an Inverness cape about his shoulders, and carrying in his hand a stout staff. He joined them by lifting—another marvel—a mahogany flap and walking straight through the counter! and so led the way out of the shop and up the street to the right, while the children in delicious terror trotted at his heels.

They came to an open doorway, with a lamp burning

above it. Dark wavering shadows played within, across the threshold; but the old man stepped through these boldly, and pushed open the door of a lighted room. The children followed, and stood for a moment blinking.

The room was lined with books—shelves upon shelves of books; and among their books a dozen men sat reading in total silence. Some held thin, unbound pages of enormous size—Arthur Miles was unacquainted with newspapers—open before them; all were of middle age or over; and none of them showed surprise at the new-comers. The old chemist nodded to one or two, who barely returned his nod and forthwith resumed their studies.

He walked straight across the room—this was wonderful too, that he should know, among so many books, exactly where to search—adjusted his spectacles, stooped with palms on knees, peered for ten seconds or so along the backs of a row of tall volumes, drew forth one, and bearing it to the table, laid it open under the lamplight.

“Let me see—let me see,” he muttered, turning the pages rapidly. “H—H.O.—here we are! Hockley—Hoe—no.” He turned another three or four pages. “Holbeach—Hollington—Hollingwood—Holme—ah, here we have it!—Holmfirth, Holme Fell, Holme Moss, HOLMNESS.”

He paused for a moment, scanning the page while they held their breath. Then he read aloud, yet not so as to disturb the other students—

“‘*Holmness*. An Island or Islet in the Bristol Channel——’”

“Ah!” The boy let his breath escape almost in a sob.

“‘Uninhabited——’”

The old chemist looked up over the rims of his spectacles; but whether questioning or because the sound had interrupted him, Tilda could not determine.

“Yes,” said the boy eagerly. “They thought that about—about the other Island, sir. Didn’t they?”

The old man, either not hearing or not understanding,

looked down at the page again. He read out the latitude and longitude—words and figures which neither of the children understood.

“ ‘ Extreme length, three-quarters of a mile ; width at narrowest point, 165 yards. It contains 356 acres, all of short grass, and affords pasturage in summer for a few sheep from the mainland. There is no harbour ; but the south side affords fair anchorage for vessels sheltering from N.W. winds. The distance from nearest point of coast is $3\frac{3}{4}$ miles. Reputed to have served anciently as *rendezvous* for British pirates, and even in the last century as a smugglers’ *entrepôt*. Geological formation——’ ”

“ Is that all ? ” asked Tilda as the old man ceased his reading.

“ That is all.”

“ But the river will take us to it,” said the boy confidently.

“ Hey ? What river ? ”

“ Why *this* river—the Avon. It leads down to it—of course it must ! ”

“ Why, yes,” answered the old chemist after considering a while. “ In a sense, of course, it does. I hadn’t guessed at your age you’d be so good at geography. The Avon runs down to Tewkesbury, and there it joins the Severn ; and the Severn leads down past Gloucester and into the Bristol Channel.”

“ I was sure ! ”

The boy said it in no very loud tone : but something shook in his voice, and at the sound of it all the readers looked up with curiosity—which changed, however, to protest at sight of the boy’s rags.

“ S—sh—sh ! ” said two or three.

The old chemist gazed around apologetically, closed the volume, replaced it, and shepherded the children forth.