

## CHAPTER XVII

BY WESTON WEIR

“Down below the Weir Brake  
Journeys end in lovers' meeting :  
You and I our way must take,  
You and I our way will wend  
Farther on, my only friend—  
Farther on, my more than friend—  
My sweet sweeting.”—*Country Song.*

IN a private apartment of the Red Cow Public-house Sam Bossom sat doggedly pulling at a short pipe while Mr. Mortimer harangued him.

On the table stood a cheap, ill-smelling oil-lamp between two mugs of beer. Sam had drawn his chair close, and from time to time reached out a hand for his mug, stared into its depths as though for advice, and gloomily replaced it. For the rest, he sat leaning a little forward on his crossed arms, with set, square chin, and eyes fixed on a knot in the deal table top.

Mr. Mortimer stood erect, in a declamatory attitude, with his back to the exiguous fire. In the pauses of his delivery, failing to draw response from Sam, he glanced down at his wife for approval. But she too, seated on a low stool, made pretence to be absorbed in her knitting; and her upward look, when her lord compelled it, expressed deep sympathy rather than assent.

“Consequently,” perorated Mr. Mortimer, “I conceive my personal obligations to Mr. Hucks to be satisfied; practically satisfied, even in law; as keen men of business, and allowing for contingencies, satisfied abundantly. To liquidate the seven pounds fifteen and six owing to your master you have, or your own admission, six-seven-line in hand. We—my Arabella and I—

are offered a fortnight here at forty-four shillings *per* week between us. Not princely, I own. But suffer me to remind you that it realises the dream, as perchance it affords the opportunity, of a lifetime. She will be Ophelia. She, the embodiment (I dare to say it) of Shakespeare's visionary heroine, will realise his conception here, on this classic ground. And if, at short notice, I must content myself with doubling the parts of Guildenstern and First Gravedigger, believe me I do so cheerfully, pending fuller—er—recognition."

"My Stanislas demeans himself by accepting them," said Mrs. Mortimer, still with her eyes on her knitting.

"I should hope so, my poppet. Still, there is Fat in the First Gravedigger; and as our Gallic neighbours put it, everything comes to him who knows how to wait."

"All very well," observed Sam, withdrawing the pipe from his mouth. "But 'ow about the children? I put it to *you*, ma'am."

"Ah, poor things!" sighed Mrs. Mortimer, and hesitated. She was about to say more, when her husband interrupted—

"I trust—I sincerely trust—that my failings, such as they are, have ever leaned to the side of altruism. Throughout life I have been apt to injure myself in befriending others; and you see"—Mr. Mortimer flourished a hand—"where it has landed me. We have convoyed these children to Stratford, to use the language of commerce, as *per* contract. To ask me—to ask Mrs. Mortimer—to dance attendance upon them indefinitely, at the sacrifice of these golden prospects——"

But at this point someone tapped at the door.

"Come in!" called Sam, swinging around in his chair, and with that, jumping to his feet, let out a cheerful "hooray!"

"Same to you," said Tilda, nodding, as she admitted Arthur Miles and closed the door behind him. "Anything to eat in this public?"

"I'll order in supper at once," said Sam.

"No you won't; not for five minutes any'ow. Well, 'ere we are—and 'ow 'ave you three been gettin' along since I saw yer last?"

"Oh, *we're* all right; but all the better for seein' you. That's understood."

"W'ich I looks towards yer, and I likewise bows," said Tilda graciously. "But what's the matter?" she asked, glancing from one to the other. "A stranger might say as you wasn' the best o' friends."

"Nothin'," answered Sam after a slight pause. "Bit of a argymint—that's all."

"Wot about?"

"'Tisn' worth mentionin'." Sam glanced at the other two. "The theayter 'ere's offered Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer an engagement."

"Well?"

"We was discussin' whether they ought to take it."

"W'y not?"

"Well, you see—Glasson bein' about——"

"After them too, is 'e? Don't mean ter say *they've* been an' lost their fathers an' mothers? No? Then I don't see."

"Them 'avin' contracted to look after you——"

He paused here, as Tilda, fixing him with a compassionate stare, began to shake her head slowly.

"You don't deserve it—you reelly don't," she said, more in sorrow than in anger; then with a sharp change of tone, "And you three 'ave been allowin', I s'pose, that our best chance to escape notice is travellin' around with a fur coat an' a sixty-foot Theayter Royal? . . . W'y, wot was it put Glasson on our tracks? . . . Oh, I'm not blamin' yer! Some folks—most folks, I'm comin' to think—just can't 'elp theirselves. But it's saddenin'."

"O' course," suggested Sam, "I might take on the job single-anded. My orders don't go beyond this place; but the beer'll wait, and 'Ucks' per'aps won't ruind my takin' a 'oliday—not if I explain."

Tilda regarded him for a while before answering.

When at length she spoke, it was with a fine, if weary, patience—

“ Got pen-an’-ink, any of yer ? ”

Mrs. Mortimer arose, stepped to a bundle of shawls lying in a Windsor chair, unwrapped a portable writing-case which appeared to be the kernel of the bundle, and laid it on the table—all this with extreme docility.

“ I’ll rouble you to do the writin’,” said Tilda, laying a sheet of paper before Sam after she had chosen a pen and unsnapped the ink-case.

“ Why not Mortimer ? ” he protested feebly.

“ I wouldn’ make Arguin’ a ’abit, if I was you.”

Sam collapsed and took the pen from her, after eyeing the palms of his hands as though he had a mind to spit on them.

“ Now write,” she commanded, and began to dictate slowly.

She had taken command of the room. The Mortimers could only stand by and listen, as helpless as Arthur Miles. She spoke deliberately, patiently, indulging all Sam’s slowness of penmanship—

“ ‘ DEAR MR. ’UCKS,—This comes ’opin’ to find you well as it leaves us all at present. I promised to write in my own ’and ; but time is pressin’, as I am goin’ to tell you. So you must please put up with Mr. Bossom, and excuse mistakes. I will sign this to let you know there is no fake. We are at Stratford-on-Avon : w’ich for slow goin’ must be a record : but all well and ’earty. Mr. M. ’as ’ad luck with ’is actin’——’ ’Ow much ? ”

“ Six-seven-nine,” answered Sam as he caught up with her.

“ Clear ? ”

Sam nodded. “ Barrin’, o’ course, the bill for to-night’s board an’ lodgin’.

“ —Up to date, ’e ’as paid S. Bossom over six pound, and ’as picked up with an engagement ’ere. Dear sir, you’ll see there’s no risk, and S. Bossom will stay ’ere a week an’ collect the balance.’ ”

“The Lord forbid!” Sam protested, laying down his pen.

“I’d like to know oo’s writin’ this letter—you or me?” She pointed to the paper. “Go on, please. ‘Dear sir, a party as we will call W. B. ’as joined the company. W’ich is strange to say——’”

“Who’s *he*?”

Sam looked up again, but Tilda’s finger still pointed firmly.

“‘W’ich ’e too continues ’earty; but You-know-Oo is close after ’im; and so, dear sir, ’avin’ ’eard of an Island called ’Olmness, we are off there to-morrow, and will let you know further. W’ich I remain yours respectfully—’ Now ’and over the pen an’ let me sign.”

“‘Olmness? Where’s ’Olmness?”

She took the pen from him and slowly printed TILDA, in roman capitals; examined the signature made sure it was satisfactory, and at length answered—

“It’s a Island, somewhere in the Bristol Channel, w’ich is in the Free Library. We’ve just come from there.”

“An’ you reckon I got nothin’ better to do than go gallivantin’ with you, lookin’ for islands in the Bristol Channel?”

“—W’en I said, on’y a minute back,” she answered with composure, “that we were leavin’ you in Stratford for a week.”

“Ho!” he commented scornfully. “Lëavin’ me, are you? *You leavin’ me?* . . . Well, if that ain’t good, I declare!”

She looked at him as one disdaining argument.

“I’ll tell you all about it termorrow. Let’s ’ave in supper now; for we’re ’ungry, Arthur Miles an’ me, an’ the Fat Lady’ll be expectin’ us. Between two an’ three miles down the river there’s a lock, near a place they call Weston—you know it, I reckon? Well, meet us there termorrow—say eight o’clock—an’ we’ll ’ave a talk.”

“The child,” said Mr. Mortimer, “has vidently

something up her sleeve, and my advice is that we humour her."

Tilda eyed him.

"Yes, that's right," she assented with unmoved countenance. "'Ave in supper and 'umour me."

The supper consisted of two dishes—the one of tripe-and-onions, the other of fried ham. There were also potatoes and beer, and gin, Mr. Mortimer being a sufferer from some complaint which made this cordial, as Mrs. Mortimer assured them, "imperative." But to-night, "to celebrate the reunion," Mr. Mortimer chose to defy the advice of the many doctors—"specialists" Mrs. Mortimer called them—who had successively called his a unique case; and after a tough battle—his wife demurring on hygienic, Sam on financial, grounds—ordered in a bottle of port, at the same time startling the waitress with the demand that it must not be such as that—

"She set before chance-comers,  
But such whose father-grape grew fat  
On Lusitanian summers."

That the beverage fulfilled this condition may be doubted. But it was certainly sweet and potent, and for the children at any rate a couple of glasses of it induced a haze upon the feast—a sort of golden fog through which Mr. Mortimer loomed in a halo of diffusive hospitality. He used his handkerchief for a table-napkin, and made great play with it as they do in banquets on the stage.

He pronounced the tripe-and-onions "fit for Lucullus," whatever that might mean. He commended the flouriness of the potatoes, in the cooking of which he claimed to be something of an amateur—"being Irish, my dear Smiles, on my mother's side." He sipped the port and passed it for "sound, sir, a wine of unmistakable body," though for bouquet not comparable with the contents of a famous bin once the pride of his paternal cellars at Scaresby Hall, Northamptonshire. He became reminiscential, and spoke with a break in his voice of a certain

“ Banquet hall deserted,  
Whose lights were fled,  
Whose garlands dead,  
And all but he [Mr. Mortimer] departed.”

Here he wiped his eyes with the handkerchief that had hitherto done duty for napkin, and passed, himself, with equal adaptability to a new rôle. He would give them the toast of “ Their Youthful Guests.”—

“ They are, I understand, about to leave us. It is not ours to gaze too closely into the crystal of fate; nor, as I gather, do they find it convenient to specify the precise conditions of their departure. But of this”—with a fine roll of the voice, and a glance at Mrs. Mortimer—“ of this we may rest assured: that the qualities which, within the span of our acquaintance, they have developed, will carry them far; yet not so far that they will forget their fellow-travellers whose privilege it was to watch over them while they fledged their wings; and perhaps not so far but they may hear, and rejoice in, some echo of that fame which (if I read the omens aright)”—here again he glanced at his wife—“ the public will be unable much longer to withhold.”

Altogether, and in spite of his high-flown language, Mr. Mortimer gave the children an impression that he and his wife were honestly sorry to part with them. And when the supper—protracted by his various arts to the semblance of a banquet of many courses—came at length to an end, Mrs. Mortimer dropped a quite untheatrical tear as she embraced them and bade them good-bye.

Sam Bossom walked with them to the bridge and there took his leave, promising to meet them faithfully on the morrow by Weston Lock.

“ Though,” said he, “ there be scenes hereabouts that I finds painful, and I’m doin’ a great deal to oblige you.”

“ It’s a strange thing to me,” said Tilda reflectively, gazing after him until his tall figure was lost in the darkness between the gas-lamps, “ how all these grown-

ups get it fixed in their 'eads that *they're* doin' the per-  
fectin' I reckon their size confuses 'em."

They found the Fat Lady sitting up and awaiting them in some anxiety.

"It's on account of the dog," she explained while 'Dolph devoured them with caresses. "I managed to keep him pretty quiet all day, but when the time came for me to perform, and I had to leave him locked in the van here, he started turnin' it into a menagerie. Gavel has sent around twice to say that if it's a case of 'Love me, love my dog,' him and me'll have to break contracts."

"Leadin' this sort o' life don't suit 'im," said Tilda.

"No," Mrs. Lobb agreed; "he's drunk as a lord again, and his temper something awful."

Tilda stared.

"I meant the dog," she explained.

So the children, looking forth and judging the coast clear, took Godolphus for a scamper across the dark meadow. They returned to find their hostess disrobed and in bed, and again she had the tea-equipage arrayed and the kettle singing over the spirit-lamp.

"It's healthful, no doubt—all this exercise," she remarked with a somewhat wistful look at their glowing faces; "but it's not for me," she added. "There's another thing you've taught me. I've often wondered sittin' alone here—supposin' as there had really been a Mr. Lobb—how I could have done with the children. Now, my dears, it's pleasant havin' your company; but there's an anxiety about it that I find wearin' A week of it, and I'd be losing flesh. And the moral is, if you're an artist you must make sacrifices."

The Fat Lady sighed. She sighed again and more heavily as, having extinguished the lamp, she composed herself to sleep.

Early next morning they bade her farewell, and departed with her blessing. Now Tilda the match-maker had arranged in her mind a very pretty scene



of surprise and reconciliation. But, as she afterwards observed, "there's times when you worrit along for days together, an' no seemin' good of it; an' then one mornin' you wakes up to find everything goin' like clockwork, an' yerself standin' by, an' watchin', an' feelin' small."

So it happened this morning as they drew near to Weston. There in the morning light they saw the broken lock with a weir beside it, and over the weir a tumble of flashing water; an islet or two, red with stalks of loosestrife; a swan bathing in the channel between. And there, early as they came, Sam Bossom stood already on the lock-bank; but not awaiting them, and not alone. For at a distance of six paces, perhaps, stood the girl of the blue sun-bonnet, confronting him.

Tilda gasped.

"And I got 'er promise to wait till I called 'er. It's —it's unwomanly!"

Sam turned and caught sight of them. He made as though to leave the girl standing, and came a pace towards them, but halted. There was a great awe in his face.

"'Eury's broke it off!" he announced slowly, and his voice trembled.

"I could a-told yer that." Tilda's manner was short, as she produced the letter and handed it to him. "There —go to 'im," she said in a gentler voice as she slipped past the girl. "'E's good, as men go; and 'e's suffered."

She walked resolutely away down the path.

"But where are you going?" asked Arthur Miles, running and catching up with her.

"Farther on, as usual," she snapped. "Can't yer see they don't want us?"

"But why?"

"Because they're love-makin'."

He made no answer, and she glanced at his face. Its innocent wonderment nettled her the more, yet she had no notion why. She walked on faster than ever. In the clearing by the "Four Alls" they came on the young

American. He had packed up his camp furniture and was busy stowing it in the canoe.

"Hullo!" he greeted them. "Can't stay for another sitting, if that's what you're after."

With Tilda in her present mood the boy felt a sudden helplessness. The world in this half-hour—for the first time since his escape—had grown unfriendly. His friends were leaving him, averting their faces, turning away to their own affairs. He stretched out his hands.

"Won't you take us with you?"

Mr. Jessup stared.

"Why, certainly," he answered after a moment. "Hand me the valise, there, and nip on board. There's plenty of room."

He had turned to Tilda and was addressing her. She obeyed, and handed the valise automatically. Certainly, and without her help, the world was going like clock-work this morning.

