

## CHAPTER XVIII

### DOWN AVON

“O, my heart ! as white sails shiver,  
And crowds are passing, and banks stretch wide,  
How hard to follow, with lips that quiver,  
That moving speck on the far-off side.

JEAN INGELOW.

THEY were afloat : Arthur Miles in the bows, Tilda amidships, and both facing Mr. Jessup, who had taken the stern seat, and there steered the canoe easily with a single paddle, as the Indians do.

They shot under the scour of a steep bank covered with thorns and crab-apple trees and hummocks of sombre grass. Beyond this they drifted down to Welford Weir and Mill, past a slope where the yellowing chestnuts all but hid Welford village. They had to run the canoe ashore here, unlade her of the valises and camp furniture, and carry her across the weir. The children enjoyed this amazingly

“Boy, would you like to take a paddle ?” asked Mr. Jessup.

Now this was what Arthur Miles had been desiring for twenty minutes past, and with all his soul. So now, the canoe having been launched again and Tilda transferred to the bows, he found himself perched amidships, with his gaze fixed on the reaches ahead, and in his hand a paddle, which he worked cautiously at first, following Mr. Jessup's instructions. But confidence soon grew in him, and he began to put more vigour into his strokes. “Right, sonny,” and “Better and better” commented his instructor, for the child took to it as a duck to water. In twenty minutes or so he had learnt to turn his paddle slantwise after the stroke, and to drag it so as to assist the steering ; which was not always easy, for here and

there a snag blocked the main channel, or a pebbly shallow where the eye had to search for the smooth V that signals the best water. Tilda watched him, marvelling at his strange aptitude, and once, catching her eye, he nodded; but still, as he mastered the knack, and the stroke of the paddle became more and more mechanical, his attention disengaged itself from the moment—from the voice of Mr. Jessup astern, the girl's intent gaze, the swirl about the blade, the scent and pageant of the green banks on either hand—and pressed forward to follow each far curve of the stream, each bend as it slowly unfolded. Bend upon bend—they might fold it a hundred deep; but somewhere ahead and beyond their folding lay the Island.

In this wise they passed under a grassy hillside set with trimmed elms, and came to Grange Mill and another portage; and below Grange to Bidford, where there is a bridge of many arches carrying the old Roman road called Icknield Street; and from the bridge and grey little town they struck into a long reach that ran straight into the dazzle of the sun—through flat meadows at first, and then, with a turn, under the steep of Marcleeve Hill, that here borders Avon to the south for miles. Here begin the spurs of the Cotswolds—scars of green and red marle, dotted with old thorn trees or draped with ash and maple, or smothered with trails of the Traveller's Joy.

Mr. Jessup, whose instructions had become less and less frequent, and indeed were by this time patently superfluous, so quick the boy showed himself to anticipate the slightest warning, hereabouts engaged Tilda in converse.

“He's a wonder, this child! I don't know where he comes from, or you, or how far you're willing I should take you. In fact, there's an unholy flavour of kidnapping about this whole adventure. But I guess, if I wanted to return you, there are no railways hereabouts. We must strike the first depot we come to, and I'll frank you back, with apologies to your parents.”

"We got none," Tilda assured him.

"For a steady-going country like England that's unusual, eh?"

"There is a bit o' that about us," she conceded after a pause.

"But you must belong to somebody?" he urged.

"He do . . . And that's what I got to find out. But it'll be all right when we get to 'Olmness."

"Holmness?" queried Mr. Jessup. "Where's Holmness?"

"It's an Island, in the Bristol Channel, w'ich is in the Free Library. We're goin' that way, ain't we?"

"That's our direction, certainly; though we're a goodish way off."

"No 'urry," said Tilda graciously. "We'll get there in time."

Mr. Jessup smiled.

"Thank you. I am delighted to help, of course. You'll find friends there—at Holmness?"

She nodded.

"Though, as far as that goes," she allowed yet more graciously, "I'm not complainin'. We've made friends all the way yet—an' you're the latest."

"I am honoured, though in a sense I hardly deserve it. You did—if I may say it—rather take charge of me, you know. Not that I mind. This is my picnic, and I don't undertake to carry you farther than Tewkesbury. But it does occur to me that you owe me something on the trip."

Tilda stiffened.

"You can put us ashore where you like," said she; "but one d. is all I 'ave in my pocket, as may be 'twould a-been fairer t' a-told yer."

The young man laughed outright and cheerfully as he headed the canoe for shore. They were close upon another weir and an ancient mill, whence, as they landed for another portage, clouds of fragrant flour-dust issued from the doorway, greeting their nostrils.

"It's this way," he explained, "I'm here to sketch

Shakespeare's Country, and the trouble with me is, I've a theory."

"It's—it's not a bad one, I 'ope?"

She hazarded this sympathetically, never having heard of a theory. It sounded to her like the name of an internal growth, possibly malignant.

"Not half bad," he assured her. He was cheerful about it at any rate. "I'm what they call an Impressionist. A man—I put it to you—has got to hustle after culture in these days and take it, so to speak, in tabloids. Now this morning, before you came along, I'd struck a magnificent notion. As I dare say you've been told, the way to get at the essence of a landscape is to half-close your eyes—you get the dominant notes that way, and shed the details. Well, I allowed I'd go one better, and see the whole show in motion. Have you ever seen a biograph—or a cinematograph, as some call it?"

"'Course I 'ave," said Tilda. "There was one in Maggs's Circus."

"Then you'll have no trouble in getting the hang of my idea. My complaint with Art is that it don't keep itself abreast of modern inventions. The cinematograph, miss, has come to stay, and the Art of the future, unless Art means to get left, 'll have to adopt its principles . . . Well, I couldn't put Shakespeare's country into motion; but on the river I could put myself in motion, which amounts to the same thing. With the cinematograph, I grant you, it's mostly the scene that's in motion while *you* sit still; but there's also a dodge by which *you're* in the railway car and flying past the scenery."

Tilda nodded.

"Maggs 'ad 'old of that trick too. 'E called it *A Trip on the Over'sea Railway, New York.*"

"Right; and now you see. I allowed that by steering down Avon and keeping my eyes half closed, by the time I reached Tewkesbury I'd have Shakespeare's environment all boiled down and concentrated; and at

Tewkesbury I'd stop and slap in the general impression while it was fresh. But just here I ran my head full-butt against another principle of mine, which is *plein air*."

"Wot's that?"

"Why, that a landscape should be painted where it stands, and not in the studio."

"You couldn' very well paint with one 'and an paddle with the other," she began; but added in a moment, "Why there's Arthur Miles, o' course! doin', as ush'al, while the others are talkin'. That child brings luck w'erever 'e goes."

"You think that I could change places and trust him to steer."

"Think? Why for the las' ten minutes 'e 'as been steerin'!"

So below Cleve they changed places, Mr. Jessup settling himself amidships with his apparatus for sketching, while Arthur Miles was promoted—if the word may be allowed—to the seat astern. For a while he took his new responsibility gravely, with pursed lips and eyes intent on every stroke of the paddle, watching, experimenting, as a turn of the wrist more or less righted or deflected the steering. But in a few minutes he had gained confidence, and again his gaze removed itself from the swirl around the blade and began to dwell on the reaches ahead.

They were entering the rich vale of Evesham. On their left the slopes of Marcleeve Hill declined gradually to the open plain; on their right, behind a long fringe of willows, stretched meadow after meadow, all green and flat as billiard-tables. They were passing down through the scene of a famous battle. But the children had never heard of Evesham fight; and Mr. Jessup had mislaid his guide-book. He sat with half-closed eyes, now and again dipping his brush over the gunwale, and anon, for a half-minute or so, flinging broad splashes of water-colour upon his sketching-pad.

They were nearing the ferry at Harvington, and

already began to lift the bold outline of Bredon Hill that shuts out the Severn Valley, when without warning the boy broke into song . . .

It was the strangest performance. It had no tune in it, no intelligible words; it was just a chant rising and falling, as the surf might rise and fall around the base of that Island for which his eyes sought the green vale right away to the horizon.

Mr. Jessup looked up from his work. His eyes encountered Tilda's, and Tilda's were smiling. But at the same time they enjoined silence.

The boy sang on. His voice had been low and tentative at first; but now, gathering courage, he lifted it upon a note of high challenge. He could not have told why, but he sang because he was steering towards his fate. It might lie far, very far, ahead; but somewhere ahead it lay, beyond the gradually unfolding hills; somewhere in the west these would open upon the sea, and in the sea would be lying his Island. His song already saluted it.

"I am coming!" it challenged. "O my fate, be prepared for me!"

So they floated down to Harvington Mill and Weir; and as Mr. Jessup half-turned his head, warning him to steer for shore, the boy's voice faltered and dropped suddenly to silence, as a lark drops down from the sky. Tilda saw him start and come to himself with a hot blush, that deepened when she laughed and ordered 'Dolph to bark for an encore.

They ported the canoe and luggage down a steep and slippery overfall, launched her again, and shot down past Harvington Weir, where a crowd of small sandpipers kept them company for a mile, flitting ahead and alighting but to take wing again. Tilda had fallen silent. By and by, as they passed the Fish and Anchor Inn, she looked up at Mr. Jessup and asked—

"But if you want to paint fast, why not travel by train?"

"I thought of it," Mr. Jessup answered gravely.

“But the railroad hereabouts wasn’t engineered to catch the sentiment, and it’s the sentiment I’m after—the old-world charm of field and high-road and leafy hedgerow, if you understand me.” Here he paused of a sudden, and laid his sketch-block slowly down on his knee. “Je-hosaphat!” he exclaimed, his eyes brightening. “Why ever didn’t I think of it?”

“Think of wot?”

He nodded his head.

“You’ll see, missie, when we get to Evesham! You’ve put a notion into me—and we’re going to rattle up Turner and make him hum. The guide-books say he spent considerable of his time at Tewkesbury. I disremember if he’s buried there; but we’ll wake his ghost, anyway.”

So by Offenham and Dead Man Eyot they came to the high embankment of a railway, and thence to a bridge, and a beautiful bell-tower leapt into view, soaring above the mills and roofs of Evesham.

At Evesham, a little above the Workman Gardens, they left the canoe in charge of a waterman, and fared up to the town, where Mr. Jessup led them into a palatial hotel—or so it seemed to the children—and ordered a regal luncheon. It was served by a waiter in a dress suit; an ancient and benign-looking person, whose appearance and demeanour so weighed upon Tilda that, true to her protective instinct, she called up all her courage to nod across the table at Arthur Miles and reassure him. To her stark astonishment the boy was eating without embarrassment, as though to be waited on with this pomp had been a mere matter of course.

When the cheese was brought, Mr. Jessup left them on a trivial pretext, and absented himself so long that at length she began to wonder what would happen if he had “done a bilk,” and left them to discharge the score. The waiter hovered around, flicking at the side-tables with his napkin and brushing them clean of imaginary crumbs.

Tilda, eking out her last morsel of biscuit, opined that

their friend would surely be back presently. She addressed the remark to Arthur Miles ; but the waiter at once stepped forward.

" It is to be 'oped ! " said he, absent-mindedly dusting the back of a chair.

Just at this moment a strange throbbing noise drew him to the window, to gaze out into the street. It alarmed the children too, and they were about to follow and seek the cause of it, when Mr. Jessup appeared in the doorway.

" I've managed it ! " he announced, and calling to the waiter, demanded the bill.

The waiter turned, whisked a silver-plated salver apparently out of nowhere, and presented a paper upon it.

" Nine-and-six—*and* one is ten-and-six. I thank you, sir," said the waiter, bowing low.

He was good enough to follow them to the doorway, where Mr. Jessup waved a hand to indicate a motor standing ready beside the pavement, and told the children to tumble in.

" I've taken your tip, you see."

" My tip ? " gasped Tilda.

" Well, you gave me the hint for it, like Sir Isaac Newton's apple. I've hired the car for the afternoon ; and now, if you'll tuck yourselves in with these rugs, you two'll have the time of your lives."

He shut the door upon them, and mounted to a seat in front. The car was already humming and throbbing, and the hired chauffeur, climbing to a seat beside him, started her at once. They were off.

They took the road that leads northward out of Evesham, and then, turning westward, rounds the many loops and twists of Avon in a long curve. In a minute or so they were clear of the town, and the car suddenly gathered speed. Tilda caught her breath and held tight ; but the pace did not seem to perturb the boy, who sat with his lips parted and his gaze fixed ahead. As for Mr. Jessup, behind the shelter of the wind-glass he was calmly preparing to sketch.



They had left the pastures behind, and were racing now through a land of orchards and market gardens, ruled out and planted with plum trees and cabbages in stiff lines that, as the car whirled past them, appeared to be revolving slowly, like the spokes of a wheel. Below on their left, the river wandered—now close beneath them, now heading south and away, but always to be traced by its ribbon of green willows. Thus they spun past Wyre, and through Pershore—Pershore, set by the waterside, with its plum orchards, and noble tower and street of comfortable red houses—and crossed Avon at length by Eckington Bridge, under Bredon Hill. Straight ahead of them now ran a level plain dotted with poplars, and stretched—or seemed to stretch—right away to a line of heights, far and blue, which Mr. Jessup (after questioning the chauffeur) announced to be the Malverns.

At Bredon village just below, happening to pass an old woman in a red shawl, who scurried into a doorway at the toot-toot of their horn, he leant back and confided that the main drawback of this method of sketching (he had discovered) was the almost total absence of middle distance. He scarcely saw, as yet, how it could be overcome.

“But,” said he thoughtfully, “the best way, after all, may be to ignore it. When you come to consider, middle distance in landscape is more or less of a convention.”

Nevertheless Mr. Jessup frankly owned that his experiments so far dissatisfied him.

“I’ll get the first principles in time,” he promised, “and the general hang of it. Just now I’m being fed up with its limitations.”

He sat silent for a while gazing ahead, where the great Norman tower and the mill chimneys of Tewkesbury now began to lift themselves from the plain. And coming to the Mythe Bridge, he called a halt, bade the children alight, and sent the car on to await him at an hotel in the High Street, recommended by the chauffeur.

“ This,” said he, examining the bridge, “ appears to be of considerable antiquity. If you’ll allow me, I’ll repose myself for twenty minutes in the hoary past.” Unfolding a camp stool, he sat down to sketch.

The children and ‘Dolph, left to themselves, wandered across the bridge. The road beyond it stretched out through the last skirts of the town, and across the head of a wide green level dotted with groups of pasturing kine; and again beyond this enormous pasture were glimpses of small white sails gliding in and out, in the oddest fashion, behind clumps of trees and—for aught they could see—on dry land.

The sight of these sails drew them on until, lo! on a sudden they looked upon a bridge, far newer and wider than the one behind them, spanning a river far more majestic than Avon. Of the white sails some were tacking against its current, others speeding down stream with a brisk breeze; and while the children stood there at gaze, a small puffing tug emerged from under the great arch of the bridge with a dozen barges astern of her in a long line—boats with masts, and bulkier than any known to Tilda. They seemed to her strong enough to hoist sail and put out to sea on their own account, instead of crawling thus in the wake of a tug.

There was an old road-mender busy by the bridge-end, shovelling together the road scrapings in small heaps. He looked up and nodded. His face was kindly, albeit a trifle foolish, and he seemed disposed to talk.

“ Good day!” said Tilda. “ Can you tell us where the boats are goin’?”

The old road mender glanced over the parapet.

“ Eh? The trows, d’ee mean?”

“ Trows? Is that what they are?”

“ Aye; and they be goin’ down to Glo’ster first, an’ thence away to Sharpness Dock. They go through the Glo’ster an’ Berkeley, and at Sharpness they finish.”

“ Is that anywhere in the Bristol Channel?”

The old man ruminatod for a moment.

“ You may call it so. Gettin’ on, for that, anyway.

Fine boats they be ; mons'rously improved in my time. But where d'ee come from, you two ?—here in Tewkesbury, an' not to know about Severn trows ? ”

“ We've—er—jus' run over here for the afternoon, in a motor,” said Tilda—and truthfully ; but it left the old man gasping.

The children strolled on, idling by the bridge's parapet, watching the strong current, the small boats as they tacked to and fro. Up stream another tug hove in sight, also with a line of trows behind 'her. This became exciting, and Tilda suggested waiting and dropping a stone—a very small one—upon the tug's deck as she passed under the archway.

“ If only she could take us on ! ” said Arthur Miles.

“ We'd 'ave to drop a big stone for *that*,” Tilda opined.

And with that suddenly 'Dolph, who had been chasing a robin, and immersed in that futile sport, started to bark—uneasily and in small yaps at first, then in paroxysms interrupted by eager whines.

“ W'y wot the matter with 'im ? ” asked Tilda. “ Look now ! ”

For the dog had sprung upon the parapet and stood there, with neck extended and body quivering as he saluted the on-coming tug.

“ 'E can't see . . . No, surely, it can't be——” said Tilda, staring.

The tug was so near by this time that they could read her name, *Severn Belle*, on the bows. Two men stood on her deck—one aft at the tiller (for she had no wheel-house), the other a little forward of midships, leaning over the port bulwarks ; this latter a stoker apparently, or an engineer, or a combination of both ; for he was capless, and wore a smoke-grimed flannel shirt, open at the breast.

Tilda could see this distinctly as the tug drew near ; for the man was looking up, staring steadily at the dog on the parapet. His chest was naked. A cake of coal-dust obscured his features.

"It can't be," said Tilda; and then, as the tug drew close, she flung herself against the parapet.

"Bill! Oh, Bill!"

"Cheer-oh!" answered a voice, now already among the echoes of the arch.

"Oh, Bill! . . . *Where?*" She had run across the roadway. "Oh, Bill—take us!"

The boy running too—yet not so quickly as 'Dolph—caught a vision of a face upturned in blankest amazement as tug and barges swept down stream out of reach. But still Tilda hailed, beating back the dog, to silence his barking.

"Oh, Bill! Where 're yer goin'?"

As she had cried it, so in agony she listened for the response. It came; but Arthur Miles could not distinguish the word, nor tell if Tilda had heard better. She had caught his hand, and they were running together as fast as their small legs could carry them.

The chase was hopeless from the first. The tug, in midstream, gave no sign of drawing to shore. Somehow—but exactly how the boy could never tell—they were racing after her down the immense length of the green meadow.

It seemed endless, did this meadow. But it ended at last, by a grassy shore where the two rivers met, cutting off and ending all hope. And here for the first and only time on their voyage, all Tilda's courage forsook her.

"Bill! Oh, Bill!" she wailed, standing at the water's edge and stretching forth her hands across the relentless flood.

But the dog, barking desperately beside her, drowned her voice, and no answer came.