CHAPTER II

HOW TRUE TILDA CAME TO DOLOROUS GARD

" Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set
And blew 'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.' "
BROWNING.

FIFTY years before, the Hospital of the Good Samaritan had been the pet "charity" of a residential suburb. Factories and slums had since crowded in upon it, ousting the residents and creeping like a tide over the sites of their gardens and villas. The street kept its ancient width, and a few smoke-blackened trees—lilacs, laburnums, limes, and one copper-beech—still dignified the purlieus. Time, ruthless upon these amenities, had spared, and even enlarged, the hospital.

It stood on the shaded side of the street. Nevertheless, the sunshine, reflected from the façade of mean houses across the way, dazzled Tilda as she crossed the threshold of the great doorway and hopped down the steps. There were five steps, and on the lowest she paused, leaning a moment on her crutch before taking the final plunge into liberty.

Then, while she stood blinking, of a sudden a yellowish brown body bounded at her out of the sun-dazzle, pushed her tottering, danced back, and leapt at her again, springing to lick her face, and uttering sharp, inarticulate noises from a throat bursting with bliss.

"'Dolph! O 'Dolph!"

Tilda sank on the lowest step and stretched out both

arms. The dog, rushing between them, fairly bowled her backwards; lit in her lap and twisted his body round ecstatically, thrusting, nuzzling at her bosom, her neck, her face—devouring her with love. In her weakness she caught him round the chest, close behind the forelegs, and hugged him to her. So for a quarter of a minute the two rocked together and struggled.

"'Dolph! O good dog! . . . Did Bill send yer?"

'Dolph, recoiling, shook his neck-ruff and prepared for another spring; but Tilda pushed him back and stood up.

"Take me along to him," she commanded, and lifted her face impudently to the clock-face of St. Barnabas above the mean roofs. "Barnabas, are yer? Then give my compliments to the doctor, you Barnabas, an' tell 'im to cheese it."

'Dolph—short for Godolphus—pricked both ears and studied the sky-line. Perceiving nothing there—not even a swallow to be chased—he barked twice (the humbug!) for sign that he understood thoroughly, and at once fell to new capers by way of changing the subject.

Tilda became severe.

"Look here, Godolphus," she explained, "this is biz—strict biz. You may wag your silly Irish tail, but that don't take *me* in. Understand? . . . Well, the first thing you 'ave to do is take me to Bill."

Godolphus was dashed; hurt, it may be in his feelings. Being dumb, he could not plead that for three weeks daily he had kept watch on the hospital door; that, hungry, he had missed his meals for faith, which is the substance of things unseen; that, a few hours ago, having to choose between half-gods assured and whole gods upon trust—an almost dessperate trust—he had staked against the odds. Or, it may be, he forgot all this, and only considered what lay ahead for the child. At any rate, his tail, as he led the way, wagged at a sensibly lower angle.

"Bill can read any kind of 'andwriting," said Tilda,

half to herself and half to the dog. "What's more, and whatever's the matter, Bill 'elps."

So she promised herself. It did not strike her that 'Dolph—who in an ordinary way should have been bounding ahead and anon bounding back to gyrate on his hind legs and encourage her—preferred to trot ahead some thirty or forty yards and wait for her to overtake him; nor that, when she came up, he avoided her eyes, pretending that here a doorstep, there a grating or water-main, absorbed his curiosity. Once or twice, indeed, before trotting off again, he left these objects of interest to run around Tilda's heels and rub against her crutch. But she was busy with her own plans.

So through a zig-zag of four or five dingy streets they came to one she recognised as that leading into the Plain, or open space where the show-people encamped. At its far end 'Dolph halted. His tail still wagged, but his look was sidelong, furtive, uneasy.

Tilda, coming up with him, stood still for a moment, stared, and caught her breath with a little gasp of dismay.

The Plain was empty.

Circus and menagerie, swing-boats, roundabouts, shooting galleries—all were gone. The whole area lay trampled and bare, with puddles where the steam-engines had stood, and in the puddles bedabbled relics of paper brushes, confetti bags, scraps torn from feminine flounces, twisted leaden tubes of "ladies' tormentors" cast away and half-trodden into the mire; the whole an unscavenged desolation. Her folk—the show-folk—had deserted her and vanished, and she had not a penny in her pocket. It cost Tilda all her pluck to keep what she called a tight upper lip. She uttered no cry, but seated herself on the nearest doorstep—apparently with deliberation, actually not heeding, still less caring, to whom the doorstep belonged.

"Oh 'Dolph!" she murmured.

To her credit, in the act of appealing to him, she understood the dog's heroism, and again stretched forth her arms. He had been waiting for this—sprang at her, and

again was caught and hugged. Again the two forlorn ones rocked in an embrace.

Brief ecstasy! The door behind them was constructed in two portions, of which the upper stood wide, the lower deceptively on the latch. Against this, as she struggled with Godolphus's ardour, Tilda gave a backward lurch. It yielded, flew open, and child and dog together rolled in across the threshold, while a shop-bell jangled madly above them.

"Get out of this—you and your nasty cur!"

Tilda picked up herself and her crutch, and stood eyeing the shopwoman, who, summoned by the bell, had come rushing from an inner room, and in no sweet temper. From the woman she glanced around the shop—a dairy shop with a marble-topped counter, and upon the counter a pair of scales and a large yellow block of margarine.

"It was an accident," said Tilda firmly and with composure. "And my dog isn' a nasty cur; it only shows your ignorance. Be quiet, 'Dolph!"

She had to turn and shake her crutch at Godolphus, who, perceiving his mistress's line of action, at once, in his impulsive Irish way, barked defiance at the shopwoman.

But the shopwoman's eyes rested on the crutch, and the sight of it appeared to mollify her.

"My gracious! I do believe you're the child was hurt at Maggs's Circus and taken to hospital."

Tilda nodded.

"Did you see me?"

"Carried by on a stretcher—and your face the colour of *that*." The woman pointed to the marble counter-top.

"I was a serious case," said Tilda impressively. "The people at the Good Samaritan couldn' remember admittin' the likes of it. There were complications."

"You don't say!"

"But what's become of Maggs's?"

"Maggs's left a week ago come Tuesday. I know, because they used to buy their milk of me. They were

the first a'most, and the last was the Menagerie and Gavel's Roundabouts. *They* packed up last night. It must be a wearin' life," commented the shopwoman. "But for my part I like the shows, and so I tell Damper—that's my 'usband. They put a bit of colour into the place while they last, besides bein' free-'andeder with their money. Light come light go, I reckon; but anyway, it's different from cows. So you suffered from complications, did you?"

"Internal," Tilda assured her in a voice as hollow as she could make it. "I must have spit up a quart of blood, first an' last. An' the medecine I 'ad to take! You wouldn' think it, but the colour was pale 'eliotrope."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Damper sympathetically—"I wonder it stayed in the stomach."

"It didn'."

"Wouldn' you fancy a glass o' milk, now?"

"It's very kind of you." Tilda put on her best manners. "And 'ere's 'ealth!" she added before sipping, when the milk was handed to her.

"And the dog—wouldn' 'e like something?"

"Well, since you mention it—but it's givin' you a 'eap of trouble. If you 'ave such a thing as a bun, it don't matter 'ow stale."

"I can do better'n that." Mrs. Damper dived into the inner room, and re-emerged with a plateful of scraps. "There's always waste with children," she explained, and I got five. You can't think the load off one's shoulders when they're packed to school at nine o'clock. And that, I dessay," she wound up lucidly, "is what softened me t'ards you. Do you go to school, now?"

"Never did," answered Tilda, taking the plate and laying it before Godolphus, who fell-to voraciously.

"I'd like to tell that to the attendance officer," said Mrs. Damper in a wistful tone. "But p'r'aps it might get you into trouble?"

"You're welcome."

"He do give me a lot of worry; and it don't make things easier Damper's threatenin' to knock his 'ead

off if ever he catches the man darkenin' our door. Never been to school, aven't you? I'd like to tell 'im, and that, if there's a law, it ought to be the same for all. But all my children are 'ealthy, and that's one consolation."

"'Ealth's the first thing in life," agreed Tilda. "So they've all cleared out?—the shows, I mean."

"Every one—exceptin' the Theayter."

"Mortimer's?" Tilda limped to the open door. "But I don't see him, neither."

"Mortimer's is up the spout. First of all, there was trouble with the lodgings; and on top of that, last Monday, Mr. Hucks put the bailiffs in. This mornin' he sent half a dozen men, and they took the show to pieces and carried it off to Hucks's yard, where I hear he means to sell it by public auction."

"Who's Mr. Hucks?"

"He's the man that farms the Plain here—farms it *out*, I mean," Mrs. Damper explained. "He leases the ground from the Corporation and lets it out for what he can make, and that's a pretty penny. Terrible close-fisted man is Mr. Hucks."

"Oh!" said Tilda, enlightened. "When you talked of farmin', you made me wonder . . . So they're all gone? And Wolverhampton-way, I reckon. That was to be the next move."

"I've often seen myself travellin' in a caravan," said Mrs. Damper dreamily. "Here to-day an' gone to-morrow, and only to stretch out your hand whether 'tis hairpins or a fryin'-pan; though I should never get over travellin' on Sundays." Here, while her eyes rested on the child, of a sudden she came out of her reverie with a sharp exclamation. "Lord's sake! You ain't goin' to tell me they've left you in 'ospital, stranded!"

"That's about it," said Tilda bravely, albeit with a wry little twist of her mouth.

"But what'll you do?"

"Oh, I dunno . . . We'll get along some'ow—eh

'Dolph? Fact is, I got a job to do, an' no time to lose worryin'. You just read *that.*"

Tilda produced and handed her scrap of paper to Mrs. Damper, who took it, unfolded it, and perused the writing slowly.

"Goin' there?" she inquired at length.

"That depends." Tilda was not to be taken off her guard. "I want you to read what it says."

"Yes, to be sure—I forgot what you said about havin' no schoolin. Well, it says: 'Arthur Miles, surname Chandon, b. Kingsand May 1st, 1888. Rev. Dr. Purdie J. Glasson, Holy Innocents' Orphanage, Bursfield, near Birmingham'—leastways, I can't read the last line clear, the paper bein' frayed; but it's bound to be what I've said."

"Why?"

"Why, because that's the address. Holy Innocents, down by the canal—I know it, o' course, *and* Dr. Glasson. Damper supplied 'em with milk for over six months, an' trouble enough we had to get our money."

"How far is it?"

"Matter of half a mile, I should say—close by the canal. You cross it there by the iron bridge. The tram'll take you down for a penny, only you must mind and get out this side of the bridge, because once you're on the other side it's tuppence. Haven't got a penny? Well,"—Mrs. Damper dived a hand into her till—"I'll give you one. Bein' a mother, I can't bear to see children in trouble."

"Thank you," said Tilda. "It'll come in 'andy; but I ain't in no trouble just yet."

"I 'spose," Mrs. Damper ventured after a pause, "you don't feel like tellin' me what your business might be down at the orphanage? Not that I'm curious."

"I can't." This was perfectly true, for she herself did not know. "You see," she added with a fine air of mystery, "there's others mixed up in this."

Mrs. Damper sighed.

"Well, I mustn' detain you . . . This Arthur Miles Chandon—he's not a friend of yours by any chance?"

"He's a—sort of connection," said Tilda. "You know 'im, p'r'aps?"

"Dear me, no!"

"Oh,"—the child, without intending it, achieved a fine irony—"I thought you seemed interested. Well, so long! and thank you again—there's a tram stoppin' at the corner! Come along, 'Dolph!"

She was not—she had said it truthfully—by any means in trouble just yet. On the contrary, after long deprivation she was tasting life again, and finding it good. The streets of this Bursfield suburb were far from suggestive of the New Jerusalem—a City of which, by the way, Tilda had neither read nor heard. They were, in fact, mean and squalid, begrimed with smoke and imperfectly scavenged. But they were, at least, populous, and to Tilda the faces in the tram and on the pavements wore, each and all, a friendly—almost an angelic—glow. The tramcar rolled along like a celestial chariot trailing clouds of glory, and 'Dolph, running beside it and threading his way in and out between the legs of the passers-by, was a hound of heaven in a coat effluent of gold. Weariness would come, but as yet her body felt no weariness, buoyed upon a spirit a-tiptoe for all adventure.

The tram reached the iron bridge and drew up She descended, asked the conductor to direct her to Holy Innocents, and was answered with a jerk of the thumb.

It stood, in fact, just beyond the bridge, with a high brick wall that turned off the street at right angles and overhung the towpath of the canal. Although in architecture wholly dissimilar, the building put her in mind of the Hospital of the Good Samaritan, and her spirits sank for a moment. Its façade looked upon the street over a strip of garden crowded with dingy laurels. It contained a depressingly large number of windows, and it seemed to her that they were at once bare and dirty. Also, and simultaneously, it occurred to her that she had

no notion what step to take next, nor how, if she rang the bell, to explain herself. She temporised therefore; whistled to 'Dolph, and turned aside down the steps leading to the towpath. She would con the lie of the land before laying siege—the strength of the castle before summoning the defence.

The castle was patently strong—strong enough to excuse any disheartenment. Scarcely a window pierced its narrow butt-end, four stories high, under which the steps wound. It ended just where they met the towpath, and from its angle sprang a brick wall dead-blank, at least twelve feet high, which ran for eighty or ninety yards along the straight line of the path. Across the canal a row of unkempt cottage gardens sloped to the water, the most of them fenced from the brink of it with decayed palings, a few with elder bushes and barbed wire to fill up the gaps, while at least two ended in moraines of old meat tins and shards of crockery. And between these containing banks wound the canal, shallow and waveless, with noisome weeds trailing on its surface afloat amid soot and irridescent patches or pools of tar. In the cottage gardens not a soul was at work, nor, by their appearance, had a soul worked in them for years past. The canal, too, was deserted, save for one long monkey-boat, black as Charon's barge, that lay moored to a post on the towpath, some seventy-odd yards up stream, near where the wall of the Orphanage ended. Beyond this and over a line of ragged thorns, the bulk of a red-brick Brewery—its roof crowned with a sky-sign—closed the view.

The monkey-boat lay with her stem down-stream, and her after-part—her habitable quarters—covered by a black tarpaulin. A solitary man was at work shovelling coal out of her middle hold into a large metal bucket. As Tilda hobbled towards him he hoisted the full bucket on his shoulders, staggered across the towpath with it, and shot its contents into a manhole under the brick wall. Tilda drew near and came to a halt, watching him. . .

"Afternoon," said the man, beginning to shovel again.

"Afternoon," responded Tilda.

He was a young man—she could detect this beneath his mask of coal dust. He wore a sack over his shoulders and a black sou'wester hat with a hind-flap that fell low over his neck. But she liked the look in his eyes, though the rims of them were red and the brows caked with grit. She liked his voice, too. It sounded friendly.

"Is this the Orph'nige? What they call 'Oly Innercents?" she asked.

"That's so," the young coalheaver answered. "Want to get in?"

"I do an' I don't," said Tilda.

"Then take my advice an' don't."

He resumed his shovelling, and Tilda watched him for a while.

"Nice dorg," said he, breaking off and throwing an affable nod towards Godolphus who, having attracted no attention by flinging himself on the grass with a lolling tongue and every appearance of fatigue, was now filling up the time in quest of a flea. "No breed, but he has points. Where did you pick him up?"

"He belongs to a show."

"Crystal Pallus?"

"And," pursued Tilda, "I was wonderin' if you'd look after him while I step inside?"

She threw back her head, and the man whistled.

"You're a trustin' one, I must say!"

"You'd never be mean enough to make off with 'im, an' I won't believe it of you," spoke up Tilda boldly.

"Eh? I wasn' talkin' of the dorg," he explained. "I was meanin' the Orph'nage. By all accounts 'tisn' so easy to get in—an' 'tis a sight harder to get out."

"I've got to get in," urged Tilda desperately. "I've a message for someone inside. His name's Arthur Miles Chandon."

The young coalheaver shook his head.

"I don't know 'im," he said. "I'm new to this job, an' they don't talk to me through the coal-'ole. But

you seem a well-plucked one, and what with your crutch—— How did you come by it ? "

" Kick of a pony."

" Seems to me you've been a good deal mixed up with animals, for your age. What about your pa and ma ? "

" Never 'ad none, I thank Gord."

" Eh ? " The young man laid down his shovel, lifted the flap of his sou'wester, and scratched the back of his head slowly. " Let me get the hang o' *that* now."

" I've seen fathers and mothers," said the sage child, nodding at him ; " and them as likes 'em is welcome to 'em."

" Gor-a-mussy ! " half-groaned the young man. " If you talk like that, they'll take you in, right enough ; but as to your gettin' out——"

" I'll get out, one way or 'nother—you see ! " Tilda promised. " All you 'ave to do is to take charge o' this crutch an' look after the dog."

" Oh, I'll look after 'im ! "

The child shook a forefinger at 'Dolph, forbidding him to follow her. The dog sank on his haunches, wagging a tail that swept the grasses in perplexed protest, and watched her as she retraced her way along the towpath.

Tilda did not once look back. She was horribly frightened ; but she had pledged her word now, and it was irredeemable. From the hurrying traffic of the street she took a final breath of courage, and tugged at the iron bell-pull depending beside the Orphanage gate. A bell clanged close within the house, and the sound of it almost made her jump out of her boots.