

CHAPTER XXI

THE HUNTED STAG

“Three hundred gentlemen, able to ride,
Three hundred horses as gallant and free,
Beheld him escape on the evening tide
Far out till he sank in the Severn Sea . . .
The stag, the runnable stag.”—JOHN DAVIDSON.

EARLY next morning the two children awoke in clean beds that smelt deliciously of lavender. The feeling was so new to them and so pleasant, that for a while they lay in luxurious ease, gazing out upon so much of the world as could be seen beyond the window—a green hillside scattered with gorse-bushes, sheeted with yellowing brake-fern and crossed by drifting veils of mist: all golden in the young sunshine, and all framed in a tangle of white-flowered solanum that clambered around the open casement. Arthur Miles lay and drank in the mere beauty of it. How should he not? Back at the Orphanage, life—such as it was—and the day's routine had always taken care of themselves; he had accepted, suffered them, since to change them at all lay out of his power. But Tilda, after a minute, sat upright in her bed, with knees drawn up beneath the bedclothes and hands clasped over them.

“This is a good place,” she announced, and paused. “An' decent people, though rummy.” Then, as the boy did not answer, “The best thing we can do is stay 'ere, if they'll let us.”

“Stay here?” he echoed. There was surprise in the echo and dismay. “But why should we stay here?”

“W'y not?”

She had yet to break it to him that Sir Miles Chandon

was abroad, and would (so Miss Chrissy had told her) almost certainly remain abroad for months to come. She must soften the blow.

"W'y not?" she repeated. "They're kind 'ere. If they'll keep us we can look about an' make inquiries."

"But we must get to the Island."

"The Island? Oh, yes, I dessay we'll get there sometime or another. What're you doin'?" she asked, for he had leapt out of bed and run to the window.

"Looking for it."

But the Island was not visible. This gable of the house fronted a steep coombe, which doubtless wound its way to the sea, since far to the right a patch of sea shone beyond a notch in the enfolding slopes.

"It'll stay there, don't you fret," Tilda promised. "'Wish I could be as sure that *we'd* stay 'ere: though, far as I can see, we're safe enough for a few days. The old lady's puzzled about me. I reckon she don't attend circuses—nor the Minister neither—an' that Child-Acrobat turn fairly fetched 'em. They set it down to the 'fects of grace. I 'eard them talkin' it over, an' that was 'ow the Minister put it—whatever 'e meant."

"Well, but wasn't it?"

Arthur Miles had come back from the window, and stood at the foot of the bed in a nightshirt many sizes too large for him.

"Wasn't it *wot*?"

"Hadn't—hadn't it anything to do with the praying?"

"Garn!" Tilda chuckled. "But I'm glad it took you in too. The foolishness was my overdoin' it with 'Dolph. Dogs don't 'ave any religion, it seems; and it rattled 'em a bit, 'is be'avin' like a person that 'ad just found salvation. The Minister talked some science about it to Mother Tossell—said as 'ow dogs 'adn't no souls but a 'eap of *sympathy*; and it ended by 'er 'avin' a good cry over me when she tucked me up for the night, an' sayin' as 'after all I might be a brand-plucked from the burnin'. But it didn't take in Miss Chrissy, as I could tell from the look in 'er eyes."

Whatever Miss Chrissy's doubts may have been, she chose a curious and perhaps a subtle method of expressing them. After breakfast she took Tilda to her room, and showed her a small volume with a cloth binding printed over with blue forget-me-nots and a gilt title, *The Lady's Vade-Mecum, or How to Shine in Society*. It put forth a preface in which a lady, who signed herself "One of the Upper Ten Thousand" but gave no further clue to her identity, underlook (as she put it) "to steer the aspirant through the shoals and cross-currents which beset novitiate in the *haut-ton*;" and Miss Chrissy displayed the manual shyly, explaining that she had bought it in Taunton, and in a foolish moment. "It flies too high for me. It says, under 'Cards,' that 'no lady who respects herself would talk about the 'Jack of Spades'; but when I played *Fives and Sevens* at the last harvest supper but one, and started to call him a Knave, they all made fun of me till I gave it up." She opined, nevertheless, that Tilda would find some good reading in it here and there; and Tilda, sharp as a needle, guessed what Miss Chrissy meant—that a study of it would discourage an aspirant to good society from smiling up at it between her ankles. She forgave the divined intention of the gift, for the gift itself was precisely what her soul had been craving. She borrowed it for the day with affected nonchalance—Tilda never gave herself away—and hugged the volume in her pocket as she and Arthur Miles and 'Dolph explored the coombe's downward windings to the sea.

A moor stream ran down the coombe, dodging and twisting between the overlaps of the hills, and ended in a fairy waterfall, over which it sprang some thirty feet to alight on a beach of clean-washed boulders. Close beside the edge of the fall stood a mud-walled cottage, untenanted and roofless, relic of a time when Farmer Tossell's father had adventured two or three hundred pounds in the fishery, and kept a man here with two grown sons to look after his nets. Nettles crowded the doorway, and even sprouted from crevices

of the empty window sockets. Nettles almost breast-high carpeted the kitchen floor to the hearthstone. Nettles, in fact—whole regiments of nettles—had taken possession and defended it. But Tilda, with the book in her pocket, decided that here was the very spot for her—a real house in which to practise the manners and deportment of a real lady, and she resolved to borrow, or steal a hook after dinner and clear the nettles away. Farmer Tossell had promised the children that on the morrow he would (as he put it) ride them over to Miss Sally's house at Culvercoombe, to pay a call on that great gentlewoman; to-morrow being Sunday and his day of leisure. But to-day he was busy with the sheep, and the children had a long morning and afternoon to fill up as best they might.

Arthur Miles did not share Tilda's rapture over the ruined cottage, and for a very good reason. He was battling with a cruel disappointment. All the way down the coombe he had been on the look-out for his Island, at every new twist and bend hoping for sight of it; and behold, when they came here to the edge of the beach, a fog almost as dense as yesterday's had drifted up Channel, and the Island was invisible. Somewhere out yonder it surely lay, and faith is the evidence of things not seen; but it cost him all his fortitude to keep back his tears and play the man.

By and by, leaning over the edge of the fall, he made a discovery that almost cheered him. Right below, and a little to the left of the rocky pool in which the tumbling stream threw up bubbles like champagne, lay a boat—a boat without oars or mast or rudder, yet plainly serviceable, and even freshly painted. She was stanch too, for some pints of water overflowed her bottom boards where her stern pointed down the beach—collected rain water, perhaps, or splashings from the pool.

The descent appeared easy to the right of the fall, and the boy clambered down to examine her. She lay twenty feet or more—or almost twice her length—

above the line of dried seaweed left by the high spring tides. Arthur Miles knew nothing about tides; but he soon found that, tug as he might at the boat, he could not budge her an inch. By and by he desisted and began to explore the beach. A tangle of bramble bushes draped the low cliff to the right of the waterfall, and peering beneath these, he presently discovered a pair of paddles and a rudder, stored away for safety. He dragged out one of the paddles and carried it to the boat, in the stern-sheets of which he made his next find—five or six thole-pins afloat around a rusty baler. He was now as well equipped as a boy could hope to be for an imaginary voyage, and was fixing the thole-pins for an essay in the art of rowing upon dry land, when Tilda, emerging from the cottage (where the nettles stung her legs) and missing him, came to the edge of the fall in a fright lest he had tumbled over and broken his neck. Then, catching sight of him, she at once began to scold—as folks will, after a scare.

“Come down and play at boats!” the boy invited her.

“Shan’t!” snapped Tilda. “Leave that silly boat alone, an’ come an’ play at houses.”

“Boats aren’t silly,” he retorted; “not half so silly as a house without any roof!”

“A boat out of water—bah!”

Here Tilda was forced to stoop and rub her calves, thus in one moment demonstrating by word and action how much she had to learn before qualifying to shine in Society.

So for the first time the two children quarrelled, and on the first day that invited them to cast away care and be as happy as they listed. Arthur Miles turned his back upon Tilda, and would not budge from his boat; while Tilda seated herself huffily upon a half-decayed log by the cottage doorway, with Dolph beside her, and perused *The Lady's Vade-Mecum*. “A hostess,” she read, “should make her preparations beforehand and especially avoid appearing *distracte* during the

progress of dinner. Small blunders in the service should either be ignored, or, at the worst, gilded over with a laughing apology. . . . A trace too much of curaçao in the *salade d'oranges* will be less easily detected and, if detected, more readily pardoned, than the slightest suspicion of *gêne* on the part of the presiding goddess. . . . In England it is customary to offer sherry with the soup, but this should not be dispensed lavishly. Nursed by a careful butler (or parlour-maid, as the case may be), a single bottle will sherry twelve guests, or, should the glasses be economical, thirteen. Remember the Grecian proverb, 'Mēden agan,' or 'In all things moderation.' " All this Tilda read in a chapter which started with the sentence, " A dinner is a Waterloo which even a Napoleon may lose ; and it is with especial care, therefore, almost with trepidation, that we open this chapter. We will assume that our pupil has sufficiently mastered those that precede it ; that she is apparelled for the fray, her frock modest but *chic*, her *coiffure* adequate . . ." This was going too fast. She harked back and read, under *General Observations*, that " It is the hall-mark of a lady to be sure of herself under all circumstances," and that " A lady must practise self-restraint, and never allow herself to exhibit temper."

" And I'm showin' temper at this moment ! Oh, 'Dolph "—she caught the dog close to her in a hug—" the lot we've got to learn ! "

'Dolph might have answered that he for his part was practising self-restraint, and practising it hard. He loved his mistress before all the world, but he had no opinion of books, and would have vastly preferred to be on the beach with Arthur Miles, nosing about the boat or among the common objects of the seashore.

By this time Arthur Miles, too, was feeling lonely and contrite. On their way back to dinner—signalled by the blowing of a horn in the farm-place—he ranged up beside Tilda and said gently, " I'm sorry," upon which, to her astonishment, Tilda's eyes filled with tears.

She herself could not have said it ; but somehow it was just by differing from her and from other folks that this boy endeared himself.

The reconciliation made them both very happy, and after dinner—to which the whole family, the shepherd and half a dozen labourers assembled, so that Tilda marvelled how, even with a fireplace so ample, Mrs. Tossell managed to cook for them all—Arthur Miles boldly approached Chrissy and got her to persuade her sweetheart, Festus, to lend him a hook. Armed with this, the children retraced their steps down the coombe. The fog had lifted a little, and in the offing Holmness loomed out dimly, with a streak of golden light on the water beyond its westernmost cliffs. But the boy nerved himself ; he would not loiter to gaze at it, but strode into the cottage and began hacking with great fierceness at the nettles, which Tilda—her hands cased in a pair of old pruning gloves—gathered in skirtfuls and carried out of door. Godolphus, in his joy at this restored amity, played at assisting Arthur Miles in his onslaught, barking and leaping at the nettles, yet never quite closely enough to endanger his sensitive nose.

They had been engaged thus for half an hour, perhaps, when they heard a horn sounded far up the coombe. It had not the note of Mrs. Tossell's dinner-horn ; it seemed to travel, too, from a distance beyond the farm, and as Tilda listened, it was followed by a yet fainter sound, as of many dogs baying or barking together. Dolph heard it, yapped excitedly, and made a dash out through the doorway. But, when Tilda followed, the sounds had died away. The coombe was silent save for the chatter of the fall and the mewing of an army of sea-gulls up the vale, where, on the farthest slope in sight, young Roger paced to and fro with a team of horses breaking up the stubble.

Tilda whistled Dolph back and fell to work again, filling her lap with nettles ; but the load was scarcely complete before the dog, who had been whimpering and trembling with excitement, made another dash for the

open, his yells all but drowning a thud of hooves with which a dark body hurled itself past the doorway, between the children and the sunshine, and so leapt clear for the beach over the fall.

Tilda, running to the doorway, saw the animal leap, but in so quick a flash that she noted nothing but its size, and mistook it for a riderless, runaway horse. Then as it appeared again and with three bounds cleared the beach and plunged into the sea, she knew that it was no horse but a huge stag—even such a stag as she had seen portrayed on menagerie posters—a huge Exmoor stag leaping dark against the sun, but with a flame along the russet-gold ridge of his back and flame tipping his noble antlers as he laid them back and breasted the quiet swell of the waves.

The hounds were close upon him. Not until they were close had he quitted his hide-hole in the stream, where for the last time he had broken the scent for them. This was the third stream he had used since they had tufted him out of the wood where through the summer he had lorded it, thirty-five miles away; and each stream had helped him, and had failed him in the end. He had weakened the scent over stony ridges, checked it through dense brakes of gorse, fouled and baffled it by charging through herds of cattle and groups of hinds of his own race couching or pasturing with their calves; for the stag-hunting season was drawing close to its end, and in a few weeks it would be the hinds' turn. But the hinds knew that their peril was not yet, and, being as selfish as he, they had helped him but little or not at all. And now his hour was near.

For even while the children gazed after him the hounds came streaming down the coombe in a flood, with a man on a grey horse close behind them; and behind him, but with a gap between, a straggling line of riders' broke into sight, some scarlet-coated, others in black or in tweeds. The man on the grey horse shouted up the hill to Roger, who had left his team and was running. Away over the crest above him two labourers hove

in sight, these also running at full speed. And all—hounds, horses, men—were pouring down the coombe towards the beach.

The hounds swept down in a mass so solid and compact that Tilda dragged Arthur Miles into the doorway, fearful of being swept by them over the edge of the fall. Past the cottage they streamed, down over the grassy cliff, and across the beach. 'Dolph, barking furiously by the edge of the waves, was caught and borne down by the first line of them—borne down and rolled over into the water with no more ceremony than if he had been a log. They did not deign to hurt him, but passed on swimming, and he found his feet and emerged behind them, sneezing and shaking himself and looking a fool. He was, as we know, sensitive about looking a fool; but just then no one had time to laugh at him.

The riders had arrived, and reined up, crowding the ledge before the cottage, and the most of them stood raising themselves in their stirrups, gazing after the stag that now, with little more than his antlers visible like a bleached bough moving on the flood, swam strongly out into the golden mist still cloaking the Island. Moment by moment he out-distanced the wedge-shaped ripple where the heads of the tired pack bobbed in pursuit; for here, as always in water, the deer held the advantage, being able to float and rest at will while the hound must always ply his forelegs or sink. The huntsman, however, judged it impossible that he could reach Holmness. He and a dozen gentlemen had dismounted, clambered down beside the fall, and were dragging the boat down the beach to launch her, when Roger and the two labourers burst through the throng and took charge; since to recover a deer that takes to the sea means a guinea from the hunt. And the boat was necessary now, for as the Inistow men launched her and sprang aboard the leading hounds realised that their quarry could not be headed, or that their remaining strength would scarcely carry them back to shore and gave up the chase. By this the hunted stag gained

another respite, for as the rowers pulled in his wake they had to pause half a dozen times and haul on board a hound that appeared on the point of sinking.

At the last moment the huntsman had leapt into the stern-sheets of the boat. He had his knife ready, and the rowers too had a rope ready to lasso the stag's antlers when they caught up with him. Ashore the huddled crowd of riders watched the issue. The children watched with them; and while they watched a sharp, authoritative voice said, close above Tilda's ear—

"They won't reach him now. He'll sink before they get to him, and I'm glad of it. He's given us the last and best run of as good a season as either of us can remember—eh, Parson?"

Tilda looked up with a sudden leap of the heart. Above her, on a raw roan, sat a strong-featured lady in a bottle-green riding-habit, with a top-hat—the nap of which had apparently been brushed the wrong way—set awry on her iron-grey locks.

The clergyman she addressed—a keen-faced, hunting parson, elderly, clean-shaven, upright as a ramrod on his mud-splashed grey—answered half to himself and in a foreign tongue.

"Latin, hey? You must translate for me."

"A Pagan sentiment, ma'am, from a pagan poet. . . . If I were Jove, that stag should sleep to-night under the waves on a coral bed. He deserves it."

"Or, better still, swim out to Holmness and reign his last days there, a solitary king."

The Parson shook his head as he gazed.

"They would be few and hungry ones, ma'am, on an island more barren than Ithaca; no shady coverts, no young ash shoots to nibble, no turnip fields to break into and spoil. . . . Jove's is the better boon, by your leave."

"And, by Jove, he has it! . . . Use your eyes, please; yours are better than mine. For my part, I've lost him."

They sat erect in their saddles, straining their gaze over the sea.

"It's hard to say—looking straight here against the sun, and with all this fog drifting about——"

But here a cry, breaking almost simultaneously from a score of riders, drew his attention to the boat.

"Yes, the boat—they have ceased pulling. He must have sunk!"

"God rest his bones—if a Christian may say it."

"Why not, ma'am?"

But as he turned to her the lady turned also, bending down at a light eager touch on her stirrup.]

"Oh, ma'am! . . . Oh, Miss Sally!"

Miss Sally stared down into the small upturned face.

"Eh? . . . Now where in the world have I seen you before? Why, mercy, if it ain't the child Elphinstone, ran over!"

