

CHAPTER XXII

THE VOYAGE

“ Many a green isle needs must be . . .”—SHELLEY.

THE boat had given up its search, and returned to shore. The hunt had wound back up the coombe in a body, and thence homeward in the failing light over the heather, breaking up into small parties as their ways parted, and calling good nights after the best run of the season. But Miss Sally and Parson Chichester sat talking in the best parlour at Inistow, and still sat on while the level sunset shone blood-red through the geraniums on the window-ledge, and faded and gave place to twilight.

They had heard the children's story ; had turned it inside out and upside down, cross-questioning them both ; and had ended by dismissing them for the time. Tomorrow, Miss Sally promised, Farmer Tossell should be as good as his word, and ride them over to Culvercoombe, where perhaps she might have a few more questions to put to them. For the present she and Mr. Chichester had enough to talk over.

The interview had lasted a good hour, and Arthur Miles was glad to regain his liberty. The boy's manner had been polite enough, but constrained. He had stripped and shown the mark on his shoulder ; he had answered all questions truthfully, and Miss Sally's readily—with the Parson he had been less at home—but he had managed to convey the impression that he found the whole business something of a bore ; and, indeed, he asked himself, Where was the point of it ? If only, instead of asking questions, they would take him to the Island now ! . . .

But when he would have followed Tilda from the

room, she took hold of him, pushed him out, and closing the door upon him, turned back and walked up to the two elders where they sat.

"You mus'n' judge Arthur Miles by to-day," she pleaded, meeting the amused, expectant twinkle in Miss Sally's eye. "'E didn't show at 'is best—along of 'im."

She nodded towards the Parson.

"'Eh, to be sure," said Mr. Chichester, "what you may call my *locus standi* in this affair is just nothing at all. If the child had demanded my right to be putting questions to him, 'faith, I don't know what I could have answered."

"It ain't that at all," said Tilda, after considering awhile. "It's your bein' a clergyman. 'E's shy of clergymen. If ever you'd seen Glasson you wouldn't wonder at it, neither."

"I'd like to persuade him that the clergy are not all Glassons? Perhaps you might ask him to give me a chance, next time?"

"Oh, you?" Tilda answered, turning in the doorway and nodding gravely. "You're all right, o' course. W'y, you sit a hoss a'most well enough for a circus!"

"That child is a brick," laughed Miss Sally as the door closed.

"At this moment," said Mr. Chichester, "I should be the last man in the world to dispute it. Her testimonial was not, perhaps, unsolicited; still, I never dreamed of one that tickled my secret vanity so happily. I begin to believe her story, and even to understand how she has carried through this amazing anabasis. Shall we have the horses saddled?"

He rang the bell. Mrs. Tossell answered it, bringing with her a tray of cold meats, apple tart, syllabubs, glasses, and a flagon of home-made cider. Yes, to be sure, they might have their horses saddled; but they might not go before observing Inistow's full ritual of hospitality.

Miss Sally plied (as she put it) a good knife and fork, and the Parson was hungry as a hunter should be. They ate, therefore, and talked little for a while: there would be time for talk on the long homeward ride. But when, in Homer's words, they had put from them the desire of meat and drink, and had mounted and bidden Mrs. Tossell farewell, Parson Chichester reopened the conversation.

"You believe the child's story, then?"

"Why, of course; and so must you. Man alive, truth was written all over it!"

"Yes, yes; I was using a fashion of speech. And the boy?"

"Is Miles Chandon's son. On that too you may lay all Lombard Street to a china orange." In the twilight Miss Sally leaned forward for a moment and smoothed her roan's mane. "You know the history, of course?"

"Very little of it. I knew, to be sure, that somehow Chandon had made a mess of things—turned unbeliever, and what not——"

"Is that all?" Miss Sally, for all her surprise, appeared to be slightly relieved. "But I was forgetting. You're an unmarried man: a wife would have taught you the tale and a hundred guesses beside. Of all women in the world, parsons' wives are the most inquisitive."

Mr. Chichester made no reply to this. She glanced at him after a pause, and observed that he rode with set face and looked straight ahead between his horse's ears.

"Forgive me," she said. "When folks come to our time of life without marrying, nine times out of ten there has been a mess; and what I said a moment since is just the flippant talk we use to cover it up. By 'our time of life' I don't mean, of course, that we're of an age, you and I, but that we've fixed our fate, formed our habits, made our beds and must lie in 'em as comfortably as we can manage. . . . I was a girl when Miles Chandon came to grief; you were a grown man—had been away

for years, if I recollect, on some missionary expedition."

"In north-east China."

"To be sure, yes; and, no doubt, making the discovery that converting Chinamen was as hopeless a business as to forget Exmoor and the Quantocks."

"I had put my hand to the plough——"

"—and God by an illness gently released it. I have heard . . . Well, to get back to Miles Chandon. . . . He was young,—a second son, you'll remember, and poor at that; a second lieutenant in the Navy, with no more than his pay and a trifling allowance. The boy had good instincts," said Miss Sally with a short, abrupt laugh. "I may as well say at once that he wanted to marry me, but had been forced to dismiss the notion."

Again she paused a moment before taking up the story.

"Well, his ship—the *Pegasus*—was bringing him home after two years on the Australian station. . . . Heaven help me! I'm an old sportswoman now, and understand something of the male animal and his passions. In those days I must have been—or so it strikes me, looking back—a sort of plain-featured Diana; 'chaste huntress'—isn't that what they called her? At any rate, the story shocked, even sickened, me a little at the time. . . . It appears that the night before making Plymouth Sound he made a bet in the wardroom—a bet of fifty pounds—that he'd marry the first woman he met ashore. Pretty mad, was it not?—even for a youngster coming home penniless, with no prospects, and to a home he hated; for his father and mother were dead, and he and his elder brother Anthony had never been able to hit it off. . . . On the whole, you may say he got better than he deserved. For some reason or other they halted the *Pegasus* outside the Hamoaze—dropped anchor in Cawsand Bay, in fact; and there, getting leave for shore, the young fool met his fate on Cawsand quay. She was a coast-guard's daughter—a

decent girl, I've heard, and rather strikingly handsome. I'll leave it to you what he might have found if he'd happened to land at Plymouth. . . . He got more than half-drunk that night; but a day or two later, when the ship was paid off, he went back from Plymouth to Cawsand, and within a week he had married her. Then it turned out that fate had been nursing its stroke. At Sidmouth, on the second day of the honeymoon, a re-directed telegram reached him, and he learnt that by Anthony's death Meriton was his, and the title with it. He left his bride at once, and posted up to Meriton for the funeral, arriving just in time; and there I saw him, for we all happened to be at Culvercoombe for the shooting, and women used to attend funerals in those days. . . . No one knew of the marriage; but that same evening he rode over to Culvercoombe, asked for a word with me in private, and told me the whole story—pluckily enough, I am bound to say. God knows what I had expected those words in private to be; and perhaps in the revulsion of learning the truth I lashed out on him. . . . Yes, I had a tongue in those days—have still, for that matter; not a doubt but I made him feel it. The world, you see, seemed at an end for both of us. I had no mother to help me, and my brother Elphinstone's best friend wouldn't call him the man to advise in such a business. Moreover, where was the use of advice? The thing was done, past undoing. . . . Oh," Miss Sally went on, "you are not to think I broke my heart over it. As I've tried to explain, I was disgusted rather: I loathed the man, and—and—well, this is not the history of Sally Breward, so once more we'll get back to Miles Chandon. . . . He rode off; but he didn't ride back to Sidmouth. In his rage he did a thing that, I now see, was far baser than his original folly. I saw it as soon as my mind cleared; but—since this is a confession of a sort—I didn't see it at the time; for I hated the woman. He wrote her a letter; stuck a cheque inside, I dare say—he was brute enough just then; and told her she might claim her price if she chose, but that he

would never see her again. . . . She went back to her coast-guard people."

"It would seem," said Mr. Chichester gravely, as she paused for a while, "that he did not even supply her with alimony—that is, if the child's story be true."

"Probably she refused to accept any. I think we must suppose that, in justice to her—and to him. Let me finish my confession. . . . I thought I could never endure to look on the woman; I have never, as a fact, set eyes on her. I don't know that she ever knew of my existence. If we meet, t'other side of the grave, there'll be a deal to be discussed between us before we straighten things out; but I'll have to start by going up and introducing myself and telling her that, in the end, she beat me. . . . Yes, parson, you'll hardly believe it, but one day, finding myself in Plymouth, I took a boat from Admiral's Hard, and crossed over to Maker Parish to make inquiries. This was two years later, and she had gone—moved with her father (God help her, like me she hadn't a mother) to some station on the east coast—the folk in Cawsand and Kingsand couldn't tell me where. But they told me a child had been born; which was new to me. They weren't sure that it was alive, and were wholly vague about the father—called him Chandon, to be sure, but supposed the name to be spelt with an 'S' as pronounced; told me he was an officer in the Navy, reputed to be an earl's son. Gossip had arrived no nearer. She was respectable, all agreed; no doubt about her marriage lines; and the register confirmed it, with the right spelling—the marriage, and, ten months later, the boy's christening. Arthur Miles was the name. That is all, or almost all. It seems that towards the end of his time there her father became maudlin in his wits; and the woman—her maiden name had been Reynolds, Helen Reynolds—relied for help, and advice upon an old shipmate of his, also a coast-guard, called Ned Commins. It was Ned Commins they followed when he was moved to the east coast, the father, being by this time retired on a pension.

And that is really all. I was weary, ashamed of my curiosity, and followed the search no further."

"You must follow it now," said Parson Chichester quietly.

"That's understood."

"What do you propose as the first step?"

"Why, to ride to Meriton to-morrow, and get Miles Chandon's address. He's somewhere in the South of France. It's ten years or so since we parted, that evening of the funeral; but a telegram from me will fetch him, or I am mistaken."

"Let me save you some trouble. To-morrow is Sunday, and my parishioners will be glad enough to escape a sermon at Morning Service. Let me cut the sermon and ride over to Meriton, get the address and bring it to Culvercoombe. I ought to reach there by three in the afternoon, but the precise hour does not matter, since in these parts there's no telegraphing before Monday."

"That's a good neighbourly offer, and I'll accept it," answered Miss Sally. "I could ride over to Meriton myself, of course. But Tossell has promised to bring the children to Culvercoombe in the early afternoon, and this will give you an excuse to be present. Some questions may occur to you between this and then; and anyway, I'd like to have you handy."

No more was said. They parted, having come to a point where the rising moon showed their paths lying separate across the moor. Their lonely homes lay eight miles apart. Even by daylight one unaccustomed to the moor could hardly have detected the point where the track divided in the smothering heather. But these two could have found it even in the dark; being hunters both, and children of the moor, born and bred.

Had they known it, even while they talked together, something was happening to upset their plans for the morrow, and for days to come.

The children, as they left the parlour, had been inter-

cepted by Mrs. Tossell with the information that tea was ready for them in the kitchen.

"Wot, another meal?" said Tilda.

Twenty-four hours ago a world that actually provided too much to eat would have been inconceivable by her. But already the plenty of Inistow was passing from a marvel into a burden. It seemed to her that the great kitchen fire never rested, as indeed it seldom did. Even when the house slept, great cauldrons of milk hung simmering over the hot wood ashes.

Tea over, the children started once again for their waterfall; and this time in haste, for the hollow of the coombe lay already in shadow, and soon the yellow evening sunlight would be fading on its upper slopes. Arthur Miles hungered for one clear view of his Island before nightfall; Tilda was eager to survey the work accomplished that afternoon in the cottage; while 'Dolph scampered ahead and paused anon, quivering with excitement. Who can say what the dog expected? Perchance down this miraculous valley another noble stag would come coursing to his death; and next time 'Dolph would know how to behave, and would retrieve his reputation—to which, by the way, no one had given a thought. But dogs can be self-conscious as men.

Lo! when they came to the ledge above the fall, Holmness was visible, vignettted in a gap of the lingering fog, and standing so clear against the level sunset that its rocky ledges, tipped here and there with flame appeared but a mile distant, or only a trifle more. He caught his breath at sight of it, and pointed. But Tilda turned aside to the cottage. This craze of his began to annoy her.

She was yet further annoyed when he joined her there, ten minutes later, and appeared to pay small attention, if he listened at all, to her plans for to-morrow, before the ride to Culvercoombe. There could be no more nettle-clearing to-day. Dusk was gathering fast, and in another hour the moon would rise. So back once more they fared, to find Mrs. Tossell busily laying

supper; and close after supper came prayer, and bedtime on the stroke of nine.

An hour later Tilda—who slept, as a rule, like a top—awoke from uneasy dreams with a start, and opened her eyes. A flood of moonlight poured in at the window, and there in the full ray of it stood Arthur Miles, fully dressed.

The boy let drop the window-curtain, and came across to her bed.

“Are you awake?” he whispered. “Get up and dress—we can do it easily.”

“Do what?”

“There’s a tank just under the window—with a slate cover: we can lower ourselves down to it from the sill, and after that it’s not six feet to the ground.”

“What’s up with you?” She raised herself, and sat rubbing her eyes. “Oh, get your clothes off an’ go back to bed! Walkin’ in yer sleep you must be.”

“If you won’t come with me, I’m going alone.”

“Eh?” She stared at him across the moon-ray, for he had gone back to the window and lifted the curtain again. “But *where* in the world?”

“To Holmness.”

“’Olmness? . . . It’s crazed you are.”

“I am not crazed at all. It’s all quite easy, I tell you—easy and simple. They’ve left the boat afloat—I’ve found out how to get to her—and the night is as still as can be. . . . Are you coming?”

“You’ll be drowned, I tell you—drowned or lost, for sure—”

“Are you coming?”

He did not reason with her, or she would have resisted. He spoke very calmly, and for the first time she felt his will mastering hers. One thing was certain—she could not let him go alone. . . . She threw back the bedclothes, slipped out, and began to dress, protesting all the while against the folly of it.

To reach the ground was mere child's play, as he had promised. From the broad window-ledge to the slate tank was an easy drop, and from the tank they lowered themselves to a gravelled pathway that led around this gable of the house. They made the least possible noise, for fear of awakening the farm-dogs; but these slept in an out-house of the great farmyard, which lay on the far side of the building. Here the moon shone into a diminutive garden with box-bordered flower-beds, and half a dozen bee-skips in row against a hedge of privet, and at the end of the gravelled walk a white gate glimmering.

Arthur Miles tip-toed to the gate, lifted its latch very cautiously, and held it aside for Tilda to pass. They were free.

"Of all the madness!" she muttered as they made for the coombe.

The boy did not answer. He knew the way pretty well, for this was their fourth journey. But the moonlight did not reach, save here and there, the hollows through which the path wound, and each step had to be carefully picked.

"Look 'ere," she essayed again after a while. "I won't say but this is a lark, if on'y you'll put that nonsense about 'Olmness out of yer mind. We can go down to the cottage an' make believe it's yer ancestral 'ome——"

"Wh'st!" he commanded sharply, under his breath.

She listened. Above the murmur of the stream her ears caught a soft pattering sound somewhere in the darkness behind.

"What is it?" She caught at his arm.

"I don't know. . . . Yes, I do. 'Dolph?—is it 'Dolph? Here then—*good* dog!"

And sure enough 'Dolph came leaping out of the darkness, heaven knows by what instinct guided. 'Dolph, too wise to utter a single bark, but springing to lick their hands, and fawning against their legs.

The dog's presence put new courage into Tilda, she scarcely knew why, and henceforth she followed more

confidently. With a stumble or two, but no serious mishap, they groped their way down the coombe, and coming to the ledge, saw the beach spread at their feet in the moonlight and out on the water the dark boat heaving gently, a little beyond the edge of the waves' ripple. The tide had receded since their last visit, and Arthur Miles knew nothing about tides. But he had discovered the trick of the boat's moorings. The farmers, returning from their pursuit of the stag, had dropped a small anchor attached to a shore-line, by which at high-water they could draw her in and thus save themselves the present labour of hauling her up the steep beach. But the weather being fair, they had suffered high-water to pass, and let her ride out the night as she lay.

Arthur Miles knew the bush to which the shore-end of the line was attached, and scrambling down beside the fall, found it easily and untied it. As a fact (of which, however, he was quite unaware), he had very little time to lose. In another twenty minutes the boat's keel would have taken ground immovably. He ran down the beach, coiling the slack of the line as he went; tugged at the anchor, which yielded readily; found it; and almost at the same moment heard the boat's nose grate softly on the pebbles. The beach shelved steeply, and her stern lay well afloat; nor was there any run of sea to baffle him by throwing her broadside-on to the stones. He hurried Tilda aboard. She clambered over the thwarts to the stern-sheets, 'Dolph sprang after her, and then with the lightest push the boy had her afloat—so easily indeed that she had almost slid away, leaving him; but he just managed to clutch the gunwale close by the stern and to scramble after.

He seized an oar at once and thrust off. Next came the difficult job of working her round and pointing her nose for the sea. Of rowing he knew nothing at all, nor could Tilda help him. He could but lift the clumsy oar, and ply it with the little skill he had learnt on the voyage down Avon, as one plies a canoe-paddle. Even to do

this he was forced to stand erect in the stern-sheets : if he sat, the awkward pole would over-weight his strength completely. But the boy had a native sense of water-manship, and no fear at all ; and the boat, being a stable old tub, while taxing all his efforts, allowed a margin for mistakes. Little by little he brought her round, and paddled her clear of the cove into open water.

Even then he might have desisted. For although the moon, by this time high aloft behind his right shoulder, shone fair along the waterway to the Island, the grey mass of which loomed up like the body of a sea-monster anchored and asleep in the offing, he soon discovered that his own strength would never suffice to drive the boat so far. But almost on the moment of this discovery he made two others : the first, that the tide—or, as he supposed it, the current—set down and edged the boat at every stroke a little towards the Island, which lay, in fact, well down to the westward of the cove, and but half a mile perhaps ; the second, that out here a breeze, hitherto imperceptible, was blowing steadily off the land. He considered this for a while, and then ordered Tilda, who by this time was shivering with cold, to pull up the V-shaped bottom-board covering the well in the stern, and fix it upright in the bows. She did this obediently, and, so placed, it acted as a diminutive sail.

Seeing that she still shivered, he commanded her to take the other oar, seat herself on a thwart forward, and do her best to work it as they had seen the farm-hands pulling after the stag. Again she obeyed, and he fixed the thole-pins for her, and lifted the oar into place between them. But with the first stroke she missed the water altogether, and with the next caught a crab, which checked the boat dead. This would never do ; so, and still to busy her and keep her warm with exercise, rather than in hope of help from her, he instructed her to stand with her face to the bows, and push with the oar as she had seen him pushing.

He expected very little from this ; but Tilda some-

how caught the knack after a few strokes, and for half a mile it helped them greatly. By this time they were both warm enough, but desperately tired. So far as they could judge, half of the distance was accomplished. They could certainly not work back against the breeze blowing more and more freshly off the land.

With a little steering on the boy's part they might even have trusted to this breeze to carry them the rest of the way, had it not been for the ebb tide. This too had steadily increased in strength, and now, unless a miracle happened, would sweep them far to the westward of their goal. Hitherto they had been working their oars one on each side of the boat. Now Tilda shifted hers across, and they pushed together; but all in vain. The tide steadily forced them sideways. They were drifting past the westernmost end of the Island, and the Island still lay more than a mile off.

For the next ten minutes neither spoke; and it may stand to Tilda's credit that she uttered no reproach at all. At slow intervals she lifted the oar and pushed with it; but she had none of the boy's native instinct for managing it, and her strokes grew feebler. At length she lifted the heavy shaft a little way, and let it fall with a thud on the gunwale. She could do no more, and the face she turned to him in the moonlight was white with fatigue.

"I just *can't*," she panted. "It's dead beat I am."

"Lie down," he commanded, pointing to the bottom boards. "Here—take my coat—"

He picked his jacket up from the stern-sheets and tossed it to her. His face was white and wearied almost as hers, yet, strange to say, quite cheerful and confident, although patently every second now was driving the boat down Channel, and wider of its goal.

For a moment it appeared that she would resist. But, as she caught the coat, weakness overcame her, her knees gave way, and she dropped in a huddled heap. Dolph ran to her with a sharp whine, and fell to licking the hand and wrist that lay inert across the

thwart. The touch of his tongue revived her, and by and by she managed to reach out and draw his warm body close to her, where he was content to lie, reassured by the beating of her heart.

“That’s right!”

The boy spread his jacket over her, and went aft again. He did not resume his paddling, for this indeed was plainly useless. Already on his right hand the Island was slipping, or seemed to be slipping, away into darkness. But he did not lose it, for after a while the climbing moon stood right above it, linking it to the boat by a chain of light that rippled and wavered as if to mock him.

But he was not mocked. He had faith all the while. He longed for the secret by which that shining chain could be hauled upon, by which to follow up that glittering pathway; but he never doubted. By whatever gods might be, he had been brought thus far, and now sooner or later, the last miracle was bound to happen. He had been foolish to struggle so, and to wear Tilda out. He would sit still and wait.

And while he sat there and waited he began, of a sudden and at unawares, to sing to himself. It was the same tuneless chant that had taken possession of him by Haryington-on-Avon; but more instant now and more confident, breaking from him now upon the open sea, with moon and stars above him. Tilda did not hear it, for she slept. He himself was hardly conscious of it. His thoughts were on the Island, on the miracle that was going to happen. He did not know that it had already begun to happen; that the tide was already slackening; nor, had he marked it, would he have understood. For almost an hour he sang on, and so slipped down in the stern-sheets and slept.

By and by, while he slept, the tide reached its ebb and came stealing back, drawing with it a breeze from the south-west.

He awoke to a sound which at first he mistook for the

cawing of rooks—there had been many rooks in the trees beyond the wall of Holy Innocents, between it and the Brewery. But, gazing aloft, he saw that these were sea-gulls, wheeling and mewing and making a mighty pother. And then—O wonder!—as he rubbed his eyes he looked up at a tall cliff, a wall of rock rising sheer, and a good hundred feet from its base where the white water was breaking. The boat had drifted almost within the back-draught, and it was to warn him that the gulls were calling.

“The Island! The Island!”

He caught up his oar and called to Tilda. She struggled up sleepily, and gasped at the sight.

“You must take an oar and help!” he called. “There must be a landing near, if we work her round the point——”

And, sure enough, around the point they opened a small cove, running inwards to a narrow beach of shingle. A grassy gully wound up from the head of the cove, broadening as it trended to the left, away from the tall rocks of the headland; and at the sight of this ‘Dolph began barking furiously, scaring fresh swarms of sea-birds from their roosting-ledges.

They were in quiet water here, and in less than two minutes—the boy steering—the boat’s stem grated softly on the shingle and took ground. ‘Dolph sprang ashore at once, but the children followed with some difficulty, for they were cold and stiff, and infinitely weary yet. It seemed to them that they had reached a new world; for a strange light filled the sky and lay over the sea; a light like the sheen upon grey satin, curiously compounded of moonlight and dawn; a light in which the grass shone a vivid green, but all else was dim and ghostly.

Scarcely knowing what they did, they staggered up the beach a little way, and flung themselves down on the shingle.

Two hours passed before Arthur Miles awoke. The

sun had climbed over the low cliff to the eastward of the cove, and shone on his lids. It seemed to him that his feet were lying in water.

So indeed they were, for the tide had risen, and was running around his ankles. But while he sat up, wondering at this new marvel, Tilda gave a cry and pointed. The boat had vanished.

