

CHAPTER XXIII

THE ISLAND

"Be not afraid; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not."

The Tempest

"WELL," said Tilda dolefully, "I guess that about settles us!"

The boy, his hands thrust into his breeches' pockets, stared over the sea for a while.

"I don't see that it matters much," he answered at length, withdrawing his gaze. "You know well enough we could never have worked her back again."

"Oh, indeed? And 'ow are we goin' to pick up our vittles? I don't know what *you* feel like, but I could do with breakfast a'ready."

"Perhaps 'Dolph can catch us a rabbit," he suggested hopefully after a pause. "I heard Roger say last night that Holmness swarmed with rabbits."

"Rabbits?" said Tilda with scorn. "D'yer know 'ow to skin one if we caught 'im?"

"No, I don't," he confessed.

"And when he's skinned, there's the cookin'; and we 'aven't so much as a box of matches . . . That's the worst of boys, they're so unpractical."

"Well, then, we can hunt for gulls' eggs."

"That's better; if," she added on an afterthought, "gulls 'appen to lay eggs at this time of year,—which I'll bet they don't."

"Look here," said the boy severely, "we haven't searched yet. What's the use of giving in before we've *tried*? Nobody starves on the Island, I tell you; and

—and I can't bear your talking in this way.' It isn't like you——"

"I can't 'elp it," owned poor Tilda with a dry sob.

"—breaking down," he continued, "just when we've reached, and all the rest is going to happen just as the book says."

"That's likely!"

"It's certain." He pulled out the tattered, coverless volume. "Why, I do believe"—he said it with a kind of grave wonder—"you're hankering after that silly cottage!"

"Of course I am," she confessed defiantly, for he exasperated her. "We'd promised to ride over an' see Miss Sally this afternoon, an' I wanted to spend the 'cle-mornin' learnin' 'ow to be a lady. . . . I don't get too much time for these little things."

The protest was weak enough, and weakly uttered. Until the moment of embarking on this expedition Tilda had been throughout their wanderings always and consciously their leader—her will the stronger, hers to initiate and to guide. But now he stuck his hands deeper into his pockets.

"That's all very well," he replied; "but you can't get to Miss Sally's to-day. So who's unpractical now? Let's find the cave first, and have breakfast; and then, if you're tired of exploring, you can sit on cushions all day, and read your book and learn how to be a princess—which is ever so much higher than an ordinary lady."

"Cave? *Wot* cave? *Wot* breakfast? *Wot* cushions? Oh, I do believe, Arthur Miles, you've gone stark starin' mad!"

"Why," he reasoned with her, "on a seashore like this there are bound to be caves; the only trouble will be to find the right one. And as for breakfast, it was you that talked about it just now."

His persistence, his gentleness, the careful lucidity of his craze drove her fairly beside herself.

"Oh" she cried again, "if you ain't mad, then I must be, or elst I'm sicke'in' for it! It don't much matter,

any'ow. We got to starve 'ere an' die, an' the sooner the better."

She walked across the beach to a smooth slab of rock and seated herself sullenly, with her eyes on the distant mainland. They were misty with tears of anger, of despair. But he could not see them, for she had resolutely turned her back on him. Had she broken down—had she uttered one sob even—the boy would have run to her side. As it was, he gazed at her sorrowfully. . . . She had lost her temper again, and it spoiled everything. But the spell of the Island was on him. Above, in the sunlight, the green gully wound upward and inland, inviting him; and here on the shingle at his feet sat 'Dolph and looked up at him, with eyes that appealed for a ramble. The dog's teeth chattered, and small suppressed noises worked in his throat.

"Very well," called the boy, "I'm going, and you can sit there or follow, as you like."

He swung on his heel and set forth, 'Dolph scampering ahead and barking so wildly that the noise of it scared the birds again in flock after flock from their ledges.

On the ridge the boy halted for a moment and looked down. But Tilda sat stubbornly on her rock, still with her back turned.

She had pulled out her book, the *Lady's Vade-Mecum*, but only for a pretence. She did not in the least want to read, nor could her eyes just now have distinguished a word of the text. She was wholly miserable; and yet, curiously enough, after the first minute her misery did not rest on despair, or at any rate not consciously. She was wretched because the boy had broken away and gone without her, and 'Dolph with him—'Dolph, her own dog. They were ungrateful. . . . Had not everything gone right so long as they had obeyed her? While now— They would find out, of course. Even Arthur Miles would begin to feel hungry after a while, and then—'Dolph might keep going for a time on rabbits, though as a circus dog he was not clever at sport.

Yes, she had a right to be indignant. She had lost

command for a moment, and Arthur Miles had straightway led her into this trap. . . . This was all very well, but deep down beneath the swellings of indignation there lurked a thought that gradually surmounted them, working upwards until it sat whispering in her ear. . . . They were in a tight place, no doubt, . . . but was she behaving well? Now that the mess was made and could not be unmade, where was the pluck—where was even the sense—of sitting here and sulking? Had she stuck it out, why then at the end she could have forgiven him, and they would have died together. . . . She stared farlornly at the book, and a ridiculous mocking sentence stared back at her: "It is often surprising into what tasty breakfast dishes the cunning housewife will convert the least promising materials." In a gust of temper she caught up the book and hurled it from her.

And yet . . . with all these birds about, there must surely be eggs. She had not a notion how gulls' eggs tasted. Raw eggs! they would certainly be nasty; but raw eggs, after all, will support life. Moreover, deliverance might come, and before long. The Tossells, when they found the boat missing, would start a search, and on the Island there might be some means of signalling. How could she be forgiven, or forgive herself, if the rescuers arrived to find Arthur Miles dead and herself alive?

With that a dreadful apprehension seized her, and she stood erect, listening She had let him go alone, into Heaven knew what perils. He was searching along the cliffs, searching for a cave, and very likely for gulls' eggs on the way. . . . What easier than to slip and break his neck? She listened—listened. But the sound of 'Dolph's barking had long ago died away. . . . Oh, if he were dead, and she must search the Island alone for him!

Poor child! for the moment her nerve deserted her. With a strangling sob she ran towards the beach-head, and began to clamber up the low cliff leading to the gully,

"Til-da! Hi! Til-da!"

From the ledge of the cliff she stared up, and with

another sob. High on the ridge that closed the gully stood Arthur Miles, safe and sound. He was waving both arms.

"I've found it!" he called.

"Found w'ot?"

"The House." He came running down to meet her as she scrambled her way up the gully. "It's not a Cave, but a House." They met, both panting. "You were right, after all," he announced, and in a voice that shook with excitement. He had forgotten their quarrel; he had no room for remembrance of it; sheer joy filled him so full. "It's not a Cave, but a House; and with *such* things to eat!"

"Things to eat?" she echoed dully, and for an instant her heart sank again at the suspicion that after all he was mad, and here was another proof of it. But her eyes were fixed on something he held out in his hand. "What's that you've got?"

"Marmalade—real marmalade! And a spoon too—there are heaps of spoons and cups and glasses, and a fire ready laid. And—see here—biscuits!" He produced a handful from his pocket. "I brought these things along because you said you were hungry."

Still incredulous, distrusting her eyes, Tilda watched him dip out a small spoonful of marmalade and spread it on the biscuit. She took it and ate, closing her eyes. The taste was heavenly.

"Oh, Arthur Miles, where are we?"

"Why, on the Island. Didn't I tell you it was going to be all right?"

He said it in mere elation, without a hint of reproach.

"I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? What is there to be sorry about? Come along."

They climbed the turfy slope in silence, Tilda too deep in amaze for speech. By and by she asked irrelevantly—

"Where is 'Dolph?"

"Eh? Dolph? He was with me five minutes ago."

Off chasing rabbits, I expect. He has missed catching about two dozen already."

"Isn't that his bark? Listen . . . away to the right."

They stood still for a while.

"Sounds like it," said the boy; "and yet not exactly like."

"It's 'Dolph, and he's in some sort of trouble. That's not 'is usual bark."

"We'd best see what it is, I suppose, and fetch him along." Arthur Miles struck aside from the line they had been following, and moved after the sound, not without reluctance. "It may be only a vision," he said gravely. "Remember the hounds that ran after Caliban and the others!"

But as they trended towards the edge of the cliffs the barking grew louder, and was recognisably 'Dolph's; and so they came to, a wide shelving amphitheatre of turf overgrown with furze and blackthorn. It curved almost as smoothly as the slope of a crater, and shelved to a small semicircular bay. There, on the edge of the tide, danced 'Dolph yelping; and there, knee-deep in water, facing him with lowered head, stood a magnificent stag—yes, the stag of yesterday! When Arthur Miles caught at Tilda's arm and proclaimed this, at first she doubted. But he pointed to the antlers, glinting bright in the sunshine. He did not know the names for them, but whereas the left antler bore brow, bay, tray, and three on top, the top of the right antler, by some malformation, was not divided at all, and even a child could see this and guess it to be unusual. He was a noble stag nevertheless. The sun shone down on his russet-gold flanks as he stood there fronting the dog with his deadly brow-points. And 'Dolph kept to the edge of the water, leaping forward a little and anon leaping back, and at each leap emitting a futile yelp.

The children stared, wondering how he could have driven so noble a quarry; until, as Arthur Miles called down, he lifted his head and gazed up at them for a moment. Then he turned slowly, as it were disdain-

fully, and they divined the truth—that the long swim of yesterday had broken his gallant strength, and he had come down to the beach to die. He turned and lurched heavily down into deep water, laid himself gently afloat, and struck out as if heading for the main. But the main and his own heathery moors lay far distant, a blue-grey line in the haze to the southward. Perhaps his spirit regained them as his body slowly sank. The children watched it sink until only the antlers showed above water like a forked bough adrift on the tideway. They drifted so for a few seconds; then dipped out of sight, and were gone.

The children stood for a full minute gazing at the water where he had disappeared. Then Arthur Miles whistled to 'Dolph, who came bounding up the slope, and together all three struck inland again, but in silence. They were awed by the Island and its wonders.

The Island, as they climbed to its grassy chine, gradually revealed itself as a hill of two peaks, united by a long saddle-back. The most of this upland consisted of short turf, with here and there a patch of stones. In all the prospect was no single tree, scarcely a furze-bush even—the furze grew only on the southern slopes, low down; and Tilda strained her eyes vainly for sight of the House.

But in the very dip of the saddle was a gully, much like the one by which they had ascended, but steeper and dipping to the north. Before they reached it, before she could detect it even, Arthur Miles pointed to where it lay; and they had scarcely turned aside to follow it before a chimney—a genuine red-brick chimney—rose into sight above the dying bracken.

A minute later, and she was looking down on a broad slated roof, on a building of one story, stuck here in a notch of the gully, and in the lee of almost every wind that could blow. Its front faced her as she descended. It had a deep, red-tiled verandah, and under the verandah a line of windows, close-shuttered all but one. This one stood next to the front door, on the right.

The boy, still leading, ran down the sloping path to the door, and lifted the latch. Tilda halted just within the threshold, and looked about her.

The kitchen, on which the door opened, was well furnished, with an open hearth, and a fire laid ready there, and even a row of saucepans twinkling above the mantel-shelf.

Arthur Miles waved a hand around, and pointed to another door at the end of the kitchen.

"There's a heap of rooms in there. I didn't stay to search. But look at this!"

He unhitched a card which hung above the mantel-shelf. On it was written:—

"The provisions here are left for any mariners who may find themselves shipwrecked on this Island. All such are welcome to make use of what accommodation they find here. Casual visitors will kindly respect the intention with which this house is kept open, and will leave the place strictly as they find it.

"(Signed) MILES CHANDON, Bart."

From the next room came the sound of a window opened and a shutter thrown wide, and Tilda's voice announced—

"Well, I never! Beds!"

"Beds?"

"Beds—and sheets—and blankets." Tilda reappeared in the doorway. "A 'ole reel 'ouse! But why?—and 'ow, in the world?"

Arthur Miles held out the card.

"It's for sailors shipwrecked here."

Tilda studied the notice.

"And we're shipwrecked! Well, if this ain't the loveliest. A reel 'ouse, with reel beds an' sorsepans!"

Her jaw dropped.

"An' I flung that blessed book away just as it was tellin' about breakfast-dishes!"