

CHAPTER XXV

MISS SALLY BREAKS THE DOORS

“And to shew Thy pity upon all prisoners and captives.”
The Litany.

MR. HUCKS sat in his counting-house, counting out his money—or so much of it as he had collected from his tenantry on his Saturday rounds. It amounted to £12, 2s. 9d. in cash; but to this must be added a caged bullfinch, a pair of dumb-bells, a down mattress and an ophicleide. He had coveted the ophicleide for weeks; but he knew how to wait, and in the end it had fallen to his hand—if the simile may be permitted—like a ripe peach.

The clock at the Great Brewery struck ten, the hour at which the banks opened. Mr. Hucks whistled to himself softly, but out of tune—sure sign that he was in a good humour—as he closed the neck of his money-bag and tied the string with a neat knot. Just as he was reaching, however, for coat and walking-stick, someone knocked at the door.

“Come in!” he called, and resumed his seat as a lady entered—a stranger to him. At first glance he guessed she might be the wife of some impecunious musician, come to plead for restitution of an instrument. Such things happened now and again on Monday mornings; nor was the mistake without excuse in Miss Sally’s attire. When travelling without her maid she had a way of putting on anything handy, and in the order more or less as it came to hand. Without specifying, it may be said that two or three articles usually ranked as underclothing had this morning partially worked their way up to the top stratum, and that by consequence her person presented more than one example of what

geologists call a "fault"—though it is actually rather a misfortune. As for her hat, she had started by putting it on sideways, and then, since it would not "sit," and she had mislaid her hatpins, had bound it boldly in place with a grey woollen comforter, and knotted the ends under her chin. What gave Mr. Hucks pause was, first, the brusqueness of her entry, and next, the high clear tone of her accost.

"Mr. Christopher Hucks?"

"At your service, ma'am."

"I hope so, because I want your help."

"As for that, ma'am, I don't know who sent you; but it ain't generally reckoned in my line."

Miss Sally glanced round the counting-house.

"You have the materials for doing quite a lot of miscellaneous good in the world. But I'm not come to borrow money, if that makes you easier——"

"It do, ma'am."

"——and I don't know a note of music."

"Me either," murmured Mr. Hucks regretfully.

"That being so, we'll come to business. May I take a seat?"

"Where you——" He was going to say "please," but substituted "choose."

"Thank you. My name's Breward—Sally Breward, and I live at a place called Culvercoombe, on the Devon and Somerset border. My business is that I'm interested in a couple of children, about whom you know something. They broke out, some days ago, from an Orphanage kept here by one Glasson; and I gather that you gave them a helping hand."

"Whoever told you that——" began Mr. Hucks.

"Nobody told me. I said that I gathered it. The girl never gave you away for a moment. We will agree, if you prefer it, that I put two and two together. But look here you can be open with me or not, as you please; I'm going to be open with you. And first let me say that the boy is pretty certainly the son of a neighbour of mine, and heir to considerable estates."

Mr. Hucks whistled softly to himself.

"As for the girl who helped him to escape, she's probably just what she says—a show-child who, happening to be laid up lame in hospital, chanced on this scent, and has held to it—to make an addition of my own—with the pluck of a terrier."

Mr. Hucks nodded, but would not commit himself.

"Where are they now?" he asked. "In your keepin'?"

"That's just the trouble." Miss Sally unfolded a scrap of pinkish-coloured paper. "I left them in good keeping with an honest farmer and his wife—tenants of mine; I had a telegram sent to the boy's father, who is abroad; and I posted up here by night mail to satisfy myself by a few inquiries."

"You've seen Glasson, then?" Mr. Hucks interrupted.

"I have; but not in any way you suspect. I haven't called, for instance, at the Orphanage—though I intend to. Glasson's not at home. He was down in my neighbourhood yesterday afternoon, nosing around for information."

"Then he knows the children are thereabouts?"

"No, he does not. But has been pushing researches. He has learnt who is the boy's probable father, and where he lives—at a place called Meriton. He came to Meriton to get the father's foreign address, and when the butler refused it, he called on me."

"I see." Mr. Hucks nodded. "And you refused it too?"

"I did better. I gave it to him——"

"Eh?"

"——at the same time taking care that the father—his name is Chandon, by the way, and he's a baronet—should get a wire from me to come home by the first train he can catch. By this means, you see, I not only get Glasson out of the neighbourhood, where he might have run against the children, or picked up news of them, but I send him all the way to the South of France expressly

to find his bird flown. It's cruel, I grant you; but I've no tenderness for blackmailers—especially when they keep Orphanages."

"You're right there. You've no call to waste any pity on Glasson. But the question is, Will he come? The father, I mean."

"Certainly, since I tell him," Miss Sally answered with composure.

"And him a bart—a bloomin' bart—what the Tichborne chap used to call a bart of the B.K.!"

Mr. Hucks stared at his visitor with rounded eyes, drew a long breath, puffed out his cheeks and emitted it, and wound up by removing his hat and laying it on the ledge of the desk.

"Well," said he, "you've done it clever. You've done it so mighty clever that I don't see why you come to me to help. I can't order barts about."

"No," said Miss Sally; "in this part of the business I fear you cannot help. Read *that*, please."

She spread open the telegraph form which she had been holding all this while, and laid it on the desk before him.

"Breward, Grand Central Hotel, Bursfield.

"Regret to say children missing. Supposed left Inistow Cove Tossell's boat Saturday night. Boat found ashore Clatworthy Beach. Search parties along coast. Will report any news.—Chichester."

"When did you get this, ma'am, making so bold?"

"At nine this morning. If you look, you will see the telegram was handed in at 8.37, and received here at 8.50—is it not? The sender is a Mr. Chichester, a clergyman and a friend of mine."

"Aye," said Mr. Hucks, after slowly examining the telegram and the office stamp. He raised his formidable grey eyes and fixed them full on Miss Sally.

"Oh," she said after a while, but without blanching, "I see what's in your mind."

"No you don't," he answered abruptly "It did

cross my mind, but it's not there any longer. You're straight. And you're quality—though maybe your kind don't answer to the pitcher-books . . . Well, about this wire now . . . What's your opinion ? ”

“ Why, that the children are lost.”

“ Meanin' by that drowned—or just missing ? ”

“ From that message what must one conclude ? ”

“ Well,” said Mr. Hucks slowly, after another perusal of the telegram, “ I don't conclude much from it ; but from my knowledge of the gal-child, I jolly well conclude that they're no more drowned than you 'r me. They've just made another bolt for it, and the shipwrecked boat's no more than a blind.”

“ They were comfortable enough at Inistow Farm. Why should they want to bolt ? ” Miss Sally urged.

“ Because, ma'am, that gal has a business conscience developed to a degree I never struck yet in man or woman. You've dealt open with me, and I'll deal open with you. I *did* help that pair to give Glasson the slip ; not from any kindheartedness, I'd have you to know, if you're thinkin' to accuse me of it ; but as a kind of by-speculation. For I saw that dirty thief Glasson was mad to get the boy back, and it seemed to me there was likely some money in it. I gave 'em their chance, yes ; because it happened so, and I couldn't see no other way. Now, observe me—that gal knew all the time I wasn't doing it for my health, as you might say ; she know well enough I was just as hard as Glasson, though maybe in a different way. She knew this, and as things turned out, she might have run off with the boy and snapped her fingers at me. But does she ? Nothing o' the sort. She freezes to her bargain, same as if she'd all a lawyer's knowledge and none of his conscience. First, she clears me back every penny I've invested in Mortimer, and with interest ; and I'm the first man that ever invested on that scamp and saw his money again. When that's paid she strikes out on a trail of her own—but not to lose herself and the boy : not she. At every halt she reports herself and him ; and by her last I was to write

to her at a place called Holmness, which I posted a letter there yesterday."

"Holmness!" ejaculated Miss Sally. "Holmness, did you say?"

"That's so. Might it be anywhere in your parts?"

"Of course it is. But Holmness, my good sir, is an island."

"She mentioned that, now I come to think of it. Island or not, she'll get there, if she bursts; and I won't believe other till I hear from the Dead Letter Office."

"You addressed a letter to Holmness? . . . But it's too absurd; the place is a mere barren rock, three good miles from the mainland. Nothing there but rabbits, and in summer a few sheep."

"Mayhap she didn't know it when she gave the address. But," persisted Mr. Hucks doggedly, "she's there if she's alive. You go back and try."

[He gave Tilda, as the reader knows, more credit than she deserved; but from this may be deduced a sound moral—that the value of probity, as an asset in dealing, is quite incalculable.]

Miss Sally considered for a full minute—for two minutes, Mr. Hucks watching her face from under his shaggy eyebrows.

It is barely possible," she owned at length. "But supposing they have reached Holmness, it can only be to starve. Good Lord, they may be starving to death there at this moment!"

Mr. Hucks kept his composure.

"It's plain to me you haven't measured that gal," he said slowly. "Is this Holmness in sight from the farm—whatever you call it—where they were missed?"

"Right opposite the coast there."

"And not more than three miles away? Then you may take it she won't have started without provisions. It wouldn't be her way."

[Again, the reader perceives, he gave Tilda undeserved credit; but always in this world the Arthur Miles's

will be left out of account by men of business, to upset again and again their calculations.]

"So," he continued, "there's no need for you to be running and sending telegrams to folks there to chivvy 'em. Take the next train home and pick up the credit yourself."

"Mr. Hucks," said Miss Sally after a pause; "you are a remarkable man. I am half inclined to believe you; and if you should prove to be right, I shall not know how to repay you."

"Well," said Mr. Hucks, "it seems likely I've helped, after all. I'm not pressing for payment; though, as between persons of business, I'm glad you mention it."

"If these children are recovered, you shall name any price in reason. But there is another matter in which you can help me, I hope. I want admission to Glasson's Orphanage."

"The 'Oly Innocents? It goes by nomination, and I'm not a subscriber," said Mr. Hucks with a grin, which Miss Sally ignored.

"Will it be enough if I call and ask to be shown over the institution?"

"Quite enough—to get the door slammed in your face."

"Well, I mean to have a look inside, even though I get you to put me in a sack and lower me into the coal-cellar."

"That's an idea, though," said Mr. Hucks, rising.

He went to the door and, stepping into the yard, emitted a loud roar like the bellow of a bull. Apparently it was his method of telephoning to his employés. After a moment a distant voice called back, "Aye, aye, boss!"

"Where's Sam Bossom?"

"In the stables."

"Then send him along here, and tell him to look sharp. He's the man for our job," explained Mr. Hucks, returning to the counting-house; and maybe you'll like to make his acquaintance, too, after what you've 'eard."

"Before he comes I should like even better to hear

your plan of campaign; for it seems that you have one."

"I have; but it being what you might call a trifle 'igh-'anded, I wasn't proposin' to drag a lady into it—leastways, not to make her an accomplice before the fac'."

"I'll risk that," she assured him.

"Well, you see, Glasson owes me for coal; thirteen ten on the last lot delivered, and six pounds owin' before that—total nineteen ten. I warned him he'd got the last lot out o' me by a trick; an' I'm goin' to send Sam to see if there's a chance to recover it. That'll be by the back way—same as the children got out. Eh? Here's the man," he wound up as Sam Bossom's honest face appeared in the doorway.

"Good morning, Mr. Bossom." Miss Sally held out a hand. "I'm proud to make your acquaintance."

"Thank ye, ma'am." Sam looked at the hand, but rubbed his own up and down the seat of his trousers. "What for, if it's not makin' too bold?"

"The lady here," explained Mr. Hucks, "is a friend of two children that broke out of 'Oly Innocents t'other day—as it maybe you'll remember. What's more, she's brought news o' them."

"Oh!" said Sam, his face clearing. "Doin' pretty well, I 'ope?"

"They were quite well when I left them, two days ago. Come, shake hands and tell me. How is everyone at the 'Four Alls'?"

"If it 'adn't been for them children——" blurted Sam, and came to a full stop.

Miss Sally nodded.

"They are wonders, those Babes in the Wood and the funniest thing about 'em is, while they went along asking their way, they were all the time teaching it to others."

"Well," struck in Mr. Hucks, while Sam scratched his head over this, "I suggest the conspiracy may just as well get going at once. Sam, I want you to step along to 'Oly Innocents with us, and on the road I'll fix up ~~you~~ ^{your} modest hopper andy."

Of this *modus operandi* the opening move was made as the trio reached the confines of the Orphanage premises. Here, by the angle of the red brick wall, Mr. Bossom halted to strike a match for his pipe. He struck it upon the iron cover of the manhole, and thus made opportunity to assure himself that the cover was still removable. Satisfied of this, he lit his pipe and stood for a minute puffing at it, and staring, now at the stagnant canal water, now after the retreating figures of Miss Sally and Mr. Hucks, as without a backward look they passed down the towpath to the Iron Bridge.

At the bridge they turned, as Tilda had turned, to the left, and came, as Tilda had come, to the Orphanage gate with its box labelled, "For Voluntary Donations."

Mr. Hucks rang the bell; and after a minute or so Mrs. Huggins, slatternly as ever, opened the front door and came shuffling down the pathway.

"Eh?" said she, halting within the gate, a pilaster of which hid Miss Sally from her. "Mr. 'Ucks? And what might you be wantin', Mr. 'Ucks?"

"Nineteen pound ten," Mr. Hucks answered tersely.

"Then you can't 'ave it."

"That's a pity." He appeared to ruminate for a second or two. "And I can't offer to take it out in orphans, neither. Very well, then, I must see Glasson."

"You can't; 'e's not at 'ome."

"That's a worse pity. Hist, now!" he went on with a sudden change of tone, "it's about the runaways. I've news of 'em."

He said it at the top of his voice.

"For the Lord's sake——" entreated the woman, glancing nervously across his shoulder at the traffic in the street. "The Doctor don't want it discussed for all the town to 'ear."

"No, I bet he don't. But it's your own fault, missus. This side o' the gate a man can't scarcely hear hisself speak."

"Come in, then, if you've brought news. The Doctor'll be glad enough when 'e comes back."

"Will he?" Mr. Hucks, as she opened, planted his bulk against the gate, pushing it back and at the same time making way for Miss Sally to follow him. "Yes, I got news; but here's a lady can tell it better than me—'avin' come acrost them right away down in Somerset."

Mrs. Huggins stepped forward, but too late.

"I don't want no crowd in 'ere" she muttered, falling back a pace, however, as Miss Sally confronted her.

"You'll have one in two two's if you make any disturbance," Miss Sally promised her, with half a glance back at the street. "Show me into the house, if you please."

"Shan't."

The woman placed herself in the pathway, with arms akimbo, barring her passage.

"You behave very foolishly in denying me," said Miss Sally.

"Maybe; but I got my orders. You never took no orders from a man. I should say—not by the looks o' yer."

"You are right there."

Miss Sally regarded her with a smile of conscious strength, stern but good-natured. Her gaze wandered past the woman's shoulder, and the smile broadened. Mrs. Huggins saw it broaden, and cast a look behind her, towards the house—to see Mr. Bossom, coal-grimed but cheerful, grinning down on her from the front doorstep.

"It's a trap!" she gasped, shooting a venomous look at Mr. Hucks.

"It looks like one," said Miss Sally, stepping past her; "and I shall be curious to know, by and by, who baited it."

"Where shall I take ye, ma'am?" asked Sam Bossom.

"Show me the children first, if you please."

He walked before her down the unsavoury passage. He was unacquainted with the interior and knew only that the way through the kitchens, by which he

had come, led to the kitchen-garden and missed the children's quarters. Avoiding this, and opening a door at random—a door on his right—he stepped into the bare drawing-room. Miss Sally followed, and Mrs. Huggins at her heels, protesting. Mr. Hucks brought up the rear. Finding himself in an apartment which apparently led nowhither, Sam would have turned and shepherded the party back into the corridor, but Miss Sally strode past him, attempted to fling up the window-sash, but in vain, and looking over it, beheld what Tilda had beheld—the gravelled yard, the children walking listlessly to and fro, the groups passing and re-passing with scarce a lift of the eyes, the boys walking with the boys and the girls with the girls.

“But it is horrible—horrible!” cried Miss Sally. “Mr. Hucks, lend me your stick, if you please. This window won't open.”

He passed his stick to her, supposing that she meant in some way to prise the window open. But she took it and deliberately smashed a pane—two panes—all the six panes with their coloured transparencies of the Prodigal Son. And the worst was, that the children in the yard, as the glass broke and fell, scarcely betrayed surprise. One or two glanced furtively towards the window. It seemed that they dared do no more.

“Save us!” exclaimed Miss Sally. “They're starving; that's what's the matter!”

“They are not, ma'am!” still protested Mrs. Huggins.

“Tut, woman, don't talk to *me*. I've bred cattle, and I know. Fetch me a list of the pious persons that have lent their names to this swindle. You, Mr. Hucks, take me upstairs; I'll explore this den from garret to basement, though it cost my stomach all that by the smell I judge it will. And you, Sam Bossom—here's a five-pound note: take it to the near st pastry-cook's and buy up the stock. Fetch it here in cabs; hire every cab you meet on the way; and when you've brought 'em, tell 'em to wait!”

An hour later a procession of fifteen cabs drove up to the Grand Central Hotel, Bursfield, to the frank dismay of hall-porters and manager; a dismay which Miss Sally accepted with the lordliest indifference.

"You see that they're stowed," she advised Mr. Hucks shortly, as they helped the dazed children to alight. "And if there's any difficulty, send the manager to me. He'll find me in the telegraph office." She consulted a prospectus of the Holy Innocents, extorted from Mrs. Huggins. "I shall be there for an hour at least. There are two dozen patrons on this list—besides a score of executive committee, and I'm going—bless you, Mr. Hucks—to give those philanthropists the dry grins."

"A telegram for you, ma'am," said the hall-porter, advancing with a nervous eye on the children congregated, and still congregating, in the hall.

Miss Sally took it and read—

"Coming Fair Anchor, 4.30 Tuesday. Chandon."

She knit her brows and examined the telegraph form carefully. The message was forwarded from Fair Anchor. It had been handed in at the Monte Carlo post office on Sunday night, addressed to Culvercoombe, but at what hour she could not decipher. The Fair Anchor office was closed on Sunday, and opened on Monday at eight o'clock. The telegram had been received there at 8.12; had been taken to Culvercoombe, and apparently retransmitted at 12.15. All this was unimportant. But how on earth had her telegram, to which this was evidently a reply, reached Monte Carlo on Sunday evening—last evening?

She considered awhile, and hit on the explanation. Parson Chichester last evening, calling on the coastguard in his search, must have used their telephone and got the message through by some office open on Sundays.