EPILOGUE

THE time is seven years later—seven years and a half, rather; the season, spring; the hour, eight in the morning; and the place, a corner of Culvercoombe, where Miss Sally's terraced garden slopes to meet the wild woodland through an old orchard billowy overhead with pink and white blossom and sheeted underfoot with bluebells. At the foot of the orchard, and on the very edge of the woodland, lies a small enclosure, where from the head of the slope you catch sight, between the apple trees, of a number of white stones glimmering; but your eyes rest rather on the figure of a girl who has just left the enclosure, and is mounting the slope with a spade on her shoulder.

You watch her, yourself invisible, while she approaches. You might gaze until she has passed, and yet not recognise her for Tilda. She wears a coat and skirt of grey homespun, fashioned for country wear yet faultless in cut, the skirt short enough to reveal a pair of trim ankles cased in shooting-gaiters. Beneath her grey shooting-cap, also of homespun, her hair falls in two broad bands over the brows, and is gathered up at the back of the head in a plain Grecian knot. By the brows, if you had remarked them in days gone by, when neither you nor she gave a second thought to her looks, you might know her again; or perhaps by the poise of the chin, and a touch of decision in the eyes. In all else the child has vanished, and given place to this good-looking girl, with a spring in her gait and a glow on her cheek that tell of clean country nurture.

At the head of the path above the orchard grows an old ash tree, and so leans that its boughs, now bursting into leaf, droop pendant almost as a weeping willow. Between them you catch a glimpse of the Bristol Channel, blue-grey beyond a notch of the distant hills. She pauses here for a look. The moors that stretch for miles on all sides of Culvercoombe are very silent this sunny morning. It is the season when the sportsman pauses and takes breath for a while, and neither gun nor horn is abroad. The birds are nesting; the stag more than a month since has "hung his old head on the pale," and hides while his new antlers are growing amid the young green bracken that would seem to imitate them in its manner of growth; the hinds have dropped their calves, and fare with them unmolested. It is the moors' halcyon time, and the weather to-day well befits it.

Tilda's face is grave, however, as she stands there in the morning sunshine. She is looking back upon the enclosure where the white stones overtop the bluebells. They are headstones, and mark the cemetery where Miss Sally, not ordinarily given to sentiment, has a fancy for interring her favourite dogs.

You guess now why Tilda carries a spade, and what has happened, but may care to know how it happened.

Sir Elphinstone is paying a visit just now to Culvercoombe. He regards Tilda with mixed feelings, and Tilda knows it. The knowledge nettles her a little and amuses her a good deal. Just now Miss Sally and he are improving their appetites for breakfast by an early canter over the moor, and no doubt are discussing her by the way.

Last night, with the express purpose of teasing him, Miss Sally had asked Tilda to take up a book and read to her for a while. The three were seated in the drawing-room after dinner, and Sir Elphinstone beginning to grow impatient for his game of piquet. On the hearth-rug before the first were stretched Godolphus and three of Miss Sally's prize setters; but Godolphus had the warmest corner, and dozed there stertorously.

The book chanced to be Gautier's *Emaux et Camées*, and Tilda to open it at the *Carnaval de Venise*—

> "Il est un vieil air populaire
> Par tous les violons raclé,
> Aux abois de chiens en colère
> Par tous les orgues nasillé."

She read the first verse with a pure clear accent and paused, with a glance first at the hearthrug, then at Sir Elphinstone in his chair. Perhaps the sight of him stirred a small flame of defiance. At any rate she closed the book, went straight to the piano, and recklessly rattled out the old tune, at once so silly and haunting. Had she not heard it a thousand times in the old circus days?

Her eyes were on the keyboard. Hardly daring to lift them, she followed up the air with a wild variation and dropped back upon it again—not upon the air pure and simple, but upon the air as it might be rendered by a two-thirds-intoxicated coachful of circus bandsmen. The first half-a-dozen bars tickled Miss Sally in the midriff, so that she laughed aloud. But the laugh ended upon a sharp exclamation, and Tilda, still jangling, looked up as Sir Elphinstone chimed in with a "What the devil!" and started from his chair.

'Dolph was the cause of it. 'Dolph at the first notes had lifted his head, unobserved. Then slowly raising himself on his rheumatic fore-legs, the old dog heaved erect and waddled towards the piano. Even so no one paid any heed to him until, halting a foot or so from the hem of Tilda's skirt, he abased his head to the carpet while his hind-legs strained in a grotesque effort to pitch his body over in a somersault.

It was at this that Sir Elphinstone had exclaimed. Tilda, glancing down sideways across her shoulder, saw and checked a laugh. She understood. She let her fingers rest on a crashing chord, and rose from the music-stool as the dog rolled over on his flank.

"'Dolph! My poor old darling!"

She knelt to him, stretching out her arms. The candlelight fell on them, and on the sheen of her evening

frock, and on the small dark curls clustering on the nape of her bowed neck; and by the same light 'Dolph lifted his head and gazed up at her. That look endured for five seconds, perhaps; but in it shone more than she could remember, and more than she could ever forget—a life's devotion compressed into one last leap of the flame, to expire only with life itself. As her hands went swiftly down to him, his tongue strove to lick them; but his head fell back and his spirit went out into whatever darkness the spirits of dead dogs possess.

You know now why Tilda is not riding this morning, why she carries a spade on her shoulder, and why her face on this sunny morning wears a pensive shadow as she gazes back through the orchard trees. But 'Dolph, the circus mongrel, sleeps among hounds of nobler breed, and shall have a stone as honourable as any.

Now, if you were to look more closely you might perceive a small stain of green on the front of the home-spun skirt otherwise so trim, and might jump to the erroneous conclusion that before leaving the enclosure she had knelt to say a prayer over the snapping of this last tie with her old disreputable life. It is not precisely Christian, perhaps, to pray over a dog's grave; but I am pretty sure that Parson Chichester, who has made some tentative openings towards preparing Tilda for Confirmation, would overlook the irregularity, and even welcome it as a foreshadowing of grace. But Parson Chichester is a discerning man, as well as an honest; and for some reason, although Tilda has long passed the normal age to be prepared for that rite, he has forborne to press her as yet even to be baptised. It will all come in time, he hopes; but he has a queer soul to deal with.

—A queer soul, and (as he perceives) a self-respecting one. If she comes to it, she will come in her own time. So let it be confessed, as a secret she would be extremely annoyed to hear revealed, that she did indeed kneel five minutes since, but with no thought of religion; to try rather over 'Dolph's grave, if she could bend her body back in the old acrobatic trick.

She could not, of course. She had known that she could not even as—with a glance around her to make sure she was unobserved—she had made the effort. Time had taken away the old Tilda with the old 'Dolph. She was a girl grown, a girl with limbs firmed by out-door sports and country living. And she had learnt much—so much, that to have learnt it she had necessarily forgotten much. You or I, meeting her this morning for the first time, had made no doubt of her being a young lady of rather exceptional breeding.

She looked back to the spot where 'Dolph rested among dogs of loftiest race. She knew that Sir Elphinstone and Miss Sally were discussing her while they rode, and she could hear two words Sir Elphinstone let fall. She repeated them to herself—"Nobody's child."

She did not remember that she had once thanked her gods for it.

The rural postman carried a brass cowhorn, and made a practice of sounding it as he mounted the road leading to Culvercoombe. Its note, sounding through the clear morning air, aroused Tilda from her brown study, and she ran lightly up the slope to catch him on the upper terrace.

He handed her the day's mail—a dozen letters or more, and among them one addressed to her. In the whole world was but one handwriting that ever came for her; recognisable always, though with each post it grew firmer in character.

The envelope bore an Italian stamp and a Neapolitan postmark. Arthur Miles was a midshipman now, soon to be a second-lieutenant; his ship, the *Indomitable*, attached to the Mediterranean fleet. She broke the seal. . . . The letter was a boyish one, full of naval slang, impersonal, the sort of letter growing boys write to their mothers. But Arthur Miles had no mother; and if he wrote to his father, Tilda knew that he wrote more formally.

"We were sent up here," the letter said, "on getting

word that Vesuvius meant to erupt badly, and that we might be useful. But the show seems to be hanging fire, and we may be ordered back to Malta at any moment. Half a dozen of us made up a picnic yesterday, to have a look at the crater at close quarters. We cooked some eggs on it, to show our unconcern, and while we were cooking them up came an American, who had pitched camp in the foolhardiest spot. Guess why—to paint it! Guess who he was—why, Jessup! Do you remember Jessup? He introduced himself, and I knew him at once, but he did not know me, and I did not enlighten him. He said that the Art of the Future must depend on the development of wireless telegraphy, and that in the meanwhile he was just marking time with earthquakes."

Tilda, having read thus far, looks up at the sound of horses' hoofs. Miss Sally and Sir Elphinstone are returning from their ride.

"And after all, why not?" Miss Sally is saying.

"The very mistake his father made!"

"Homœopathy is one of my fads, remember."

"A nobody's child!"

"True; and so would *he* have been, but for her."

THE END