CHAPTER III

A KIDNAPPING

"And with that sound the castle all to-brast; so she took him, and they two fared forth hand in hand."—*Quest of the Grail.*

THE front door opened, and a slatternly woman in a soiled print dress came shuffling down the flagged pathway to the gate. She wore cloth boots, and Tilda took note that one of them was burst.

"Go away," said the woman, opening the gate just wide enough to thrust out her head. "We don't give nothing to beggars."

"I could 'a told *you* that," retorted Tilda. "But as it 'appens, I ain't one." She pointed to a brass letter-plate beside the wicket—it was pierced with a slit, and bore the legend, *For Voluntary Donations*. "Seems you collect a bit, though. Like it better, I dessay."

"Look here, if you've come with a message, let's 'ave it, an' take yourself off. It's washing-day in the 'ouse, an' I'm busy."

"Ah!" said Tilda politely, "I'm glad I came before you begun. I want"—here she unfolded her scrap of paper and made pretence to read—"I want to see the Reverend Doctor Purdie J. Glasson."

"Then you can't," snapped the woman, and was about to shut the door in her face, but desisted and drew back with a cry as a formidable yellow dog slipped through the opening, past her skirts, and into the garden.

It was 'Dolph, of course. Anxiety for his mistress had been too much for him, and had snapped the bonds

of obedience; and knowing full well that he was misbehaving, he had come up furtively, unperceived. But now, having crossed the Rubicon, the rogue must brazen things out—which he did by starting a cat out of one of the dingy laurels, chivvying her some way into the house, and returning to shake himself on the front doorstep and bark in absurd triumph.

"'Dolph! 'Dolph!" called Tilda.

"Belongs to you, does he? Then fetch him out at once! You, and your dogs!"

"I'm fetchin' him fast as I can."

Tilda pushed past her, and advanced sternly to the front doorstep. "'Dolph, come here!" she commanded. 'Dolph barked once again defiantly, then laid himself down on the step in abject contrition, rolling over on his back and lifting all four legs skyward.

Tilda rolled him sideways with a slap, caught him by the scruff of the neck, and began to rate him soundly. But a moment later her grasp relaxed as a door opened within the passage, and at the sound of a footstep she looked up, to see a tall man in black standing over her and towering in the doorway.

"What is the meaning of this noise?" demanded the man in black. He was elderly and bald, with small pig-eyes, grey side-whiskers, and for mouth a hard square slit much like that of the collecting box by the gate. A long pendulous nose came down over it and almost met an upthrust lower jaw. He wore a clerical suit, with a dingy white neck-tie; the skin about his throat hung in deep folds, and the folds were filled with an unpleasing grey stubble.

"If—if you please, sir. I was comin' with a message, an' he started after a cat. I can't break 'im of it."

"Turn him out," said the man in black. He walked to the gate and held it open while Tilda ejected Godolphus into the street. "I never allow dogs on my premises."

"No, sir."

"Now tell me your message."

"It's about a—a boy, sir," stammered Tilda and felt

a horrible fear creeping over her now that she approached the crisis. "That is, if you're the Reverend Doctor Glasson."

"I am Doctor Glasson. Well?"

"It's about a boy," harked back poor Tilda. "He's called Arthur Miles Surname Chandon—an' he was born at a place called Kingsand, if that's any 'elp—an' there's somebody wants to see 'im most particular."

"Come indoors."

Doctor Glasson said it sharply, at the same time turning right about and leading the way towards the house. Tilda followed, while behind her the excluded 'Dolph yapped and flung himself against the gate. But the gate was lined on the inside with wire-netting, and the garden wall was neither to be leapt nor scaled.

In the porch Dr. Glasson stood aside to let the servant precede them into the house, looked after her until she vanished down the length of a dark passage that smelt potently of soapsuds and cabbage-water, and motioned the child to step within. She obeyed, while her terror and the odours of the house together caught her by the throat. But worse was her dismay when, having closed the front door, the Doctor bolted it and slipped a chain on the bolt.

"The first door to the left, if you please."

He stepped past her and pushed it open, and she entered, albeit with quaking knees. The room—a large and high one—was furnished barely and like an office—with a red flock wall-paper, a brown linoleum on the floor, and in the centre of the linoleum a bulky roll-top desk and a Windsor chair. Other Windsor chairs stood in array against the walls, and a couple of rosewood bookcases with glass fronts. There was also by the fireplace an armchair covered with American leather, a rag-work hearthrug, and a large waste-paper basket stuffed with envelopes and circulars. Over the mantelshelf hung a print in an Oxford frame, with the title *Suffer Little Children to Come unto Me*, and a large stain of damp in the lower left-hand corner. The mantel-

shelf itself supported a clock, a pair of bronze candlesticks, a movable calendar, a bottle of paste, and a wooden box with *For the Little Ones* painted on it in black letters.

All this the child took in almost at a glance, and notwithstanding that the room was dark. Yet it had two large windows, and they were curtainless. Its gloom came of the thick coating of dirt on their upper panes, and a couple of wire blinds that cut off all light below.

Doctor Glasson had walked straight to his desk, and stood for a few moments with his back to the child, fingering his papers and apparently engaged in thought. By-and-by he picked up a pair of spectacles, turned, and adjusted them slowly whilst he stared down on her.

"Where did you get this information?"

Tilda's first impulse was to show him her scrap of paper, but she thought better of it. She would keep it back while she could, as a possible trump card. Besides, she feared and distrusted this man with the little eyes. Seen through glasses they were worse than ever.

"He's wanted by someone very particular," she repeated.

"By whom? Speak up, child! Who sent you?"

Heaven knows to what invisible spirits the child appealed. They were certainly disreputable ones, as will be seen; but they heard her prayer, and came to her now in her extremity. Hardly knowing what she did, she opened on this man a pair of eyes seraphically innocent, and asked—

"W'y, haven't you seen my aunt?"

"Your aunt?"

"She *promised* to call here at twelve-thirty, an' I was to meet her. But"—here Tilda had to keep a tight hold on her voice—"per'aps I'm early?"

"It's close upon one o'clock," said Doctor Glasson, with a glance towards the mantelshelf. "What is your aunt's name, and her business?"

"She's called Brown—Martha Brown—*Mrs.* Martha Brown, and she keeps a milliner's shop in the Edgeware Road, London," panted Tilda.

"I should have asked, What is her business with me?" Doctor Glasson corrected his question severely.

"I think—I dunno—but I *think*, sir, she might be wantin' to enter me for a orphlan. My pa, sir, was knocked down an' killed by a motor-car. It was in the early days," pursued Tilda, desperate now and aghast at her own invention. The lies seemed to spring to her lips full grown. "Pa was a stableman, sir, at Buckin'am Palace, and often and often I've 'eard 'im tell mother what'd be the end of 'im. He'd seen it in a dream. And mother, *she* was a stewardess in a Sou'-Western boat that got cut in two last year. Maybe you read of it in the papers?"

Tears by this time filled the child's eyes. She was casting about to invent a last dying speech for her mother, when Doctor Glasson interrupted.

"If your aunt wishes to place you here, it might perhaps be managed, for a consideration. Just now we have no room for—er—non-paying children. But you began by asking for Arthur Miles."

"Surname Chandon."

"Yes—quite so—Chandon." He picked up a pencil and a half-sheet of paper from the desk, and wrote the name. "Born at Kingsand—I think you said Kingsand? Do you happen to know where Kingsand is? In what county, for instance?"

But Tilda had begun to scent danger again, she hardly kne · why, and contented herself with shaking her head.

"Someone wants to see him. Who?"

"She's an invalid," Tilda admitted.

"Not your aunt?"

"She's a—a *friend* of my aunt's."

Doctor Glasson pulled out a watch and compared it with the clock on the mantelshelf. While he did so, Tilda stole a look up at his face, and more than ever it seemed to her to resemble a double trap—its slit of a mouth constructed to swallow anything that escaped between nose and chin.

"Your aunt is far from punctual. You are sure she means to call?"

"Sure," answered Tilda still hardily. "'Twelve-thirty' was her last words when she left me at the doctor's—my 'ip bein' 'urt, sir, through tumblin' out of a nomnibus, three weeks ago. But you never can depend on 'er to a few minutes up an' down. She gets into the streets, watchin' the fashions, an' that carries 'er away. P'r'aps, sir, I'd better go back into the street and 'ave a look for her."

"I think you had better wait here for her," said Doctor Glasson, shutting his lips with a snap. "There are some picture-books in the drawing-room."

He led the way. The drawing-room lay at the back of the house—an apartment even more profoundly depressing than the one she had left. Its one important piece of furniture was a circular table of rosewood standing in the centre of the carpet under a brass gaselier, of which the burnish had perished in patches; and in the centre of the table stood a round-topped glass case containing a stuffed kestrel, with a stuffed lark prostrate under its talons and bleeding vermilion wax. Around this ornament were disposed, as the Doctor had promised, a number of albums and illustrated books, one of which he chose and placed it in her hands, at the same time bringing forward one of a suite of rosewood chairs ranged with their backs to the walls. He motioned her to be seated.

"You shall be told as soon as ever your aunt arrives."

"Yes, sir," said Tilda feebly. For the moment all the fight had gone out of her.

He stood eyeing her, pulling at his bony finger-joints, and seemed on the point of putting some further question, but turned abruptly and left the room.

As the door closed—thank Heaven, at least, he did not bolt this one also!—a dry sob escaped the child. Why had she told that string of falsehoods? She was trapped now—imprisoned in this horrible house, not to

be released until this fictitious aunt arrived, which, of course, would be never. The book on her lap lay open at a coloured lithograph of Mazeppa bound upon his steed and in full flight across the Tartar steppes. She knew the story—was it not Mr. Maggs's most thrilling "equestrian *finale*," and first favourite with the public? At another time she would have examined the picture eagerly. But now it swam before her, unmeaning. She closed the book, threw a glance around the four corners of the room, another at the stuffed kestrel—whose pitiless small eye strangely resembled Doctor Glasson's—and dragged herself to the window.

The lower panes of the window were filled with coloured transparencies representing in series the history of the Prodigal Son. They excluded a great deal of daylight and the whole of the view. Even by standing on tip-toe she could not look over them, and she dared not try to raise the sash.

By-and-by a thought struck her. She went back to her chair, lifted it, carried it to the window and climbed upon it; and this was no small feat or succession of feats, for as yet her thigh pained her, and fear held her half-paralysed.

What she looked upon was an oblong space enclosed by brick walls ten or twelve feet high, and divided by a lower wall—also of brick—into two parallelograms of unequal width. Of these the wider was a gravelled yard, absolutely bare, in extent perhaps an acre; and here, in various knots and groups, were gathered some two dozen children. Alongside of the yard and upon its left—that is to say, as Tilda guessed, between it and the canal—ran a narrower strip of kitchen garden, planted with leeks, cabbages, potatoes, and ending in a kind of shed—part glasshouse, part outhouse—built in lean-to fashion against the terminal wall, which overtopped it by several feet. The children in the yard could not look into this garden, for the dividing wall reached far above their heads.

Tilda, too, had no eyes for the garden, after a first

glance had assured her it was empty. The children engaged all her attention. She had never seen anything like them; and yet they were obviously boys and girls, and in numbers pretty equally divided. What beat her was that they neither ran about nor played at any game, but walked to and fro—to and fro—as though pacing through some form of drill; and yet again they could not be drilling, for their motions were almost inert and quite aimless. Next, to her surprise, she perceived that, on no apparent compulsion, the boys kept with the boys in these separate wandering groups, and the girls with the girls; and further that, when two groups met and passed, no greeting, no nod of recognition, was ever exchanged. At any rate she could detect none. She had heard tell—indeed, it was an article of faith among the show-children with whom she had been brought up—that the sons and daughters of the well-to-do followed weird ways and practised discomfortable habits—attended public worship on Sundays, for instance, walking two and two in stiff raiment. But these children were patently very far from well-to-do. The garments of some hung about them in rags that fell short even of Tilda's easy standard. The spectacle fascinated her. For the moment it chased fear out of her mind. She was only conscious of pity—of pity afflicting and indefinable, far beyond her small understanding, and yet perhaps not wholly unlike that by which the great poet was oppressed as he followed his guide down through the infernal circles and spoke with their inhabitants. The sight did her this good—it drove out for a while, along with fear, all thought of her present situation. She noted that the majority were in twos or threes, but that here and there a child walked solitary, and that the faces of these solitary ones were hard to discern, being bent towards the ground.

The door-handle rattled and called her back to terror. She had no time to clamber down from her chair. She was caught.

But it was a woman who entered, the same that had

opened the front gate; and she carried a tray with a glass of water on it and a plate of biscuits.

"The Doctor told me as 'ow you might be 'ungry," she explained.

"Thank you," said Tilda. "I—I was lookin' at the view."

For an instant she thought of appealing to this stranger's mercy. The woman's eyes were hard, but not unkind. They scrutinised her closely.

"You take my advice, an' get out o' this quick as you can."

The woman thumped down the tray, and made as if to leave the room with a step decisive as her speech. At the door, however, she hesitated.

"Related to 'im?" she inquired.

"Eh?" Tilda was taken aback. "'Oo's 'im?"

"I 'eard you tell the Doctor you wanted to see 'im."

"An' so I do. But I'm no relation of 'is—on'y a friend."

"I was thinkin' so. Lawful born or come-by-chance, the child's a little gentleman, an' different from the others. Blood al'ays comes out, don't it?"

"I s'pose so."

Tilda, still perched on her chair, glanced out at the children in the yard.

"You won't see 'im out there. He's in the shed at the end o' the kitchen garden, cleanin' the boots. If you've got anything good to tell 'im, an' 'll promise not to be five minutes, I might give you a run there while the Doctor's finishin' his dinner in his study. Fact is," added this strange woman, "the child likes to be alone, an' sometimes I let's 'im slip away there—when he's good, or the Doctor's been extra 'ard with 'im."

"Beats 'im?" asked Tilda, and suddenly, still erect on her chair, and looking down on the woman, felt her courage flowing back full and strong. "He's a beast, then."

"You mustn' talk like that," said the woman hurriedly.

with a glance back at the half-open door. "But he's 'ard if you cross 'im—an' the child's pay bein' be'ind-'and——"

"What's your name?" demanded Tilda.

"Sarah 'Uggins."

"Miss or Missis?"

"What's that to you?"

The blood surged into the woman's face, and she eyed the child suspiciously under lowered brows. Tilda slipped down from her chair. She had a sense of standing dangerously on the edge of something evil, forbidden. If only she could scream aloud and rush out—anywhere—into the open air!

"I—I was only wantin' to speak polite," she stammered. "I been impident to yer. But O, Sarah 'Uggins—O, ma'am—'elp me see 'im an' get away, an' I'll bless yer name for ever and ever! Amen."

"Nip in front o' me," said the woman, "and be quick, then! First turnin' to the right down the stairs, an' don't clatter yer boots."

Tilda obeyed breathlessly, and found herself in a dark stone stairway. It led down steeply to the basement, and here her guide overtook and stepped ahead of her. They passed through two dirty kitchens, through a wash-house littered with damp linen and filled with steam from a copper in the corner, and emerged upon a well-court fœtid with sink-water and decaying scraps of vegetables. They had met no one on their way, and it crossed Tilda's mind—but the thought was incredible—that Sarah Huggins served this vast barracks single-handed. A flight of stone steps led up from this area to the railed coping twenty feet aloft, where the sky shone pure and fresh.

"Up there, an' you're in the garden."

Tilda ran, so fast that at the head of the steps she had to clutch at the railing and draw breath.

The garden, too, was deserted. A gravelled path, scarcely four feet wide, ran straight to the end of it, and along this she hurried, not daring to look back,

but aware that all the back windows were following her —watching and following her—with horrible curtainless eyes.

The garden, planted for utility, was passably well kept. It contained, in all its parcelled length, not a single flower. At the very end a few currant bushes partially hid the front of the shed and glasshouse. They were the one scrap of cover, and when she reached them she had a mind to crouch and hide, if only for a moment, from the staring windows.

Her own eyes, as she passed these bushes, were fastened on the shed. But it seemed that someone else had discovered shelter here; for with a quick, half-guttural cry, like that of a startled animal, a small figure started up, close by her feet, and stood and edged away from her with an arm lifted as if to ward off a blow.

It was a small boy—a boy abominably ragged and with smears of blacking thick on his face, but for all that a good-looking child. Tilda gazed at him, and he gazed back, still without lowering his arm. He was trembling, too.

"Doctor Livingstone, I presume?" said Tilda, lifting the brim of her chip hat and quoting from one of Mr. Maggs's most effective dramatic sketches. But as the boy stared, not taking the allusion, she went on, almost in the same breath, "Is your name Arthur—Arthur Miles?"

It seemed that he did not hear. At any rate he still backed and edged away from her, with eyes distended —she had seen their like in the ring, in beautiful terrified horses, but never in human creatures.

—"Because, if you're Arthur Miles, I got a message for you."

A tattered book lay on the turf at her feet. She picked it up and held it out to him. For a while he looked at her eyes, and from them to the book, unable to believe. Then with a noise like a sob, he sprang and snatched it, and hid it with a hug in the breast of his coat.

"I got a message for you," repeated Tilda. "There's someone wants to see you, very bad."

"You go away!" said the boy sullenly. "You don't know. If *he* catches you, there's no chance."

Tilda had time in her distress to be astonished by his voice. It was pure, distinct, with the tone of a sphere not hers. Yet she recognised it. She had heard celestial beings—ladies and gentlemen in Maggs's three-shilling seats—talk in voices like this boy's.

"I've took a 'eap of trouble to find yer," she said. "An' now I've done it, *all* depends on our gettin' out o' this. Ain't there no way? *Do* try to think a bit!"

The boy shook his head.

"There isn't any way. You let me alone and clear."

"He can't do worse'n kill us," said Tilda desperately, with a look back at the house. "S'help me, let's try!"

But her spirit quailed.

"He won't kill you. He'll catch you, and keep you here for ever and ever."

"We'll try, all the same."

Tilda shut her teeth and held out a hand—or rather, was beginning to extend it—when a sound arrested her. It came from the door of the glasshouse, and as she glanced towards it her heart leapt and stood still.

"'Dolph!"

Yes, it was 'Dolph, dirty, begrimed with coal; 'Dolph fawning towards her, cringing almost on his belly, but wagging his stump of a tail ecstatically. Tilda dashed upon him.

"Oh, 'Dolph!—*how?*"

The dog strangled down a bark, and ran back to the glasshouse, but paused in the doorway a moment to make sure that she was following. It was all right. Tilda had caught the boy's hand, and was dragging him along. 'Dolph led them through the glasshouse and down a flight of four steps to the broken door of a furnace-room. They pushed after him. Behind the furnace a second doorway opened upon a small coal-cellar, through the ceiling of which, in the right-hand

corner, poured a circular ray of light. The ray travelled down a moraine of broken coal, so broad at the base that it covered the whole cellar floor, but narrowing upwards and towards the manhole through which the daylight shone.

Down through the manhole, too—O bliss!—came the sound of a man's whistle.

"*Ph'ut! Phee—ee—uht!* Darn that fool of a dog! *Ph'w*——"

"For the Lord's sake!" called Tilda, pushing the boy up the coal-shute ahead of her and panting painfully as her feet sank and slid in the black pile.

"Eh? . . . Hullo!" A man's face peered down, shutting off the daylight. "Well, in all my born days——"

He reached down a hand.

"The boy first," gasped Tilda, "and quick!"