

CHAPTER IV

IN WHICH CHILDE ARTHUR LOSES ONE MOTHER AND GAINS ANOTHER

“ But and when they came to Easter Gate,
Easter Gate stood wide ;
' Y' are late, y' are late,' the Porter said ;
' This morn my Lady died.' ”—*Old Ballad.*

“ WELL, in all my born days ! ” said the young coal-heaver again, as he landed the pair on the canal bank.

He reached down a hand and drew up 'Dolph by the scruff of his neck. The dog shook himself, and stood with his tail still wagging.

“ Shut down the hole,” Tilda panted, and catching sight of the iron cover, while the young man hesitated she began to drag at it with her own hands.

“ Steady on there ! ” he interposed. “ I got five hundred more to deliver.”

“ You don't deliver another shovelful till we're out o' this ; ” said Tilda positively, stamping the cover in place and standing upon it for safety. “ What's more, if anyone comes an' arsk a question, you ha'n't seen us.”

“ Neither fur nor feather of ye,” said the young man, and grinned.

She cast a look at the boy ; another up and down the towing-path.

“ Got such a thing as a cake o' soap hereabouts ? You wouldn', I suppose——” and here she sighed impatiently.

“ I 'ave, though. Always keeps a bit in my trouser pocket.” He produced it with pride.

Said Tilda, “ I don't know yer name, but you're more like a Garden Angel than any I've met yet in your walk o' life. Hand it over, an' keep a look-out while I wash this child's face. I *can't* take 'im through the

streets in this state." She turned upon the boy. "Here, you just kneel down—so—with your face over the water, an' as near as you can manage." He obeyed in silence. He was still trembling. "That's right, on'y take care you don't overbalance." She knelt beside him, dipped both hands in the water, and began to work the soap into a lather. "What's the 'andiest way to the Good Samaritan?" she asked, speaking over her shoulder.

"Meanin' the 'orspital?"

"Yes." She took the boy's passive face between her hands and soaped it briskly. "The 'andiest way, an' the quietest, for choice."

"The 'andiest way," said the young coalheaver, after considering for half a minute, "an' the quietest, is for me to cast off the bow-straps here an' let her drop across stream. You can nip up through the garden yonder—it don't belong to nobody just now. That'll bring you out into a place called Pollard's Row, an' you turn straight off on your right. First turnin' opposite on the right by the 'Royal Oak,' which is a public-'ouse, second turnin' to the left after that, an' you're in Upper Town Street, an' from there to the Good Samaritan it's no more'n a stone's throw."

Tilda was silent for a few moments whilst she fixed these directions in her mind.

"It do seem," she said graciously while she dried the boy's face with the skirt of her frock, "like as if you'd dropped 'ere from 'eaven. What we should a-done without you, I can't think."

"You'd best thank that dog o' your'n." The young man bent to cast off his rope. "He broke away from me once, an' I made sure I'd lost 'im. But by-an'-by back he came like a mad thing, an' no need to tell me you was inside there. He was neither to hold nor to bind, an' I do believe if he hadn't thought o' the manhole he'd 'a-broke the wall down, or elst his 'eart."

"When I tell you 'e got me in, as well as out—But, good sake, I musn' stand 'ere talkin'! Gimme my crutch, an' shove us ac.oss, that's a dear man."

She pushed the boy before her on to the barge. 'Dolph sprang on board at their heels, and the young coal-heaver thrust the bows across with his pole. The canal measured but seventeen or eighteen feet from brink to brink, and consequently the boat, which was seventy feet long at least, fell across at a long angle. The garden on the opposite shore was unfenced, or rather, its rotten palings had collapsed with time and the pressure of a rank growth of elder bushes.

"So long, an' th' Lord bless yer!"

Tilda took the boy's hand, and jumped ashore.

"Same to you, an' wishin' you luck!" responded the young coalheaver cheerfully. "Look 'ere," he added, "if you get in trouble along o' this, I'm willin' to stand in for my share. Sam Bossom's my name—employ of Hucks, Canal End Basin. If they lag you for this, you just refer 'em to Sam Bossom, employ of Hucks—everyone knows Hucks; an' I'll tell 'em—well, darned if I know what I'll tell 'em, unless that we was all under the influence o' drink."

"You're a white man," responded Tilda, "though you don't look it; but there ain't goin' to be no trouble, not if I can 'elp. If anyone arsk questions, you han't seen us, mind."

"Fur nor feather of ye," he repeated.

He watched the pair as they dived through the elder bushes; saw them, still hand in hand, take the path on the left side of the garden, where its party hedge could best screen them from the back windows of the Orphanage; and poled back meditatively.

"Got an 'ead on her shoulders, that child!"

On their way up the garden Tilda kept silence. She was busy, in fact, with Sam Bossom's complicated itinerary, repeating it over and over to fix it in her mind. She was fearful, too, lest some inquisitive neighbour, catching sight of them, might stop them and challenge to know their business. The streets once gained, she felt easier—easier indeed with every yard she put between her and that house of horrors. But the streets,

too, held their dangers. The bells had rung in the elementary schools; all respectable boys and girls were indoors, deep in the afternoon session, and she had heard of attendance officers, those prowling foes.

At the end of Pollard's Row—a squalid street of tenement houses—she suffered indeed a terrible scare. A benevolent-looking middle-aged lady—a district visitor in fact—emerging from one of these houses and arrested perhaps at sight of the crutch or of the boy's strange rags, stopped her and asked where she was going.

Tilda fell back on the truth. It was economical.

"To the 'orspital," she answered, "the Good Samaritan."

Then she blundered.

"It's 'ereabouts, ain't it, ma'am?"

"Not very far," replied the lady; "two or three streets only. Shall I show you the way? I have plenty of time."

"Thank you," said Tilda (she was suffering a reaction and for a moment it dulled the edge of her wits), "but I know the Good Samaritan, an' they know all about me."

"What's the matter?"

"'Ip trouble, ma'am. I been treated for it there these three weeks."

"That is strange," said the lady. "You have been going there for three weeks and yet you don't know your way?"

"I been a in-patient. I was took there"—she was about to say "on a stretcher," but checked herself in time—"I was took there in the evenin' after dark. Father couldn' take me by day, in his work-time. An' this is my first turn as day-patient, an' that's why my brother 'ere is let off school to see me along," she wound up with a desperate rush of invention.

"You don't live in my district? What's your father's name?"

"No, ma'am. He's called Porter—Sam Porter, an' he works on the coal-barges. But I wouldn' advise you."

I reely wouldn', because father's got opinions, an' can't abide visitors. I've 'eard 'im threaten 'em quite vi'lent."

"Poor child!"

"But I won't 'ave you say anything 'gainst father," said Tilda, taking her up quickly, "for 'e's the best father in the world, if 'twasn't for the drink."

The effect of this masterstroke was that the lady gave her a copper and let her go, wishing her a speedy recovery. The gift, although she took it, did not appear to placate Tilda. She hobbled up the next street with quickened pace, now and then muttering angrily.

"Serves me right!" she broke out at length. "Bill—you don't know Bill, but 'e's the wisest man in the 'ole world, *an'* the kindest, *an'* the bestest. Bill would 'a-slapped my ear if 'e'd 'eard me jus' now. Near upon gave the show away, I did, an' all through wantin' to 'ear somebody else tell what I knew a'ready. Never let nobody else make sure for you—that's one o' Bill's sayin's. Take warnin' by me, an' don't you ever forget it, Arthur Miles."

The boy had not spoken all the way. He glanced at her timidly, and she saw that he did not understand. Also it was plain that the streets, with their traffic, puzzled him; at the approach of every passer-by he would halt uncertainly, like a puppy not yet way-wise. By-and-by he said—

"But if that's so, you must be my sister."

"I'm not," said Tilda sharply. "What put it into your 'ead?"

"You told the lady——" he began.

"Eh? So I did. But that was all flam." He could make nothing of this. "I was kiddin' of 'er—tellin' what wasn't true," she explained.

He walked forward a few steps with a frown—not disapproving, but painfully thinking this out.

"And about the Hospital—wasn't that true either?"

"Yes," Tilda nodded. "We're goin' to the 'orspital all right. That's why I came to fetch yer. There's someone wants to see yer, ever so bad."

"I know about the Good Samaritan," announced the boy.

Tilda stared.

"I bet yer don't," she contradicted.

"He found a man, a traveller, that some thieves had hurt and left by the road. Going down to Jericho, it was; and he poured oil and wine in to his wounds."

"Oh, cheese it!" said Tilda. "Oo's a-kiddin' now? An' see 'ere, Arthur Miles—it don't matter with me, a lie up or down; I'm on'y Tilda. But don't you pick up the 'abit, or else you'll annoy me. I can't tell why ezaactly, but it don't sit on you."

"Tilda?" The boy caught up her name like an echo. "Tilda what?"

"The Lord knows. Tilda *nothin'*—Tilda o' Maggs's, if you like, an' nobody's child, anyway."

"But that isn't *possible*," he said, after thinking a moment. "They called me that sometimes, back—back——"

"At the Orph'nige, eh? 'Oo called you that? The Doctor? No," said Tilda hurriedly as he halted with a shiver, "don't look be'ind; 'e's not anywhere near. An' as for the Good Samaritan, you're wrong about that, too; for 'ere's the Good Samaritan!"

She pointed at the building, and he stared. He could not comprehend ~~it~~, but she had switched him off the current of his deadly fear.

"Now you just wait 'ere by the steps," she commanded, "an' 'Dolph'll wait by you an' see you come to no 'arm. Understand, 'Dolph? I'm goin' inside for a minute—only a minute, mind; but if anybody touches Arthur Miles, you *pin* him!"

'Dolph looked up at his mistress, then at the boy. He wagged his tail, not enthusiastically. He would fain have followed her, but he understood, and would obey.

Tilda went up the steps, and up the stairs. On the landing, as chance would have it, she met the Second Nurse coming out from the ward, with a sheet in one hand and a tray of medicines in the other.

"You extremely naughty child!" began the Second Nurse, but not in the shrill tone nor with quite the stern disapproval the child had expected. "When the doctor told you half an hour exactly, and you have been *hours!* What *have* you been doing?"

"Lookin' up the old folks," she answered, and took note first that the medicine bottles were those that had stood on the sick woman's table, and next that the Second Nurse, as she came out, transferred the sheet to her arm and closed the door behind her.

"You must wait here for a moment, now you have come so late. I have had to give you another bed; and now I've to fetch some hot water, but I'll be back in a minute."

"Folks don't make beds up with hot water," thought Tilda.

She watched the nurse down the passage, stepped to the door, and turned the handle softly.

There was no change in the ward except that a tall screen stood by the sick woman's bed. Tilda crept to the screen on tip-toe, and peered around it.

Ten seconds—twenty seconds—passed, and then she drew back and stole out to the landing, closing the door as softly as she had opened it. In the light of the great staircase window her face was pale and serious.

She went down the stairs slowly.

"Seems I made a mistake," she said, speaking as carelessly as she could, but avoiding the boy's eyes. "You wasn' wanted up there, after all."

But he gazed at her, and flung out both arms with a strangling sob.

"You won't take me back! You'll hide me—you won't take me back!"

"Oh, 'ush!" said Tilda. "No, I won't take yer back, an' I'll do my best, but—oh, 'Dolph!"—she brushed the back of her hand across her eyes and turned to the dog with the bravest smile she could contrive—"to think of me bein' a mother, at *my* time o' life!"