

CHAPTER V

TEMPORARY EMBARRASMENTS OF A TRUESPIAN

"Sinner that I am," said the Showman, "see how you are destroying and ruining my whole livelihood!"—*Don Quixote*.

MR. SAM BOSSOM, having poled back to the towpath, stepped ashore, made fast his bow moorings, stood and watched the two childish figures as they passed up the last slope of the garden out of sight, and proceeded to deliver his remaining hundredweights of coal—first, however, peering down the manhole and listening, to assure himself that all was quiet below.

"If," said he thoughtfully, "a man was to come an' tell me a story like that, I'd call 'im a liar."

Twice or thrice before finishing his job he paused to listen again, but heard nothing. Still in musing mood, he scraped up the loose coal that lay around the manhole, shovelled it in, ~~re-~~ the cover, and tossed his shovel on board. His next business was to fetch a horse from the stables at the Canal End and tow the boat back to her quarters; and having taken another glance around, he set off and up the towpath at a pretty brisk pace. It would be five o'clock before he finished his work: at six he had an engagement, and it would take him some time to wash and titivate.

Canal End Basin lay hard upon three-quarters of a mile up stream, and about half that distance beyond the bend of the Great Brewery—a mofdorous pool packed with narrow barges or monkey-boats—a few loading leisurably, the rest moored in tiers awaiting their cargoes. They belonged to many owners; but

heir type was wellnigh uniform. Each measured eventy feet in length, or a trifle over, with a beam f about seven; each was built with rounded bilges, nd would carry from twenty-five to thirty tons of argo; each provided, aft of its hold or cargo-well, a mall cabin for the accommodation of its crew by day; nd for five-sixths of its length each was black as a gondola of Venice. Only, where the business part of he boat ended and its cabin began, a painted ribbon f curious pattern ornamented the gunwale, and terminated in two pictured stern-panels.

Wharves and storehouses surrounded the basin, or ather enclosed three sides of it, and looked upon the vater across a dead avenue (so to speak) of cranes and ollards; buildings of exceedingly various height and onstruction, some tiled, others roofed with galvanised ron. Almost every one proclaimed on its front, for he information of the stranger, its owner's name and what he traded in; and the stranger, while making his choice between these announcements, had ample time o contrast their diversity of size and style with the sober uniformity that prevailed afloat.

The store and yard of Mr. Christopher Hucks stood at the head of the basin, within a stone's-throw of the Neigh Dock, and but two doors away from the Canal Company's office. It was approached through folding-loors, in one of which a smaller opening had been cut or pedestrians, and through this, on his way to the stables in the rear, Mr. Sam Bossom entered. He entered nd halted, rubbing his eyes with the back of his hand, which, grimed as it was with coal grit, but further inlamed their red rims. In the centre of the yard, which had been empty when he went to work, stood a large yellow caravan; and on the steps of the caravan sat a nan—a stranger—peeling potatoes over a bucket.

“Hullo!” said Sam.

The stranger—a long-faced man with a dead complexion, an abundance of dark hair, and a blue chin—added gloomily.

"The surprise," he answered, "is mutual. If it comes to *that*, young man, you are not looking your best either; though doubtless, if washed off, it would reveal a countenance not sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought—thought such as, alas! must be mine—thought which, if acquainted with the poets, you will recognise as lying too deep for tears."

"Governor settin' up in a new line?" asked Sam, slowly contemplating the caravan and a large tarpaulin-covered wagon that stood beside it with shafts resting on the ground.

"If, my friend, you allude to Mr. Christopher Hucks, he is not setting up in any new line, but pursuing a fell career on principles which (I am credibly informed) are habitual to him, and for which I can only hope he will be sorry when he is dead. The food, sir, of Mr. Christopher Hucks is still the bread of destitution; his drink, the tears of widows; and the groans of the temporarily embarrassed supply the music of his unhallowed feast."

"There is a bit o' that about the old man, until you get to know him," assented Sam cheerfully.

"Mr. Christopher Hucks——" began the stranger with slow emphasis, dropping a peeled potato into the bucket and lifting a hand with an open clasp-knife towards heaven.

But here a voice from within the caravan interrupted him.

"Stanislas!"

"My love?"

"I can't find the saucepan."

A lady appeared at the hatch of the doorway above. Her hair hung in disarray over her well-developed shoulders, and recent tears had left their furrows on a painted but not uncomely face.

"I—I—well, to confess the truth, I pawned it, my bud. Dear, every cloud has its silver lining, and meanwhile what shall we say to a simple fry? You have an incomparable knack of frying."

"But where's the dripping?"

Her husband groaned.

"The dripping! The continual dripping! Am I—forgive the bitterness of the question—but am I a stone, love?"

He asked it with a hollow laugh, and at the same time with a glance challenged Sam's approval for his desperate pleasantry.

Sam jerked his thumb to indicate a wooden outhouse on the far side of the yard.

"I got a shanty of my own across there, *and* a few fixin's. If the van's anchored here, an' I can set you up with odds-an'-ends such as a saucepan, you're welcome."

"A friend in need, sir, is a friend indeed," said the stranger impressively; and Sam's face brightened, for he had heard the proverb before, and it promised to bring the conversation, which he had found some difficulty in following, down to safe, familiar ground. "Allow me to introduce you—but excuse me, I have not the pleasure of knowing your name——"

"Sam Bossom."

"Delighted! 'Bossom' did you say? B—O—double S—it should have been 'Blossom,' sir, with a slight addition; or, with an equally slight omission—er—'Bosom,' if my Arabella will excuse me. On two hands, Mr. Bossom, you narrowly escape poetry." (Sam looked about him uneasily.) "But, as Browning says, 'The little more and how much it is, the little less and what miles away.' Mine is Mortimer, sir—Stanislas Horatio Mortimer. You have doubtless heard of it?"

"Can't say as I've," Sam confessed.

"Is it possible?" Mr. Mortimer was plainly surprised, not to say hurt. He knit his brows, and for a moment seemed to be pondering darkly. "You hear it, Arabella? But no matter. As I was saying, sir, I desire the pleasure of introducing you to my wife, Mrs. Mortimer, better known to fame, perhaps, as Miss Arabella St. Maur. You see her, Mr. Bossom, as my helpmeet under circumstances which (though temporarily unfavourable) call

forth the true woman—naked, in a figurative sense, and unadorned. But her Ophelia, sir, has been favourably, nay, enthusiastically, approved by some of the best critics of our day.”

This again left Sam gravelled. He had a vague notion that the lady's Ophelia must be some admired part of her anatomy, but contented himself with touching his brow politely and muttering that he was Mrs. Mortimer's to command. The lady, who appeared to be what Sam called to himself a good sort, smiled down on him graciously, and hoped that she and her husband might be favoured with his company at supper.

“It's very kind of *you*, ma'am,” responded Sam; “but 'fact is I han't knocked off work yet. 'Must go now and fetch out th' old hoss for a trifle of haulage; an' when I get back I must clean meself an' shift for night-school—me bein' due early there to fetch up leeway. You see,” he explained, “bein' on the move wi' the boats most o' my time, I don't get the same chances as the other fellows. So when I hauls ashore, as we call it, I 'ave to make up for lost time.”

“A student, I declare!” Mr. Mortimer saluted him. Rising from the steps of the caravan, he rubbed a hand down his trouser-leg and extended it. “Permit me to grasp, sir, the horny palm of self-improvement. A scholar in humble life! and—as your delicacy in this small matter of the saucepan sufficiently attests—one of Nature's gentlemen to boot! I prophesy that you will go far, Mr. Bossom. May I inquire what books you thumb?”

“Thumb?” Sam, his hard hand released, stared at it a moment perplexed. “That ain't the *method*, sir; not at our school. But I'm gettin' along, and the book is called Lord Macaulay.”

“What? Macaulay's *Essays*?”

“It's called *Lays*, sir—Lord Macaulay's *Lays*. The rest of the class chose it, an' I didn' like to cry off, though I'd not a-flown so high as a lord myself—not to start with.”

“The *Lays of Ancien Rome*? My dear Bossom—my

dear Smiles—you'll allow me to dub you Smiles? *On Self Help*, you know. I like to call my friends by these playful sobriquets, and friends we are going to be, you and I. My dear fellow, I used to know 'em by heart—

'Lars Porsena of Clusium
By the nine gods he swore—'

—Is that the ticket, hey? "

Mr. Mortimer clapped him on the shoulder.

"Dang it!" breathed Sam, "how small the world is!"

"Smiles, we must be friends. Even if, for a paltry trifle of seven pounds fifteen and six, I am condemned by your master (whom you will excuse my terming a miscreant) to eke out the dregs of my worthless existence in this infernal yard—no, my loved Arabella, you will pardon me, but as a practical man I insist on facing the worst—even so I have found a congenial spirit, a co-mate and brother in exile, a Friend in my retreat Whom I can whisper: 'Solitude is sweet.' Pursue, my dear Smiles! You are young: hope sits on your helm and irradiates it. For me, my bark is stranded, my fortunes shipwrecked, my career trickles out in the sands. Nevertheless, take the advice of an Elder Brother, and pursue. By the way"—Mr. Mortimer drew from his breast-pocket the stump of a half-consumed cigar—"I regret that I have not its fellow to offer you; but could you oblige me with a match?"

Sam produced a couple of sulphur matches.

"I thank you." Mr. Mortimer lit and inhaled. "A—ah!" he sighed between two luxurious puffs. "Connoisseurs—epicures—tell me a cigar should never be lit twice. But with tobacco of this quality—the last of the box, alas! All its blooming companions—and, between you and me, smuggled." He winked knowingly.

Just then a hooter from the Great Brewery announced five o'clock. Sam groaned. He had engaged himself to the schoolmaster for an hour's private tuition before

the Evening Class opened, and Mr. Mortimer's fascinating talk had destroyed his last chance of keeping that engagement. Even if he dropped work straight away it would take him a good three-quarters of an hour to clean himself and don his best suit.

He was explaining this to Mr. and Mrs. Mortimer when, his eyes resting on the empty shafts of the wagon, a happy thought occurred to him.

"O' course," he began, "—but there, I don't like to suggest it, sir."

"Say on, my friend."

"Well—I was thinkin' that you, may be, bein' accustomed to hosses——"

"My father," put in Mr. Mortimer, "rode to hounds habitually. A *beau idéal*, if I may say so, of the Old English squire. It is in the blood."

"I *know* it's a come-down," Sam owned. "And a shilling at most for overtime—meanin' no offence——"

Mr. Mortimer waved a hand.

"If," said he, "it be a question of my rendering you any small service, I beg, my friend—I command—that all question of pecuniary recompense be left out of the discussion."

Sam, feeling that he had to deal with a noble character, explained that the job was an easy one; merely to lead or ride one of the horses down the hauling-path to where the boat lay, to hitch on the tackle, cast off straps, pull up and ship the two crowbars to which they were made fast, and so take the tiller and steer home. The horse knew his business, and would do the rest.

"And you can't mistake the boat. *Duchess of Teck* is her name, an' she lies about three ropes' lengths this side of the iron bridge, just as you come abreast o' the brick wall that belongs to the Orph'nage."

"Bring forth the steed," commanded Mr. Mortimer. "Nay, I will accompany you to the stables and fetch him."

"*And the saucepan! Don't forget the saucepan!*"

Mrs. Mortimer called after them in a sprightly voice as they crossed the yard together.

“Ha, the saucepan!” Within the stable doorway Mr. Mortimer stood still and pressed a hand to his brow. “You cannot think, my dear Smiles, how that obligation weighs on me. The expense of a saucepan—what is it? And yet——” He seemed to ponder. Of a sudden his brow cleared. “—Unless, to be sure—that is to say, it you should happen to have a shilling about you?”

“I got no change but 'arf-a-crown, if that's any use,” answered the charmed Sam.

“Nothing smaller? Still,” suggested Mr. Mortimer quickly, “I could bring back the change.”

“Yes, do.”

“It will please Arabella, too. In point of fact, during the whole of our married life I have made it a rule never to absent myself from her side without bringing back some trifling gift. Women—as you will understand one of these days—set a value on these *petits soins*; and somewhere in the neighbourhood of the iron bridge a tinsmith's should not be hard to find . . . Ah, thanks, my dear fellow—thanks inexpressibly! Absurd of me, of course; but you cannot think what a load you have taken off my mind.”

Sam unhitched one of a number of hauling tackles hanging against the wall, and led forth his horse—a sturdy old grey by name Jubilee. Casting the tackle carelessly on the animal's back, he handed Mr. Mortimer the head-stall rope, and left him, to return two minutes later with the saucepan he had promised.

“She must use this one for the time,” he explained. “And afterwards yours will come as a surprise.”

“It must be so, I suppose,” assented Mr. Mortimer, but after a pause, and reluctantly, averting his eyes from the accursed thing.

To spare him, Sam hurried across to deliver it to the lady, who awaited them in the doorway: and thus approaching he became aware that she was making

mysterious signals. He glanced behind him. Plainly the signals were not directed at her husband, who had halted to stoop and pass a hand over old Jubilee's near hind pastern, and in a manner almost more than professional. Sam advanced, in some wonder. Mrs. Mortimer reached down a shapely hand for the pan-handle, leaned as she did so, and murmured—

“ You will not lend money to Stanislas ? He is apt, when the world goes ill with him, to seek d'straction, to behave unconventionally. It is not a question of drowning his cares, for the least little drop acting upon his artistic temperament——”

But at this moment her husband, having concluded his inspection of the grey, called out to be given a leg-up, and Sam hurried back to oblige.

“ Thank you. Time was, Smiles, when with hand laid lightly on the crupper, I could have vaulted.”

Overcome by these reminiscences, Mr. Mortimer let his chin sink, his legs dangle, and rode forward a pace or two in the classical attitude of the last Survivor from Cabul ; but anon looked up with set jaw and resolution in his eye, took a grip with his knees, and challenged—

“ Give a man a horse he can ride,
Give a man a boat he can sa l,
And his something or other—I forget
the exact expression—
On sea nor shore shall fail !

—“ Fling wide the gate, Smiles ! ” He was now the Dashing Cavalier, life-sized. “ Take care of yourself, poppet ! ”

He gave his bridle-rein a shake (so to speak), turned, blew a kiss to his spouse, dug heel and jogged forth chanting—

“ *Tirra tirra* by the river
Sang Sir Lancelot ! ”