

CHAPTER VI

MR. MORTIMER'S ADVENTURE

"Old mole! canst work i' the earth so fast?"—*Hamlet*.

ALL the way along the canal bank Mr. Mortimer continued to carol. Mercurial man! Like all actors he loved applause, but unlike the most of them he was capable of supplying it when the public failed; and this knack of being his own best audience had lifted him, before now, out of quite a number of Sloughs of Despond and carried him forward singing.

He had left care behind him in Mr. Hucks's yard, and so much of noble melancholy as he kept (for the sake of artistic effect) took a tincture from the sunset bronzing the smoke-laden sky and gilding the unlovely waterway. Like the sunset, Mr. Mortimer's mood was serene and golden. His breast, expanding, heaved off all petty constricting worries, "like Samson his green wythes": they fell from him as he rode, and as he rode he chanted—

"The sun came dazling thro' the leaves
And flamed upon the brazen greaves
Of bold Sir Lancelot . . ."

• Old Jubilee—if, like John Gilpin's horse, he wondered more and more—was a philosophical beast and knew his business. Abreast of the boat, beside the angle of the Orphanage wall, he halted for his rider to alight, and began to nose for herbage among the nettles. Nor did he betray surprise when Mr. Mortimer, after a glance

down the towpath towards the iron bridge and the tram-lights passing there, walked off and left him to browse.

Fifteen minutes passed. The last flush of sunset had died out of the sky, and twilight was deepening rapidly, when Mr. Mortimer came strolling back. Apparently—since he came empty-handed—his search for a saucepan had been unsuccessful. Yet patently the disappointment had not affected his spirits, for at sight of Old Jubilee still cropping in the dusk he stood still and gave utterance to a lively whoop.

The effect of this sobered him. Old Jubilee was not alone. Hurriedly out of the shadow of the Orphanage wall arose a grey-white figure—a woman. It seemed that she had been kneeling there. Now, as Mr. Mortimer advanced, she stood erect, close back against the masonry, waiting for him to pass.

“’s a female,” decided Mr. Mortimer, pulling himself together and advancing with a hand over his brow, the better to distinguish the glimmer of her dress. “’s undoubtedly a female. Seems to be looking for something . . .” He approached and lifted his hat. “Command me, madam !”

The woman drew herself yet closer under the shadow.

“Go your way, please !” she answered sharply, with a catch of her breath.

“You mishun’erstand. Allow me iggs—I beg pardon, eggs—plain. Name’s Mortimer—Stanislas ’Ratio, of that ilk. A Scotch exshpression.” Here he pulled himself together again, and with an air of anxious lucidity laid a precise accent on every syllable. “The name, I flatter myself, should be a guarantee. No reveller, madam, I s’hure you ; appearances against me, but no Bacchanal ; still lesh—shtill less I should iggs—or, if you prefer it, eggs—plain, gay Lqthario. Trust me, ma’am—married man, fifteen years’ standing—Arabella—tha’s my wife—never a moment’s ’neasiness—

‘Two shouls’—you’ll excuse me, souls—‘with but a single thought,
Two hearts that beat ash one.’

Between you and me, ma'am, we have thoughts of applying for Dunmow fitch. Quaint old custom, Dunmow fitch. Heard of it, I daresay?"

"I wish you would go about your business."

Mr. Mortimer emitted a tragic laugh.

"I will, madam—I will: if it please you witness to what base uses we may return, Horatio. Allow me first remove mishunderstanding. Preshumed you to be searching for something—hairpin for exshample. Common occurrence with my Arabella. No offensh—merely proffered my shervices . . . The deuce! What's *that?*"

The woman seemed inclined to run, but stood hesitating, "You heard it? There! close under the wall——"

Mr. Mortimer stepped forward and peered into the shadow. He was standing close above the manhole, and to the confusica of all his senses he saw the cover of the manhole lift itself up; saw the rim of it rise two, three inches, saw and heard it joggle back into its socket.

"For God's sake go away!" breathed the woman.

"Norrabit of it, ma'am. Something wrong here. Citizen's duty, anything wrong——"

Here the cover lifted itself again. Mr. Mortimer deftly slipped three fingers under its rim, and reaching back with his other hand produced from his pocket the second of Sam's two matches.

"Below there!" he hailed sepulchrally, at the same moment striking the match on the tense seat of his trousers and holding it to the aperture. "Nero is an angler in the lake of darkness . . . Eh? . . . Good Lord!"—he drew back and dropped the match—"it's a clergyman!"

He clapped down the cover in haste, sprang to his feet, and lifting his hat, made her the discreetest of bows. He was sober, now, as a judge.

"A thousand pardons, madam! I have seen nothing—believe me, nothing."

He strode in haste to Old Jubilee's headstall and began to back him towards the boat. The woman gazed

at him for a moment in mere astonishment, then stepped quickly to his side.

"I didn' know," she stammered. "You don't look nor talk like a bargee."

Here her voice came to a halt, but in the dusk her eyes appeared to question him.

"Few of us are what we seem, ma'am," Mr. Mortimer sighed. "Bargee for the nonce I am, yet gentleman enough to understand a delicate situation. Your secrets is safe with me, and so you may tell your—your friend."

"Then you must a-seen them?" she demanded.

"Them?" echoed Mr. Mortimer.

"No," she went on hurriedly, mistaking his hesitation. "They made you promise, an' I don't *want* to know. If I knew, he'd force it out o' me, an' then he'd cut my heart out."

She glanced over her shoulder, and Mr. Mortimer, interpreting the glance, nodded in the direction of the manhole.

"Meanin' his Reverence?" he asked.

"His name's Glasson. The Orph'nage belongs to him. It's a serious thing for him to lose one o' the children, and he's like a madman about it ever since. . . ." She broke off and put out a hand to help him with the haulage tackle. "Where are you taking her?"

"Her? The boat? Oh, back to Hucks's—Christopher Hucks, Anchor Wharf, Canal End Basin. 'Anchor,' you'll observe—supposed emblem of Hope." He laughed bitterly.

"Yes, yes," she nodded. "And quick—quick as ever you can! Here, let me help—" She caught at one of the two crowbars that served for mooring-posts and tugged at it, using all her strength. "He'll be coming around here," she panted, and paused for a moment to listen. "If he catches me talkin', God knows what'll happen!" She tugged again.

"Steady does it," said Mr. Mortimer; and having helped her to draw the bar up, he laid it in the boat as noiselessly as he could and ran to the second, "There's

no one coming," he announced. "But see here, if you're in fear of the man, let me have another go at the manhole. He may be down there yet, and if so I'll give him the scare of his life. Yes, ma'am, the scare of his life. You never saw my Hamlet, ma'am? You never heard me hold parley with my father's ghost? Attend!"

Mr. Mortimer stepped to the manhole and struck thrice upon it with his heel.

"Glasson!" he called, in a voice so hollow that it seemed to rumble down through the bowels of earth.

"Glasson, forbear!"

"For Gød's sake——" The woman dragged at his shoulder as he knelt.

"All is discovered, Glasson! Thy house is on fire, thy orphans are flown. Rake not the cellarage for their bones, but see the newspapers. Already, Glasson, the newsboys run about the streets. It spreads, Glasson; may'st hear them call. Like wildfire it spreads. 'Orrible discovery of 'uman remains! A clergyman suspected!'"

Here Mr. Mortimer, warm to his work, let out a laugh so blood-curdling that Old Jubilee bolted the length of his rope.

"The boat!" gasped the woman.

"Eh?"

Mr. Mortimer turned and saw the boat glide by the bank like a shadow; heard the thud of Old Jubilee's hoofs, and sprang in pursuit. The woman ran with him.

But the freshest horse cannot bolt far with a 72-foot monkey-boat dragging on his shoulders, and at the end of fifty yards, the towrope holding, Old Jubilee dropped to a jog-trot. The woman caught her breath as Mr. Mortimer jumped aboard and laid hold of the tiller. But still she ran beside panting.

"You won't tell him?"

Mr. Mortimer waved a hand.

"And—and you'll hide 'em—for he's bound to come askin'—you'll hide 'em if you can——"

Mr. Mortimer heard, but could not answer for the

moment, the steerage claiming all his attention. When he turned towards the bank she was no longer there. He looked back over his shoulder. She had come to a dead halt and stood watching, her print gown glimmering in the dusk. And so, as the boat rounded the bend by the Brewery, he lost sight of her.

He passed a hand over his brow.

"Mysterious business," he mused; "devilish mysterious. On the face of it looks as if my friend Smiles, not content with self-help in its ordinary forms, has been helping himself to orphans! Must speak to him about it."

He pondered, gazing up the dim waterway, and by-and-by broke into a chuckle.

He chuckled again twenty minutes later, when, having stabled Old Jubilee, he crossed the yard to supper and to season the meal with a relation of his adventure.

"Such an encounter, my poppet!" he announced, groping his way across to the caravan, where his spouse had lit the lamp and stood in the doorway awaiting him. "Smiles—our ingenuous Smiles—has decoyed, has laid me under suspicion; and of what, d'you think? Stealing orphans!"

"Hush!" answered Mrs. Mortimer. "They're here."

"They? Who? . . . Not the bailiffs? Arabella, don't tell me it's the bailiffs again!"

Mr. Mortimer drew back as though a snake lay coiled on the caravan steps.

"It's not the bailiffs, Stanislas; it's the orphans."

"But—but, my sweet, there must be some mistake. I—er—actually, of course, I have nothing to do with any orphans whatsoever."

"Oh, yes, you have," his wife assured him composedly. "They are inside here, with a yellow dog."

While Mr. Mortimer yet reeled under this news the door of the courtyard rattled and creaked open in the darkness. A lantern showed in the opening, and the

bearer of it, catching sight of the lit caravan, approached with quick, determined strides.

"Can you inform me," asked a high clerical voice, "where I can find Mr. Christopher Hucks?"

The stranger held his lantern high, so that its ray fell on his face, and with that Mr. Mortimer groaned and collapsed upon the lowest step, where mercifully his wife's ample shadow spread an ægis over him.

"Mr. Hucks, sir?" Mrs. Mortimer answered the challenge. "I saw him, not twenty minutes ago, step into his private office there to the left, and by the light in the window he's there yet."

"But who is it?" she asked, as the stranger, swinging his lantern, marched straight up to Mr. Hucks's door.

"Good Lord, it's the man himself—Glasson! And he's come for his orphans."

"He shan't have 'em, then," said Mrs. Mortimer.

