

CHAPTER VIII

FLIGHT

“So all night long and through the dawn the ship cleft her way.”
Odyssey, ii.

MR. HUCKS ran. Mr. Mortimer ran. As they reached the gate they heard the voice of Doctor Glasson uplifted, gurgling for help.

They spied him at once, for by a lucky chance his lantern—one of the common stable kind, with panes of horn—had fallen from his grasp as he pitched over the edge of the basin. It floated, bobbing on the waves cast up by his struggles and splashings, and by the light of it they quickly reached the spot. But unluckily, though they could see him well enough, they could not reach Doctor Glasson. He clung to the head-rope of a barge moored some nine feet from shore, and it appeared that he was hurt, for his efforts to lift himself up and over the stem of the boat, though persistent, were feeble, and at every effort he groaned. The dog—cause of the mischief—craned forward at him over the water, and barked in indecent triumph.

Mr. Mortimer, who had gone through the form of tearing off his coat, paused as he unbuttoned his waistcoat also, and glanced at Mr. Hucks.

“Can you swim?” he asked. “I—I regret to say it is not one of my accomplishments.”

“I ain’t goin’ to try just yet,” Mr. Hucks answered with creditable composure. “They’re bound to fetch help between ’em with the row they’re making. Just hark to the d——d dog.”

Sure enough the alarm had been given. A voice at that moment hailed from one of the boats across the water

to know what was the matter, and half a dozen porters, canal-men, night watchmen from the warehouses, came running around the head of the basin ; but before they could arrive, a man dashed out of the darkness behind the two watchers, tore past them, and sprang for the boat. They heard the thud of his feet as he alit on her short fore-deck, and an instant later, as he leaned over the stem and gripped Dr. Glasson's coat-collar, the light of the bobbing lantern showed them his face. It was Sam Bossom.

He had lifted the Doctor waist-high from the water before the other helpers sprang on board and completed the rescue. The poor man was hauled over the bows and stretched on the fore-deck, where he lay groaning while they brought the boat alongside the quay's edge. By this time a small crowd had gathered, and was being pressed back from the brink and exhorted by a belated policeman.

It appeared as they lifted him ashore that the Doctor, beside the inconvenience of a stomachful of dirty canal water, was suffering considerable pain. In his fright (the dog had not actually bitten him) he had blundered, and struck his knee-cap violently against a bollard close by the water's edge, and staggering under the anguish of it, had lost his footing and collapsed overboard. Then, finding that his fingers could take no hold on the slippery concrete wall of the basin, with his sound leg he had pushed himself out from it and grasped the barge's head-rope. All this, between groans, he managed to explain to the policeman, who, having sent for an ambulance stretcher, called for volunteers to carry him home ; for home Dr. Glasson insisted on being taken, putting aside—and with great firmness—the suggestion that he would be better in hospital.

Sam Bossom was among the first to offer his services. But here his master interposed.

"No, no, my lad," said Mr. Hücks genially, "you've behaved pretty creditable already, and now you can give the others a turn. The man's all right, or will be

by to-morrow ; and as it happens," he added in a lower tone, " I want five minutes' talk with you, and at once."

They watched while the sufferer was hoisted into his stretcher. So the escort started, the policeman walking close behind and the crowd following the policeman.

" Now," said Mr. Hucks, as they passed out of sight, " you'll just step into the yard and answer a few questions. You too, sir," he turned to Mr. Mortimer and led the way. " Hulloo ! "—he let out a kick at Godolphus, snuffing at the yard gate, and Godolphus, smitten on the ribs, fled yelping. " Who the devil owns that cur ? " demanded Mr. Hucks, pushing the gate open.

" I do," answered a voice just within, close at his elbow. " An' I'll arsk you not to fergit it. Ought to be ashamed o' yerself, kickin' a pore dumb animal like that ! "

" Eh ? " Mr. Hucks passed down into the darkness. " Sam, fetch a lantern . . . So you're the young lady I saw júst now inside o' the van, and unless I'm mistaken, a nice job you're responsible for."

Tilda nodded. 'Dolph's indiscretion had put her in a desperate fix ; but something told her that her best chance with this man was to stand up to him and show fight.

" Is he drowned ? " she asked.

" Drowned ? Not a bit of it. Only a trifle wet, and a trifle scared—thanks to that poor dumb animal of yours. A trifle hurt, too."

" I'm sorry he wasn't drowned," said Tilda.

" Well, you're a nice Christian child, I must say. Start with kidnappin', and then down on your luck because you haven't wound up with murder ! Where's the boy you stole ? "

" In the caravan."

" Fetch him out."

" Shan't ! "

" Now look here, missie——"

" I shan't," repeated Tilda. " Oh, Mr. Bossom, you won't let them ! They're strong, I know . . . but he's got a knife that he took when Mr. Mortimer's back

was turned, and if they try to drag 'im back to that Orph'nige——”

“ Stuff and nonsense ! ” Mr. Hucks interrupted. “ Who talked about handin' him back ? Not me. ”

“ Then you won't ? ”

“ I'm not sayin' that, neither. Fetch the boy along into my Counting House. You and me must have a talk about this—in fact, I want a word with everybody consarned. ”

Tilda considered for a moment, and then announced a compromise.

“ Tell you what, ” she said, “ I don't mind comin' along with you first—not if you let 'Dolph come too. ”

“ I shan't let him murder *me*, if that's in your mind. ”

Mr. Hucks grinned.

“ You can call the others in if he tries, ” Tilda answered seriously. “ But he won't, not if you be'ave. An' then, ” she went on, “ you can arsk me anyt'ing you like, an' I'll answer as truthful as I can. ”

“ Can't I see the boy first ? ” asked Mr. Hucks, hugely tickled.

“ No, you can't ! ”

“ You're hard on me, ” he sighed. The child amused him and this suggestion of hers exactly jumped with his wishes. “ But no tricks, mind. You others can look after the boy—I make you responsible for him. And now this way, missie, if you'll do me the honour ! ”

Tilda called to 'Dolph, and the pair followed Mr. Hucks to the Counting House, where, as he turned up the lamp, he told the child to find herself a seat. She did not obey at once ; she was watching the dog. But 'Dolph, it appeared, bore Mr. Hucks no malice. He walked around for thirty seconds smelling the furniture, found a rag mat, settled himself down on it, and sat wagging his tail with a motion regular almost as a pendulum's. Tilda, observing it, heaved a small sigh, and perched herself on the packing-case, where she confronted Mr. Hucks fair and square across the table.

“ Now you just sit there and answer me, ” said Mr.

Hucks, seating himself and filling a pipe. "First, who's in this?"

"Me," answered Tilda. "Me and 'im."

Mr. Hucks laid down his pipe, spread his fingers on the table, and made as if to rise.

"I thought," said he, "you had more sense in you 'n an ord'nary child. Seems you have less, if you start foolin'."

"I can't 'elp 'ow you take it," Tilda answered. "I got to tell you what's true, an' chance the rest. Mr. Sam Bossom, 'e gave us a 'and at the coal-'ole, an' Mr. Mortimer got mixed up in it later on; and that's all *they* know about it. There's nobody else, unless you count the pore woman at the 'orspital, an' *she's* dead."

"That aunt of yours—is *she* dead too?"

Tilda grinned.

"You've been talkin' to Glasson."

"P'r'aps," suggested Mr. Hucks, after a shrewd glance at her, "you'd best tell me the story in your own way."

"That's what I'd like. You see," she began, "I been laid up three weeks in 'orspital—the Good Samaritan, if you know it—along o' bein' kicked by a pony. End o' last week they brought in a woman—dyin' she was, an' in a dreadful state, an' talkin'. I ought to know, 'cos they put her next bed to mine; s'pose they thought she'd be company. All o' one night she never stopped talkin', callin' out for somebody she called Arthur. 'Seemed as she couldn' die easy until she'd seen 'im. Next day—that's yesterday—her mind was clearer, an' I arsked her who Arthur was an' where he lived, if one had a mind to fetch 'im. I got out of her that he was called Arthur Miles Surname Chandon, an' that he lived at 'Oly Innercents. So this mornin', bein' allowed out, I went down to the place an' arsked to see Arthur Miles Surname Chandon. First thing I noticed was they didn' know he was called Chandon, for Glasson took a piece o' paper an' wrote it down. I was afraid of Glasson, an' pitched that yarn about an aunt o' mine, which was all.kid. I never 'ad no aunt."

“ What’s your name, by the way ? ”

“ Tilda.”

“ Tilda what ? ”

“ That’s what they *all* arks,” said Tilda wearily. “ I dunno. If a body *can’t* do without father an’ mother, I’ll make up a couple to please you, same as I made up a aunt for Glasson. Maggs’s Circus is where I belong to, an’ there ’twas Tilda, or ‘ The Child Acrobat ’ when they billed me.”

“ You don’t look much like an acrobat,” commented Mr. Hucks.

“ Don’t I ? Well, you needn’t to take *that* on trust, anyway.”

The child stepped down from the packing-case, stretched both arms straight above her, and began to bend the upper part of her body slowly backward, as though to touch her heels with the backs of her fingers, but desisted half-way with a cry of pain. “ Ow ! It hurts.” She stood erect again with tears in her eyes. “ But ’Dolph will show you,” she added upon a sudden happy thought, and kneeling, stretched out an arm horizontally.

“ Hep, ’Dolph ! ”

The dog, with a bark of intelligence, sprang across her arm, turned on his hind legs, and sprang back again. She crooked her arm so that the tips of her fingers touched her hip, and with another bark he leapt between arm and body as through a hoop.

“ He don’t properly belong to me,” explained Tilda. “ He belongs to Bill, that works the engine on Gavel’s roundabouts ; but he larned his tricks off me. That’ll do, ’Dolph ; go an’ lie down.”

“ He’s a clever dog, and I beg his pardon for kicking him,” said Mr. Hucks with a twinkle.

“ He’s better’n clever. Why, ’twas ’Dolph that got us out.”

“ What, from the Orph’nage ? ”

“ Yes.” Tilda described how the Doctor had shut her in his drawing-room how she had escaped to the garden and found the boy there, and how ’Dolph had discovered

the coal-shaft for them. "An' then Mr. Bossom 'e 'elped us out an' put us across the canal. That's all the 'and 'e took in it. An' from the canal I 'urried Arthur Miles up to the Good Samaritan; but when we got there his mother was dead—becos o' course she must a-been his mother. An' so," Tilda wound up, "I turned-to an' adopted 'im, an' we came along 'ere to arsk Mr. Bossom to 'elp us. An' now—if you give 'im up it'll be a burnin' shame, an' Gawd 'll pull your leg for it."

"That's all very well," said Mr. Hucks after a few moments' thought. "That's all very well, missie," he repeated, "but grown-up folks can't take your easy way wi' the law. You're askin' me to aid an' abet, knowin' him to be stolen; an' that's serious. If 'twas a matter between you an' me, now—or even between us an' Sam Bossom. But the devil is, these playactors have mixed themselves up in it, and the Doctor is warm on Mortimer's scent."

"I thought o' that d'reckly he told me. But O, Mr. 'Ucks, I thought on such a neav'nly plan!" Tilda clasped hands over an uplifted knee and gazed on him. Her eyes shone. "They told me you was keepin' them here for debt; but that's nonsense becos they can't never pay it back till you let 'em make money."

"A fat lot I shall ever get from Mortimer if I let him out o' my sight. You don't know Mr. Mortimer."

"Don't I?" was Tilda's answer. "What d'yer take me for? Why *everybody* knows what Mr. Mortimer's like—everybody in Maggs's, anyway. He's born to borrow, Bill says; though at *Hamlet* or *Seven Nights in a Bar-Room* he beats the band. But as I said to his wife, 'Why shouldn' Mr. 'Ucks keep your caravan against what you owe, an' loan you a barge? He could put a man in charge to look after your takin's, so's you wouldn' get out o' reach till the money was paid: an' you could work the small towns along the canal, where the shows don't almost never reach. You won't want no more'n a tent,' I said, 'an' next to no scenery; an' me an' Arthur Miles could be the "Babes in the Wood"

or the "Princes in the Tower" for you, with 'Dolph to fill up the gaps.' "

"Darn *me*," said Mr. Hucks, staring, "if you're not the cleverest for your size!"

"'Eav'nly—that was Mrs. Mortimer's word for it; an' Mr. Mortimer said 'twas the dream of 'is life to pop——"

"Eh?"

"It began with pop—to pop something Shakespeare in places where they 'adn't 'eard of 'im. But you know 'is way."

Mr. Hucks arose, visibly pondering. 'Dolph, who had been keeping an eye on him, rose also, and 'Dolph's tail worked as if attached to a steam engine.

"There's a cargo, mostly beer, to be fetched up from Stratford," said Mr. Hucks after a pause. "Sam Bossom might take down the *Success to Commerce* for it, and he's as well out o' the way wi' the rest o' you."

Tilda clapped her hands.

"Mind you," he went on, "I'm not includin' any orphan. I got no consarn with bne. I haven't so much as seen him."

He paused, with his eyes fixed severely on Tilda's.

She nodded.

"O' course not."

"And if, when you go back to the van and tell the Mortimers, you should leave the door open for a minute, forgetful-like, why that's no affair o' mine."

"I'm a'most certain to forget," owned Tilda. "If you'd been brought up half yer time in a tent——"

"To be sure. Now attend to this. I give Sam Bossom instructions to take the boat down to Stratford with three passengers aboard—you and the Mortimers—as a business speckilation; and it may so happen—I don't say it will, mind you—that sooner or later Mortimer 'll want to pick up an extry hand to strengthen his company. Well, he knows his own business, and inside o' limits I don't interfere. Still, I'm financin' this voyage, as you might say, and someone must keep

me informed. F'r instance, if you should be joined by a party as we'll agree to call William Bennetts, I should want to know how William Bennetts was doin', and what his purfessional plans were; and if you could find out anything more about W. B.—that he was respectably connected, we'll say—why so much the better. Understand?"

"You want Mr. Mortimer to write?" asked Tilda dubiously.

"No, I don't. I want *you* to write—that's to say, if you can."

"I can print letters, same as the play-bills."

"That'll do. You can get one o' the Mortimers to address the envelopes. And now," said Mr. Hucks, "I'd best be off and speak to Sam Bossom to get out the boat. Show-folks," he added thoughtfully, "likes travellin' by night, I'm told. It's cooler."

Two hours later, as the Brewery clock struck eleven, a canal-boat, towed by a glimmering grey horse, glided southward under the shadow of the Orphanage wall. It passed this and the iron bridge, and pursued its way through the dark purlieu of Bursfield towards the open country. Its rate of progression was steady, and a trifle under three miles an hour.

Astride the grey horse sat Mr. Mortimer, consciously romantic. The darkness, the secrecy of the flight—the prospect of recovered liberty—beyond this the goal! As he rode, Mr. Mortimer murmured beatifically—
"To Stratford! To Stratford-on-Avon!"

Sam Bossom stood on the small a^f-er-deck and steered. In the cabin Mrs. Mortimer snatched what repose was possible on a narrow side-locker to a person of her proportions; and on the cabin floor at her feet, in a nest of theatrical costumes, the two children slept dreamlessly, tired out, locked in each other's arms.