

**ARTHUR
QUILLER-COUCH**



**TRUE
TILDA**

Arthur Quiller-Couch

True Tilda

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Contact: DigiCat@okpublishing.info



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EPILOGUE

CHAPTER I

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AT THE SIGN OF THE GOOD SAMARITAN

"That it may please Thee to preserve all that travel by land or by water . . . all sick persons, and young children."—
THE LITANY.

"I love my love with a H'aitch, because he's 'andsome—"

Tilda turned over on her right side—she could do so now without pain— and lifting herself a little, eyed the occupant of the next bed. The other six beds in the ward were empty.

"I 'ate 'im, because—look 'ere, I don't believe you're listenin'?"

The figure in the next bed stirred feebly; the figure of a woman, straight and gaunt under the hospital bedclothes. A tress of her hair had come uncoiled and looped itself across the pillow—reddish auburn hair, streaked with grey. She had been brought in, three nights ago, drenched, bedraggled, chattering in a high fever; a case of acute pneumonia. Her delirium had kept Tilda—who was preternaturally sharp for

her nine years—awake and curious during the better part of two night-watches. Thereafter, for a day and a night and half a day, the patient had lain somnolent, breathing hard, at intervals feebly conscious. In one of these intervals her eyes had wandered and found the child; and since then had painfully sought her a dozen times, and found her again and rested on her.

Tilda, meeting that look, had done her best. The code of the show-folk, to whom she belonged, ruled that persons in trouble were to be helped. Moreover, the long whitewashed ward, with its seven oblong windows set high in the wall—the smell of it, the solitude, the silence—bored her inexpressibly. She had lain here three weeks with a hurt thigh-bone bruised, but luckily not splintered, by the kick of a performing pony.

The ward reeked of yellow soap and iodoform. She would have exchanged these odours at the price of her soul—but souls are not vendible, and besides she did not know she possessed one—for the familiar redolences of naphtha and horse-dung and trodden turf. These were far away: they had quite forsaken her, or at best floated idly across her dreams. What held her to fortitude had been the drone and intermittent hoot of a steam-organ many streets away. It belonged to a roundabout, and regularly tuned up towards evening; so distant that Tilda could not distinguish one tune from another; only the thud of its bass mingled with the buzz of a fly on the window and with the hard breathing of the sick woman.

Sick persons must be amused: and Tilda, after trying the patient unsuccessfully with a few jokes from the *repertoire*

of her own favourite clown, had fallen back upon "I love my love"—about the only game known to her that dispensed with physical exertion.

"Sleepin', are you? . . . Well, I'll chance it and go on. I 'ate 'im because he's 'aughty—or 'igh-born, if you like—"

The figure beneath the bedclothes did not stir. Tilda lifted herself an inch higher on the elbow; lifted her voice too as she went on:

"And I'll take 'im to—'OLMNESS—"

She had been watching, expecting some effect. But it scared her when, after a moment, the woman raised herself slowly, steadily, until half-erect from the waist. A ray of the afternoon sun fell slantwise from one of the high windows, and, crossed by it, her eyes blazed like lamps in their sockets.

"—And feed 'im on 'am!" concluded Tilda hurriedly, slipping down within her bedclothes and drawing them tight about her. For the apparition was stretching out a hand. The hand drew nearer.

"It's—it's a name came into my 'ead," quavered the child.

"Who . . . told . . . you?" The fingers of the hand had hooked themselves like a bird's claw.

"Told me yerself. I 'eard you, night before last, when you was talkin' wild. . . . If you try to do me any 'arm, I'll call the Sister."

"Holmness?"

"*You* said it. Strike me dead if you didn'!" Tilda fetched a grip on herself; but the hand, its fingers closing on air, drew back and dropped, as though cut off from the galvanising current. She had even presence of mind to note that the

other hand—the hand on which the body propped itself, still half-erect, wore a plain ring of gold. "You talked a lot about 'Olmness—and Arthur. 'Oo's Arthur?"

But the patient had fallen back, and lay breathing hard. When she spoke again all the vibration had gone out of her voice.

"Tell them . . . Arthur . . . fetch Arthur" The words tailed off into a whisper. Still the lips moved as though speech fluttered upon them; but no speech came.

"You just tell me where he is, and maybe we'll fetch 'im," said Tilda encouragingly.

The eyes, which had been fixed on the child's, and with just that look you may note in a dog's eyes when he waits for his master's word, wandered to the table by the bedside, and grew troubled, distressful.

"Which of 'em?" asked Tilda, touching the medicine bottles and glasses there one by one.

But the patient seemed to shake her head, though with a motion scarcely perceptible.

She could talk no more.

Tilda lay back thinking.

"Sister!" she said, twenty minutes later, when the Second Nurse entered the ward. The Second Nurse had charge just now, the matron being away on her August holiday.

"Well, dear?"

"She wants something." Tilda nodded towards the next bed.

"To be sure she does, and I'm going to give it to her." The Second

Nurse, composed in all her movements, bent over the medicine table.

"Garn!" retorted Tilda. "It's easy seen you wasn' brought up along with animals. Look at the eyes of her."

"Well?" The Second Nurse, after a long look at the patient, turned to Tilda again.

"You mind my tellin' you about Black Sultan?"

"Of course I do. He was the one with the bearing rein and the white martingale. Miss Montagu rode him."

"Right-O!" Tilda nodded. "Well, they used to come on next turn to mine, which was the Zambra Fambly, as before the Crowned 'eads—only there wasn' no fambly about it, nor yet no 'eads. Me bein' 'andy an' dressed up, with frizzy 'air, they stood me on a tub with a 'oop, makin' believe 'twas for Miss Montagu to jump through; but of course she didn', reely. When she came round to me she'd only smile and touch me playful under the chin; and that made the sixpenny seats say, "Ow womanly!" or, 'Only think! able to ride like that and so fond of children!' Matter of fact, she 'ad none; and her 'usband, Mike O'Halloran, used to beat her for it sometimes, when he'd had a drop of What-killed-Aunty. He was an Irishman."

"You didn't start to tell me about Mr. O'Halloran."

"No. He wasn' your sort at all; and besides, he's dead. But about Black Sultan—Miss Montagu used to rest 'im, 'alf-way in his turn, while the clown they called Bimbo—but his real name was Ernest Stanley—as't a riddle about a policeman and a red 'errin' in a newspaper. She always rested alongside o' me; and I always stood in the same

place, right over a ring-bolt where they made fast one of the stays for the trapeze; and regular as Black Sultan rested, he'd up with his off hind foot and rub the pastern-bone, very soft, on the ring-bolt. So one day I unscrewed an' sneaked it, jus' to see what he'd do. When he felt for it an' missed it, he gave me a look. That's all. An' that's what's the matter with 'er."

"But what can she be missing?" asked the Second Nurse. "She had nothing about her but an old purse, and nothing in the purse but a penny-ha'penny."

"It don't sound much, but we might try it."

"Nonsense!" said the Second Nurse; but later in the evening she brought the purse, and set it on the table where the patient's eyes might rest on it. For aught she could detect, they expressed no thanks, gave no flicker of recognition. But the child had been watching them too, and was quicker—by one-fifth of a second, perhaps.

It was half-past eight, and the sister turned low the single gas-jet. She would retire now to her own room, change her dress for the night-watching, and return in about twenty minutes. The door had no sooner closed upon her than Tilda stretched out a hand. The sick woman watched, panting feebly, making no sign. The purse—a cheap thing, stamped with forget-me-nots, and much worn at the edges where the papier-mache showed through its sham leather—contained a penny and a halfpenny; these, and in an inner stamp-pocket a scrap of paper, folded small, and greasy with handling.

Still peering across in the dim light, Tilda undid the broken folds and scrambled up to her knees on the bed. It

cost her a twinge of pain, but only by standing upright on the bed's edge could she reach the gas-bracket to turn the flame higher. This meant pain sharper and more prolonged, yet she managed it, and, with that, clenched her teeth hard to keep down a cry. The child could swear, on occasion, like a trooper; but this was a fancy accomplishment. Just now, when an oath would have come naturally to a man, she felt only a choking in the throat, and swallowed it down with a sob.

On the paper were four lines, written in pencil in a cramped hand; and, alas! though Tilda could read print, she had next to no acquaintance with handwriting.

The words were a blur to her. She stared at them; but what she saw was the gaze of the sick woman, upturned to her from the bed. The scrap of paper hid it, and yet she saw. She must act quickly.

She gave a reassuring nod, turned the gas-jet low, and slid down into bed with the paper clenched in her hand. But as her head touched the pillow she heard a rustling noise, and craned up her neck again. The patient had rolled over on her left side, facing her, fighting for breath.

"Yes, yes," Tilda lied hardily. "To-morrow—Arthur—they shall send for him to-morrow."

"Four," said the sick woman. The word was quite distinct. Another word followed which Tilda could not catch.

"Four o'clock, or may be earlier," she promised.

"L—I—lozenges," the tongue babbled.

Tilda glanced towards the medicine table.

"Diamonds," said the voice with momentary firmness; "four diamonds . . . on his coat . . . his father's . . . his"

"Four diamonds, yes?" the child repeated.

"Ned did them . . . he told me . . . told me" But here the voice wavered and trailed off into babble, meaningless as a year-old infant's. Tilda listened hard for a minute, two minutes, then dropped her head back on her pillow as the door-handle rattled. It was the Second Nurse returning for night duty.

Early next morning the doctor came—a thin young man with a stoop, and a crop of sandy hair that stood upright from his forehead. Tilda detested him.

He and the Second Nurse talked apart for quite a long while, and paid no attention to the child, who lay shamming a doze, but with her ears open.

She heard the doctor say—

"She? Oh, move her to the far end of the ward."

The Second Nurse muttered something, and he went on

—

"She is well, practically. All she wants now is someone to keep an eye on her, make her lie up for a couple of hours every day, and box her ears if she won't."

"That's me," thought Tilda. "I'm to be moved out of the way because t'other's going to die; and if she's going to die, there's no time to be lost."

She stirred, lifted her head, and piped—

"Doctor!"

"Hullo, imp! I thought you were sleeping."

"So I was. I sleep 'eaps better now." She drew her hurt leg up and down in the bed. "Doctor, I 'd be all right, certain sure, if you let me out for arf-an-hour. Sister let me sit out for ever so long yestiday, an' while she was dustin' out the

men's ward I practised walkin'—all the lenth of the room an' back."

"When I told you never, on any account!" the Sister scolded.

"If I'd only the loan of a crutch!" pleaded Tilda; "an' it couldn' do me no 'arm in this weather."

"Pining for liberty, hey?" said the doctor. (She saw what was passing through his mind, and despised him for it.) "Well, suppose, now, we let you out for just half an hour?"

Tilda clapped her palms together, and her eyes shone. To herself she said: "Kiddin' of me, that's what they are. Want to get me out of the way while they shift the beddin'. Lemme get back my clothes, that's all, an' I'll teach him about pinin' for liberty."

"But," said the doctor severely, lifting a finger, "you're to keep to the pavement mind—just outside, where it's nice and shady. Only so far as the next turning and back; no crossing anywhere or getting in the way of traffic, and only for half an hour. The chimes from St. Barnabas will tell you, if you can't read the clock."

She had learnt to read the time before she was five years old, and had a mind to tell him, but checked herself and merely nodded her head.

"Half an hour, and the pavement only. Is that understood?"

"Honest!"

It annoyed her—when, an hour later, she began to dress for the adventure—to find herself weaker than she had at all supposed. Although she forbore to mention it to the Second Nurse, there was an irresponsible funny feeling in her legs.

They seemed to belong to her but by fits and starts. But the clothes were hers: the merino skirt a deal too short for her— she had grown almost an inch in her bed-lying— the chip hat, more badly crushed than ever, a scandal of a hat, but still hers. The dear, dear clothes! She held them in both hands and nuzzled into them, inhaling her lost self in the new-old scent of liberty.

When at length her hat was donned, the notion took her to stand by the sick woman's bed to show herself.

Consciousness had drained away deep into the sick woman's eyes. It wavered there darkly, submerged, half-suspended, as you may see the weed waver in a dim seapool. Did a bubble, a gleam, float up from the depths? At any rate, the child nodded bravely.

"Goin' to fetch 'im, don't you fret!"

CHAPTER II

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HOW TRUE TILDA CAME TO DOLOROUS GARD

*"Dauntless the slug-horn to my lips I set. And blew
'Childe Roland to the Dark Tower came.'" BROWNING.*

Fifty years before, the Hospital of the Good Samaritan had been the pet "charity" of a residential suburb. Factories and slums had since crowded in upon it, ousting the residents and creeping like a tide over the sites of their gardens and villas. The street kept its ancient width, and a few smoke-blackened trees—lilacs, laburnums, limes, and one copper-beech—still dignified the purlieus. Time, ruthless upon these amenities, had spared, and even enlarged, the hospital.

It stood on the shaded side of the street. Nevertheless, the sunshine, reflected from the facade of mean houses across the way, dazzled Tilda as she crossed the threshold of the great doorway and hopped down the steps. There were five steps, and on the lowest she paused, leaning a moment on her crutch before taking the final plunge into liberty.

Then, while she stood blinking, of a sudden a yellowish brown body bounded at her out of the sun-dazzle, pushed her tottering, danced back, and leapt at her again, springing to lick her face, and uttering sharp, inarticulate noises from a throat bursting with bliss.

"'Dolph! O 'Dolph!"

Tilda sank on the lowest step and stretched out both arms. The dog, rushing between them, fairly bowled her backwards; lit in her lap and twisted his body round ecstatically, thrusting, nuzzling at her bosom, her neck, her face—devouring her with love. In her weakness she caught him around the chest, close behind the forelegs, and hugged him to her. So for a quarter of a minute the two rocked together and struggled.

"'Dolph! O good dog! . . . Did Bill send yer?"

'Dolph, recoiling, shook his neck-ruff and prepared for another spring; but Tilda pushed him back and stood up. "Take me along to him," she commanded, and lifted her face impudently to the clock-face of St. Barnabas above the mean roofs. "Barnabas, are yer? Then give my compliments to the doctor, you Barnabas, an' tell 'im to cheese it." 'Dolph—short for Godolphus—pricked both ears and studied the sky-line. Perceiving nothing there—not even a swallow to be chased—he barked twice (the humbug!) for sign that he understood thoroughly, and at once fell to new capers by way of changing the subject. Tilda became severe. "Look here, Godolphus," she explained, "this is biz-strict biz. You may wag your silly Irish tail, but that don't take *me* in. Understand? . . . Well, the first thing you 'ave to do is take me to Bill."

Godolphus was dashed; hurt, it may be, in his feelings. Being dumb, he could not plead that for three weeks daily he had kept watch on the hospital door; that, hungry, he had missed his meals for faith, which is the substance of things unseen; that, a few hours ago, having to choose between half-gods assured and whole gods upon trust—an almost desperate trust—he had staked against the odds. Or, it may be, he forgot all this, and only considered what lay ahead for the child. At any rate, his tail, as he led the way, wagged at a sensibly lower angle.

"Bill can read any kind of 'andwriting," said Tilda, half to herself and half to the dog. "What's more, and whatever's the matter, Bill 'elps."

So she promised herself. It did not strike her that 'Dolph—who in an ordinary way should have been bounding ahead and anon bounding back to gyrate on his hind legs and encourage her—preferred to trot ahead some thirty or forty yards and wait for her to overtake him; nor that, when she came up, he avoided her eyes, pretending that here a doorstep, there a grating or water-main absorbed his curiosity. Once or twice, indeed, before trotting off again, he left these objects of interest to run around Tilda's heels and rub against her crutch. But she was busy with her own plans.

So through a zig-zag of four or five dingy streets they came to one she recognised as that leading into the Plain, or open space where the show-people encamped. At its far end 'Dolph halted. His tail still wagged, but his look was sidelong, furtive, uneasy.

Tilda, coming up with him, stood still for a moment, stared, and caught her breath with a little gasp of dismay.

The Plain was empty.

Circus and menagerie, swing-boats, roundabouts, shooting-galleries—all were gone. The whole area lay trampled and bare, with puddles where the steam-engines had stood, and in the puddles bedabbled relics of paper brushes, confetti bags, scraps torn from feminine flounces, twisted leaden tubes of "ladies' tormentors" cast away and half-trodden into the mire; the whole an unscavenged desolation. Her folk—the show-folk—had deserted her and vanished, and she had not a penny in her pocket. It cost Tilda all her pluck to keep what she called a tight upper lip. She uttered no cry, but seated herself on the nearest doorstep— apparently with deliberation, actually not heeding, still less caring, to whom the doorstep belonged.

"Oh, 'Dolph!" she murmured.

To her credit, in the act of appealing to him, she understood the dog's heroism, and again stretched forth her arms. He had been waiting for this—sprang at her, and again was caught and hugged. Again the two forlorn ones rocked in an embrace.

Brief ecstasy! The door behind them was constructed in two portions, of which the upper stood wide, the lower deceptively on the latch. Against this, as she struggled with Godolphus's ardour, Tilda gave a backward lurch. It yielded, flew open, and child and dog together rolled in across the threshold, while a shop-bell jangled madly above them.

"Get out of this—you and your nasty cur!"

Tilda picked up herself and her crutch, and stood eyeing the shopwoman, who, summoned by the bell, had come rushing from an inner room, and in no sweet temper. From the woman she glanced around the shop— a dairy-shop with a marble-topped counter, and upon the counter a pair of scales and a large yellow block of margarine.

"It was a naccident," said Tilda firmly and with composure. "And my dog isn' a nasty cur; it only shows your ignorance. Be quiet, 'Dolph!"

She had to turn and shake her crutch at Godolphus, who, perceiving his mistress's line of action, at once, in his impulsive Irish way, barked defiance at the shopwoman.

But the shopwoman's eyes rested on the crutch, and the sight of it appeared to mollify her.

"My gracious! I do believe you 're the child was hurt at Maggs's Circus and taken to hospital."

Tilda nodded.

"Did you see me?"

"Carried by on a stretcher—and your face the colour of *that*."

The woman pointed to the marble counter-top.

"I was a serious case," said Tilda impressively. "The people at the Good Samaritan couldn' remember admittin' the likes of it. There were complications."

"You don't say!"

"But what's become of Maggs's?"

"Maggs's left a week ago come Tuesday. I know, because they used to buy their milk of me. They were the first a'most, and the last was the Menagerie and Gavel's Roundabouts. *They* packed up last night. It must be a

wearin' life," commented the shopwoman. "But for my part I like the shows, and so I tell Damper—that's my 'usband. They put a bit of colour into the place while they last, besides bein' free-'anded with their money. Light come light go, I reckon; but anyway, it's different from cows. So you suffered from complications, did you?"

"Internal," Tilda assured her in a voice as hollow as she could make it.

"I must have spit up a quart of blood, first an' last. An' the medicine

I 'ad to take! You wouldn' think it, but the colour was pale 'eliotrope."

"I wonder," said Mrs. Damper sympathetically—"I wonder it stayed in the stomach."

"It didn'."

"Wouldn' you fancy a glass o' milk, now?"

"It's very kind of you." Tilda put on her best manners. "And 'ere's 'ealth!" she added before sipping, when the milk was handed to her.

"And the dog—wouldn' 'e like something?"

"Well, since you mention it—but it's givin' you a 'eap of trouble. If you 'ave such a thing as a bun, it don't matter 'ow stale."

"I can do better 'n that." Mrs. Damper dived into the inner room, and re-emerged with a plateful of scraps. "There's always waste with children," she explained, "and I got five. You can't think the load off one's shoulders when they're packed to school at nine o'clock. And that, I dessay," she wound up lucidly, "is what softened me t'ards you. Do you go to school, now?"

"Never did," answered Tilda, taking the plate and laying it before Godolphus, who fell-to voraciously.

"I 'd like to tell that to the attendance officer," said Mrs. Damper in a wistful tone. "But p'r'aps it might get you into trouble?"

"You 're welcome."

"He do give me a lot of worry; and it don't make things easier Damper's threatenin' to knock his 'ead off if ever he catches the man darkenin' our door. Never been to school, aven't you? I 'd like to tell 'im, and that, if there's a law, it ought to be the same for all. But all my children are 'ealthy, and that's one consolation."

"'Ealth's the first thing in life," agreed Tilda. "So they've all cleared out?—the shows, I mean."

"Every one—exceptin' the Theayter."

"Mortimer's?" Tilda limped to the open door. "But I don't see him, neither."

"Mortimer's is up the spout. First of all, there was trouble with the lodgings; and on top of that, last Monday, Mr. Hucks put the bailiffs in. This mornin' he sent half a dozen men, and they took the show to pieces and carried it off to Hucks's yard, where I hear he means to sell it by public auction."

"Who's Mr. Hucks?"

"He's the man that farms the Plain here—farms it *out*, I mean," Mrs. Damper explained. "He leases the ground from the Corporation and lets it out for what he can make, and that's a pretty penny. Terrible close-fisted man is Mr. Hucks."

"Oh!" said Tilda, enlightened. "When you talked of farmin', you made me wonder . . . So they're all gone? And Wolverhampton-way, I reckon. That was to be the next move."

"I've often seen myself travellin' in a caravan," said Mrs. Damper dreamily. "Here to-day an' gone to-morrow, and only to stretch out your hand whether 'tis hairpins or a fryin'-pan; though I should never get over travellin' on Sundays." Here, while her eyes rested on the child, of a sudden she came out of her reverie with a sharp exclamation. "Lord's sake! You ain't goin' to tell me they've left you in 'ospital, stranded!"

"That's about it," said Tilda bravely, albeit with a wry little twist of her mouth.

"But what'll you do?"

"Oh, I dunno . . . We'll get along some'ow—eh, 'Dolph? Fact is, I got a job to do, an' no time to lose worryin'. You just read *that*."

Tilda produced and handed her scrap of paper to Mrs. Damper, who took it, unfolded it, and perused the writing slowly.

"Goin' there?" she inquired at length.

"That depends." Tilda was not to be taken off her guard. "I want you to read what it says."

"Yes, to be sure—I forgot what you said about havin' no schoolin'. Well, it says: 'Arthur Miles, surname Chandon, b. Kingsand, May 1st, 1888. Rev. Dr. Purdie J. Glasson, Holy Innocents' Orphanage, Bursfield, near Birmingham '—leastways, I can't read the last line clear, the paper bein' frayed; but it's bound to be what I've said."

"Why?"

"Why, because that's the address. Holy Innocents, down by the canal— I know it, o' course, *and* Dr. Glasson. Damper supplied 'em with milk for over six months, an' trouble enough we had to get our money."

"How far is it?"

"Matter of half a mile, I should say—close by the canal. You cross it there by the iron bridge. The tram'll take you down for a penny, only you must mind and get out this side of the bridge, because once you're on the other side it's tuppence. Haven't got a penny? Well,"—Mrs. Damper dived a hand into her till—"I'll give you one. Bein' a mother, I can't bear to see children in trouble."

"Thank you," said Tilda. "It'll come in 'andy; but I ain't in no trouble just yet."

"I 'spose," Mrs. Damper ventured after a pause, "you don't feel like tellin' me what your business might be down at the orphanage? Not that I'm curious."

"I can't." This was perfectly true, for she herself did not know. "You see," she added with a fine air of mystery, "there's others mixed up in this."

Mrs. Damper sighed.

"Well, I mustn' detain you . . . This Arthur Miles Chandon—he's not a friend of yours by any chance?"

"He's a—sort of connection," said Tilda. "You know 'im, p'r'aps?"

"Dear me, no!"

"Oh,"—the child, without intending it, achieved a fine irony— "I thought you seemed interested. Well, so long! and

thank you again— there's a tram stoppin' at the corner! Come along, 'Dolph!"

She was not—she had said it truthfully—by any means in trouble just yet. On the contrary, after long deprivation she was tasting life again, and finding it good. The streets of this Bursfield suburb were far from suggestive of the New Jerusalem—a City of which, by the way, Tilda had neither read nor heard. They were, in fact, mean and squalid, begrimed with smoke and imperfectly scavenged. But they were, at least, populous, and to Tilda the faces in the tram and on the pavements wore, each and all, a friendly—almost an angelic—glow. The tram-car rolled along like a celestial chariot trailing clouds of glory, and 'Dolph, running beside it and threading his way in and out between the legs of the passers-by, was a hound of heaven in a coat effluent of gold. Weariness would come, but as yet her body felt no weariness, buoyed upon a spirit a-tiptoe for all adventure.

The tram reached the iron bridge and drew up. She descended, asked the conductor to direct her to Holy Innocents, and was answered with a jerk of the thumb.

It stood, in fact, just beyond the bridge, with a high brick wall that turned off the street at right angles and overhung the towpath of the canal. Although in architecture wholly dissimilar, the building put her in mind of the Hospital of the Good Samaritan, and her spirits sank for a moment. Its facade looked upon the street over a strip of garden crowded with dingy laurels. It contained a depressingly large number of windows, and it seemed to her that they were at once bare and dirty. Also, and simultaneously, it occurred to her that she had no notion what step to take next, nor how,

if she rang the bell, to explain herself. She temporised therefore; whistled to 'Dolph, and turned aside down the steps leading to the towpath. She would con the lie of the land before laying siege—the strength of the castle before summoning the defence.

The castle was patently strong—strong enough to excuse any disheartenment. Scarcely a window pierced its narrow butt-end, four stories high, under which the steps wound. It ended just where they met the towpath, and from its angle sprang a brick wall dead-blank, at least twelve feet high, which ran for eighty or ninety yards along the straight line of the path. Across the canal a row of unkempt cottage gardens sloped to the water, the most of them fenced from the brink of it with decayed palings, a few with elder bushes and barbed wire to fill up the gaps, while at least two ended in moraines of old meat tins and shards of crockery. And between these containing banks wound the canal, shallow and waveless, with noisome weeds trailing on its surface afloat amid soot and iridescent patches or pools of tar. In the cottage gardens not a soul was at work, nor, by their appearance, had a soul worked in them for years past. The canal, too, was deserted, save for one long monkey-boat, black as Charon's barge, that lay moored to a post on the towpath, some seventy-odd yards up stream, near where the wall of the Orphanage ended. Beyond this, and over a line of ragged thorns, the bulk of a red-brick Brewery—its roof crowned with a sky-sign—closed the view.

The monkey-boat lay with her stem down-stream, and her after-part—her habitable quarters—covered by a black tarpaulin. A solitary man was at work shovelling coal out of

her middle hold into a large metal bucket. As Tilda hobbled towards him he hoisted the full bucket on his shoulders, staggered across the towpath with it, and shot its contents into a manhole under the brick wall. Tilda drew near and came to a halt, watching him.

"Afternoon," said the man, beginning to shovel again.

"Afternoon," responded Tilda.

He was a young man—she could detect this beneath his mask of coal dust. He wore a sack over his shoulders, and a black sou'wester hat with a hind-flap that fell low over his neck. But she liked the look in his eyes, though the rims of them were red and the brows caked with grit. She liked his voice, too. It sounded friendly.

"Is this the Orph'nige? What they call 'Oly Innercents?" she asked.

"That's so," the young coalheaver answered. "Want to get in?"

"I do an' I don't," said Tilda.

"Then take my advice an' don't."

He resumed his shovelling, and Tilda watched him for a while.

"Nice dorg," said he, breaking off and throwing an affable nod towards Godolphus who, having attracted no attention by flinging himself on the grass with a lolling tongue and every appearance of fatigue, was now filling up the time in quest of a flea. "No breed, but he has points. Where did you pick him up?"

"He belongs to a show."

"Crystal Pallus?"

"And," pursued Tilda, "I was wonderin' if you'd look after him while I step inside?"

She threw back her head, and the man whistled.

"You're a trustin' one, I must say!"

"You'd never be mean enough to make off with 'im, an' I won't believe it of you," spoke up Tilda boldly.

"Eh? I wasn't talkin' of the dorg," he explained. "I was meanin' the Orph'nage. By all accounts 'tisin' so easy to get in—an' 'tis a sight harder to get out."

"I've *got* to get in," urged Tilda desperately.

"I've a message for someone inside. His name's Arthur Miles Chandon."

The young coalheaver shook his head.

"I don't know 'im," he said. "I'm new to this job, an' they don't talk to me through the coal-'ole. But you seem a well-plucked one, and what with your crutch—How did you come by it?"

"Kick of a pony."

"Seems to me you've been a good deal mixed up with animals, for your age. What about your pa and ma?"

"Never 'ad none, I thank Gord."

"Eh?" The young man laid down his shovel, lifted the flap of his sou'wester, and scratched the back of his head slowly. "Let me get the hang o' *that*, now."

"I've seen fathers and mothers," said the sage child, nodding at him; "and them as likes 'em is welcome to 'em."

"Gor-a-mussy!" half-groaned the young man. "If you talk like that, they'll take you in, right enough; but as to your gettin' out—"

"I'll get out, one way or 'nother—you see!" Tilda promised. "All you 'ave to do is to take charge o' this crutch an' look after the dog."

"Oh, I'll look after 'im!"

The child shook a forefinger at 'Dolph, forbidding him to follow her. The dog sank on his haunches, wagging a tail that swept the grasses in perplexed protest, and watched her as she retraced her way along the towpath.

Tilda did not once look back. She was horribly frightened; but she had pledged her word now, and it was irredeemable. From the hurrying traffic of the street she took a final breath of courage, and tugged at the iron bell-pull depending beside the Orphanage gate. A bell clanged close within the house, and the sound of it almost made her jump out of her boots.

CHAPTER III

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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