TWO GIRLS ON A BARGE

The place seemed like a haunted cave

TWO GIRLS ON A BARGE

BY

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WITH FORTY-FOUR ILLUSTRATIONS
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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

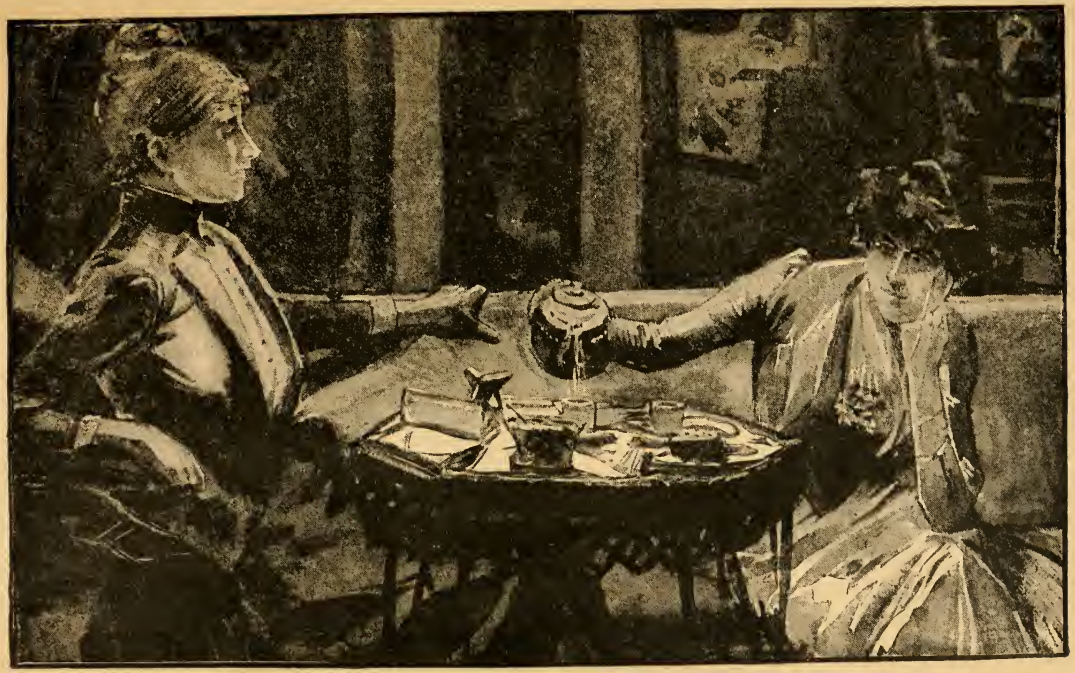
TWO GIRLS ON A BARGE

CHAPTER I

THE worst of it was that we couldn't make up our minds as to the best way to set about it, Edna Devize and I. It was the last night of term, and we had been discussing Browning and a barge alternately over Miss Devize's tea in her pretty room. We couldn't get a chart of the canal without going to a specialist, that was one of the moment's troubles. Another was that we hadn't got a barge, and we wanted one. We wanted an empty barge that we could furnish our own way, and take anywhere we liked for a week of happy idleness. For Miss Devize had overworked herself, and I had nothing else to do. But we couldn't get a chart, and we hadn't got a barge. Canals aren't recognised apparently as topographical at all,

though Shakespeare lived by one, and George Eliot fished in it. For it was Maggie Tulliver who was as responsible as anyone in the matter of this trip.

And here I must explain that, being only a benighted Londoner, and without any 'Varsity career to correct my etymology, I had long since dubbed Edna Devize generically 'Girton,' to that sweet girl graduate's natural wrath. Girton, she said, was a collective title, and she wouldn't be called a *horde*! Edna then took the matter into her own hands at this juncture of affairs. She sat down with a decided air, and we composed a note to Messrs. Corbett, of the London Salt Works. For, as everyone knows, Messrs. Corbett's boats are some of the best of those which ply between London and Birmingham. It was a very charming note! And in it we set forth our desires in the simplest terms, and asked if Messrs. Corbett would be kind enough to help us in any way they could. Messrs. Corbett's preliminary cargo being salt would be a pleasant precedent to our occupation, and full of fresh-scented reminiscences, we



THAT WAS ONE OF THE MOMENT'S TROUBLES

thought. We awaited the result of this experiment with some anxiety. But there was no need, for Mr. Corbett responded to our letter in the kindest spirit and put a boat at our disposal for as long as we might wish. Not only this, but he sent down his special manager, who gave us fatherly advice about the passes we should need, because a laden barge may go where a pleasure skiff may not upon canals.

Now, our original intention was to go we two alone. But when the manager's last letter came to say the boat was really at the wharf at Paddington awaiting our instructions, we hurriedly decided to enlist The Crew. After all, a man is a sort of necessity when there's carpentering to be done. The Crew was a property of mine, a soldier brother awaiting his commission—Mr. Talbot Bernard Grove, Gentleman Cadet. The Cadet was by no means overwhelmed at the prospect that we offered him. He even hinted, with some mathematical precision, that a houseboat on the Thames would be scarcely more expensive 'by the time that we had done,' and implied a preference.

'If you like to leave it all to me I'll arrange it for you,' he said autocratically.

Whereupon we explained to him that we intended to conduct this trip upon principles that were entirely original, and all we wanted was in reality a crew; we were very sorry that we could not offer him a captaincy, than which we could imagine nothing pleasanter.

'But you see how we are situated,' Girton said.

Well, the Cadet couldn't have been pleasanter once he understood. It appeared that he considered he was 'booked to embark upon a herring boat going down Vesuvius,' and we wanted nothing more than the margin which that gave us—the metaphor was difficult, but the intention was amenable.

'You see,' Girton said to him, 'we want to make a fresh start, as it were, and get right away from the Conventionalised Idea.'

At this point there arose a question of a properly descriptive term for an Unconventionalised Idea. Mr. Corbett had called it simply a Canal Boat, and the Cadet did battle for the word.

Girton said it was a Barge, 'and if it's *not* a Barge, I won't play!' she added. So we set off to Paddington to see. We found our craft lying at the wharf awaiting us, with a local carpenter standing in the well.

He stood with unanticipative resignation, this old carpenter, as having consigned himself for the time being to the uttermost vagaries of two female Whims. Indeed, he was quite right, and we hadn't made a ground-plan of what we wanted him to do. Though in this roomy emptiness there was scope for architects. The Cadet had sectional designs of cabins upon every cross-bar within reach of his gold pencil-case before we had realised that cabins had to be built if they were required. Rectilinear lines were the fashioning of life to the Cadet, he was drawn in them himself.

'What were it ye wanted done along o' this?' said the old carpenter, at last addressing him.

But the Cadet politely indicated us, and went on with his rectilinear lines as if it was no concern of his. His attitude announced, 'I am the cabin-boy.'

'Er—do you think,' said Girton, and she stopped to watch the laden horses coming up beyond the roofs on the other side of the canal to feed the iron shaft where the dust was falling.

'We want to start to-morrow—do you think you can be done by then?' I asked him of the slow footrule, businesslike.

'Depends on what I be to do,' quoth the old man, deliberately.

The profundity of this, and an impassive receptiveness in the old man's attitude that had no loophole of original suggestion in it, rather staggered me. Girton turned, glancing up and down the long empty barge with an air of mature consideration as if balancing the merits and demerits of the place.

'You see, there is lots of room,' she said, as if stating a new problem, and the old man waited patiently, expectantly, with his footrule in his hand. The Cadet started on another beam in a mathematical cataract of horizontal bars. He was revelling in uprights and a quadrilateral perspective most unyielding of demeanour.

'How mony square foot of boordin' 'ull ye want?' demanded the old man.

'Don't you think'—Miss Devize was seized of a sudden inspiration, and spoke eagerly—'Don't you think that there ought to be an *awning* in case the sun comes out.'

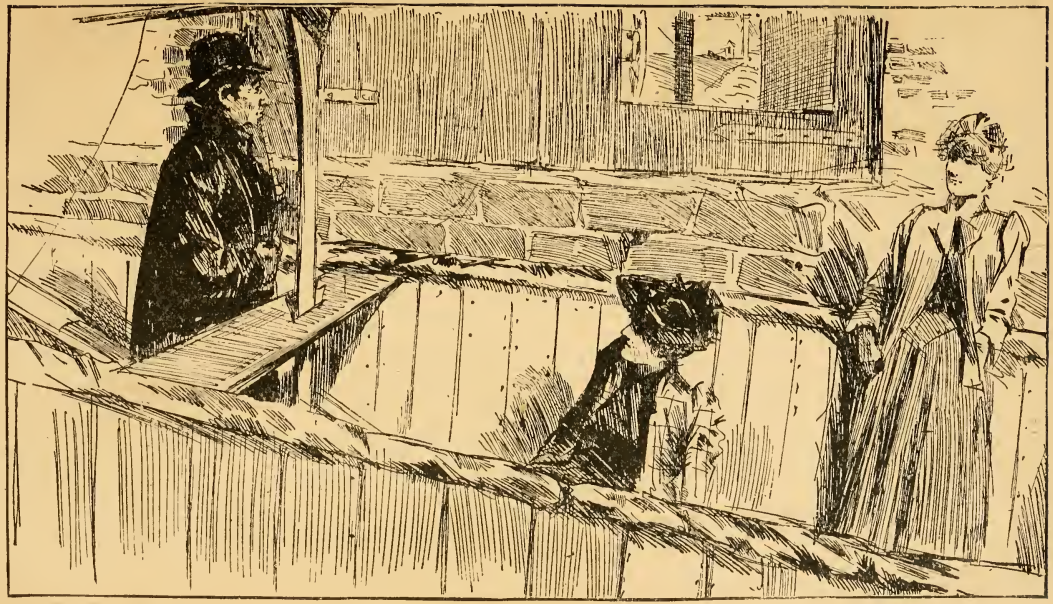
'Then you won't want no boords at all?'

'What a very imperative race carpenters appear to be!' remarked Girton to the distant horses, with a sort of abstract interest.

'And you will have to hang some fairy-lamps for us, in any case, you know, and arrange a Japanese umbrella,' I added, carefully, for these little things make so much difference when you want to make a barge look picturesque.

'Yes, but 'ow about they boords; boords takes such a deal o' choosin', and I un'erstood as maybe ye'd want a goodish few.'

'See,' said Girton, suddenly, 'if the Cadet goes on drawing on our bulwarks at this rate we shall be permanently frescoed with a Greek-patterned dado in a sectional design—and I don't think we could stand it!' Then, turning to the gentleman



DEPENDS ON WHAT I BE TO DO'

in question, 'I think the old man understands our wishes now; but perhaps you will be good enough to give him the benefit of your experience in carrying them out?' she asked, in the sweetest way. And the old carpenter looked after her, as we went to make our purchases, with admiration somewhere in the tangle of his yellow beard that even the Cadet's best diagram had been quite unable to elicit.

Then began a pilgrimage; alternately we bought and begged. Possessions grew around us in huge brown paper packages, and followed us in trucks through the plate-glass, polished doors of those London shops. Liberty curtains were the speciality of our furnishing. We bought them of every shade and size and texture. They were to be draped artistically everywhere—and certainly they did produce a very good effect when they were up. Then there were steamer chairs to get, and the table that we forgot and had to come back for, and lamps, and a tea set, and the tiny red mattresses that we couldn't get minute enough, and groceries, the butter that got rancid, and the Bath Chap that haunted us like a greasy apparition afterwards.

There was a dear old lady in one shop, a customer, who having discovered we were by way of being nautical, followed us about with information and advice.

'Are you aware,' she said, 'that to take cold on the water *always* means typhoid? Let me enjoin you to carry foot-warmers.'

In a few minutes she came up again. 'Be sure you don't buy sulphur matches—they are so dangerous; and if you are intending to take coal, I should advise "burning bricks," they're so much more portable.'

At the moment we were choosing chair-backs, and did not quite see the connection. But in the travelling rug department she palpitated out a valuable hint. 'It's the little things that get forgotten upon these occasions. Soap——'

'Oh, *soap*!'

'Yes, of course; and mustard—you can always use it up in poultices; and then a pair of garden scissors might come in handily, you can never tell, and they would save the need of snuffers!'

. . . . . .

The Cadet must have waited a long time on the wharf at Paddington, when we did at last arrive prepared to start.

His quadrilateral designs had certainly fulfilled themselves in a most natty way. The two tiny cabins looked like cherubs' packing cases, one at either end of the long deep barge. We admired them enormously, and I think the Cadet did too, though he spoke of them with a fine nonchalance. Their roofs however seemed to us to be impressionistic rather, if a series of skeleton triangles can be called a roof at all. Add to this that the barge was full of shavings and the old carpenter was putting up a door, and the effect remains unfinished you will find. We stood in the middle of the boat surveying it, while our packages were strewed over the wharf in brown hillocks of a bursting bulkiness of outline.

'Exquisite and most administrative one!' said I to Mr. Grove; 'it is charming, as you know; but has it ever occurred to you that we have come to *start*?

'Impressionistic Queryist!' he responded readily, 'when and whether we can start at all

to-day entirely depends on Miss Devize's influence with the carpenter. But, see, here is our own Bargee, doing tight-rope gymnasium apparently, and longing to salute you.'

'MRS. BARGEE'

At this moment of a first impression our own Bargee was perilously balanced on the narrow gangway running overhead, whence he shone down at us with a rubicund respect that might have

warmed a snowstorm. Our introduction to him was of necessity ephemeral, the impression still remains—gold nuggets do not tarnish in three weeks. And then Mrs. Bargee came to welcome us, beaming in her snowy sunbonnet from the open door of the little yellow cabin where she lived. She, in turn, indicated Eccles to us, a small vagrant factor of the trip at present indeterminate, playing hide-and-seek among our packages with the other children of Moore's Wharf.

Edna had just begun to 'tidy up' and was making hay among the shavings with a walking stick, luxuriously, while the Cadet was disentangling the table legs of their swathing of brown paper, when a sudden voice electrified us all.

'Well, young ladies! I have heard of you.'

It was Edna's uncle, General Essington. But then General Essington was everybody's uncle, or godfather, or guardian. And he stood, framed by the narrow door of the salt shed wall, with a quizzical expression of disapprobation and astonishment in his martial attitude. But behind him lurked a porter staggering beneath innumerable

bundles of such festive possibilities as tended to belie their owner's unappeasable severity.

Oh, yes, he had heard of us. Our light was not under a bushel. We seemed to have been creating an alarming sensation in our respective families. And would we condescend to explain to him any trivial details of our present undertaking? The smallest information would oblige. Meanwhile, however, he had brought down certain luxuries to accelerate our start, and amongst other things he had thought it would be interesting to take the point of view. He was so fortunate as to possess a friend, an embryo R.A., whom, upon consideration, he would lend to us, provided we asked very prettily and could persuade the gentleman of the advantages of a canal as an artistic field. And somewhere from among the packages the embyro R.A. appeared. It is needless to go further. Enough to state that this embryo Barge Painter fulfilled the wildest dreams. Besides which, he could make hay with a walking-stick, even to rival Edna.

'Come and visit us before we've eaten *all*

OUR OWN BARGEE PUNTED SLOWLY OFF

the grapes,' the crew called after this, its unexpected Providence—a Providence endowed with a keen sense of the ridiculous—as the General took off his hat and disappeared into the darkening recesses of Moore's Wharf; leaving a cartload of kindly luxuries, a very genuine sensation, and an embryo R.A. behind him on a barge.

And our own Bargee punted slowly off with a long barbed pole, and the old carpenter's good wishes, 'Pleasant journey to you, sir,' floated out from the little door in the salt shed wall; and the brown canal flowed gently round four Water Babies eyeing each other with a certain curiosity as they drifted out of London silently.

CHAPTER II

PAST the salt sheds and the iron crane, where the heavy barges sank still lower in the water, slowly punted by a Bargee out into the sunset. So we started.

And presently the boat diverged as if eager to be harnessed to the big horse that stood tall and brown among the children on the towing-path, where cockney fishers fished in shoals with the pertinacity of fishers, taking no refusal. Something unusual was stirring. There was expectation in the little group upon the bank, and the small son of the barge, that mite of seven summers, sat astride the big brown horse as accredited possessor and showman of the novelty. The new lights which this position threw on his horizon were by no means lost to Albert, who trailed the barge after him beside the towing-path with the air of bringing something of general interest.

SOMETHING UNUSUAL WAS STIRRING

'Seems like a Teaparty!' was the conclusion of the towing-path, summed up last by three on the Paddingtonian standpoint, formed by the flat top of one of the projecting cubes of that row of houses which keeps an eye on the canal as it goes out of London.

'Chance for a sketch,' said a voice, an artistic voice, close by. 'Three people in a barge, three figures on a wall; title "A Mutual Estimate." Throw in the sun setting behind the trees on the island there, and you have—a canal effect.'

'Metropolitan, but rather sweet,' drawled the Cadet, with his elbows on the bulwark.

We were all leaning on the bulwark in more or less receptive attitudes, waiting for ideas of barge life to come along the bank. For London had already closed into itself, and might have been a hundred years away. And other barges passed, with the flitting hedges and the moving banks, but they were only shadows that grew real in a brief 'Good-night' to the helmsman aft, and disappeared, closing the darkness gently after them.

'Us, in generally, stops here; leastways when

we're going with the load.' It was the Bargee's face that shone over the bulwark with a tentative inquiry. 'Being Willesden, there's stabling for the 'orse, at least if *you* think proper!' The very facts themselves depended on our pleasure it appeared.

'Good idea. Let's stop somewhere for the night!' And it was delightful to tie up in the growing darkness to the bank, and see Brown Dob led off to find his corn.

There was still much to do before we could begin to take Barge life in earnest. There were the curtains to hang, Liberty curtains that had taken a whole day to choose, and 'dhurries' to be draped over the fresh-scented pine of the little cabins; and Liberty again in innumerable hangings to be arranged all round the bulwarks gracefully. And it all was a speciality and to be approached in a proper spirit of due deference to the originators of a Barge Idea—and they took us and it quite seriously! Fancy taking people seriously on a barge!

Perhaps it was because the Artist's shaded tie was so ceremoniously immaculate and that his

sketch-book was packed up in his Gladstone bag. Or, perhaps, the big cigar that the Cadet puffed solemnly engrossed too much of his attention. At any rate we began to feel that the masculine element had not yet assimilated with its new surroundings, and that the Liberty hangings were being draped under the blackness of the old tarpaulin almost too exactly as desired, and the 'dhurries' arranged æsthetically on either crosswise beam, with a vagrant corner half suggesting, half concealing the provision hampers, became altogether too politely overpowering. And perhaps, it may have been Miss Grove's Cambridge theories of a monarchy that were responsible for a slight straining of relations with the crew perceptible about this time.

The last fold of the last 'hanging' strayed negligently beneath the Cadet's too punctilious hammer, and he spoke collectedly and quietly, but he took the barge by storm.

'Now,' he said, 'you will excuse us, but we're going.' It was a commonplace remark.

We looked at the Cadet, with his broad shoulders and his polo cap askew, and the eyeglass

that never tumbled out, and he was inscrutable. So we surveyed the artist, our ephemeral guest, and gleaned nothing but a polite concurrence in his general attitude. Could they do nothing further for us? asked these special sentries of a Barge. No, then Good-night and pleasant dreams. And they straightway disappeared, *viâ* the cross-wise beam, and through a flap of the tarpaulin roof. For when the roof was up the only other exit was through the rudder cabin aft where the Bargees lived.

On board there fell a silence. The possessors, left in possession, were assimilating their sensations.

It was very quiet down there on the canal, despite the Willesden train that rattled by at intervals. The tarpaulin roof closed in the boat like the dense, black shadow of a starless sky. It might have been a subterranean cavern we were in, the cavern of some weird Sybarite fitted up for the luxurious leisure of Herculean strength.

'The Cadet,' quoth Girton, reminiscently, 'did that rather well; it was quite diplomatic for a man, it was even dignified.'

'It's easy to appreciate other people's behaviour, when you haven't been to bla—I mean involved in any way.'

'Well, we are both stranded on a barge in a canal at nine o'clock at night, whoever was involved,' responded Girton, not reproachfully. 'And there is not so much as a life-buoy between this and London, I suppose,' she added, with the resignation of the recipient of unprovoked ill-luck.

'Do you really think they will go back to town to-night?—not that it makes the slightest difference,' I added hastily. And small Albert, peeping round the cabin door before he was forcibly recalled and sent back to bed, seemed to find much to interest and instruct him in the appearance of two ladies talking science with serious demeanours in the deep well of a salt barge.

But the curtain hangings swayed a little where the flap of the tarpaulin had been left uncorded, and the lamps nailed to the beams cast flickering shadows that fell in grotesque quivering contortions to the dhurrie on the floor, and it was very quiet down there on the canal. Even the little

THEY DISAPPEARED THROUGH A TRAP IN THE TARPAULIN ROOF

cabin aft was quite still and silent, for our Bargees went to bed at sundown, as everybody should, and there seemed to be only the tarpaulin between us and the night sky and the dark deep water underneath. Suddenly, at the fore end, in the bows, there was a sound. It was a grating, furtive sort of sound, a scrabbling movement, as of contact. Heavy boots muffled clumsily, on the barge side, could it have been ?

'It's—it must be *something*,' murmured Girton, as we stared breathless into the tarpaulin shadows whence the ill-omened croak had come ; and there was nothing but the pat-pat-pit-pat of quickened pulses to reward one's listening.

'Shall we make a noise and frighten it ?' she whispered, rigidly.

'No ; don't frighten it ; it—it might fall into the canal.'

'There's your Turkish dagger,' tentatively. Edna always wore it thrust into her belt, and the blade was quite two inches long.

'It's only the Bargee looking to the moorings.'

'The Bargee has been asleep for the last two hours.'

'Perhaps it will go, anyway, if we kept still.'

Wherewith it came again.

We rose simultaneously.

Girton's face showed white in the dim half-light, and the place seemed like a haunted cave.

'Unhitch the lamp,' she whispered. 'Gently, we don't want to *disturb* it. I'm going to bed; *you* can stay here if you like!'

Now, our cabin being at the rudder end was the more removed from the Formlessness that seemed to have located itself on the forward ledge of the barge outside. With silent alacrity I unhitched the lamp and Edna laid her hand on the cabin door to open it. She did not turn the handle, because there wasn't one; neither did she lift the latch. The only fastening that this door had was a small wooden bolt inside, and—the door did not respond, it would not open, it remained a door, and shut. We looked each other blankly in the face as the sound came again. *It was coming*

through. Edna stood silhouetted in the semi-twilight of the flickering lamp beside the cabin door. 'Don't clutch,' she said, 'and hold that lamp straight for half a minute if you can; I'm going to say something. Next time we go bargeeing—make a note of it—extra supplies of nerves will considerably oblige; under present quantities we are not outfitted for so much incident.' She spoke in a sibilant whisper, and the loose flap overhead rolled slowly back upon itself, and in the sudden draught the lamp glimmered and went out.

'Hullo! what, are you up still, and in the dark?' It was our crew, those invaluable boys, who had thought better of it, and returned with a loyalty worthy of Bargees.

They came, primed with meteorological apologies of an amiable, if evanescent sort, and broke the trance of silence that the barge had undergone.

'It was as dark as a wolf's mouth outside,' they said, and they had had trouble in finding the canal at all.

'Had to climb a finger-post, and light a lucifer

to read it, at a place where four roads met just this side of Willesden. Thought you would have gone to bed, and we'd be bolted out.'

'You are not, but we are,' we responded, breezily. 'We have been wanting you. Albert was round here earlier, and must have slipped the bolt; the door won't open any way.' We did not breathe a word about the sound; we would have rather died.

Well, then, they must force the door. There was nothing easier, but——

'Hullo—what's that?' said the Cadet, with a startled air.

What was it? The sound, scraping in the bows again.

'That noise came before,' I said unconcernedly.

'Here, I say, who is there? What are you doing? Who the dickens are you?' The Cadet had a good deep pair of lungs and did not mind using them.

'All right, me son,' replied a gruff, hearty, wholesome voice from the far end outside. 'Us is only mooring up alongside you, and it's most too

dark to see the tackling lines; but us'ull not disturb ye.' . . .

'On the whole it is more satisfactory to have a man on board a vessel of this sort,' said Edna as she turned out the light, 'and I'm glad they didn't go back to London!'

CHAPTER III

THE light was coming into the pine cabin in red streaks where the boards joined with a scent of resin and fir woods. It had rained, battering the old tarpaulin in the night with impotent insistency, and yet there were pinholes all over it, tiny inquisitive specks that each had a different expression of sunlighted impertinence. Everything in this impromptu shanty had taken tone to match the

chinks, and everything was curiously picturesque. It had been picturesque to go to sleep wrapped up in a striped blanket on a dreaming barge, having first discoursed all ordinary common-sense into minutely ragged tassels. And I suppose that it was picturesque as the grey dawn was creeping up with a cold shiver over the canal that a muffled ghost should steal out silently and carry off the rugs and covers from the steamer chairs to supplement the blanket. It, perhaps, was picturesque, as two poor chilly ghosts were rejoicing in gradually returning warmth, and the sense of magnanimity that returning warmth ensures, that sudden midnight fowls should have attempted to dispel them before day broke—as ghosts of rank expect. Shrill exultations all round the horizon threatened us, screaming out uncouth warnings, and clamouring for our departure to the shades of Dis. And all the time these very cocks were misinformed on every Cochin China legend of their ancestors, for To-Day still hung shrouded in the veil of Yesterday, and, wrapped in its first soft misty sleep, did not intend to stir for any barnyard cock. But this was

such an unexpected form of canal vicissitude, it is hardly to be wondered that we did not go.

A tiny dimple twinkled about Edna's mouth as she watched the red chinks and the sun-motes coming through the roof, while overhead along the narrow gangway came a sound of trampling and the lazy stir of the morning waking up. The sister barge that had moored alongside in the darkness was bestirring itself too. It sent long ripples lapping as it crossed our bows, and the Bargee exchanged the time and weather with the old fidelity of custom, as it passed on with its load. The Bargee was taking off the awning, and standing just above, one could not help hearing what he said. It

THE BARGEE'S VISITOR

was a subdued conversation and touched intimate concerns. I have no business to retail it.

'What's a'boord then, sonny?'

'Pleasure boat, me son.'

'Onlikely cargo that.'

'Never seen the like this way afore and I've been eight and thirty year going up and down. Sleeps, why 'ud sleep till *suven* o'-the morning.'

'Edna,' I said suddenly, 'it's nigh on six by the very latest dandelion clocks. Do you want to sleep till *suven* o' the morning?'

Next, it was the Cadet outside forecasting breakfast with a certain hunger to the prophet on the roof. 'By the bye, if we were to keep a pig to run along the towing-path, could Mrs. Bargee cook him, do you think?'

'Law bless ye, sir, why she could cook anythink; her hasn't got a equal, not my missus!'

And yet another unseen voice from some more distant region and a lengthy consultation in a monotone. Only scraps and fragments float in through the chinks. There has been a serious oversight, and the fragments grow gloomily des-

pondent and call in the Bargee. There is no 'mirror' to be found. They seek for substitutes;

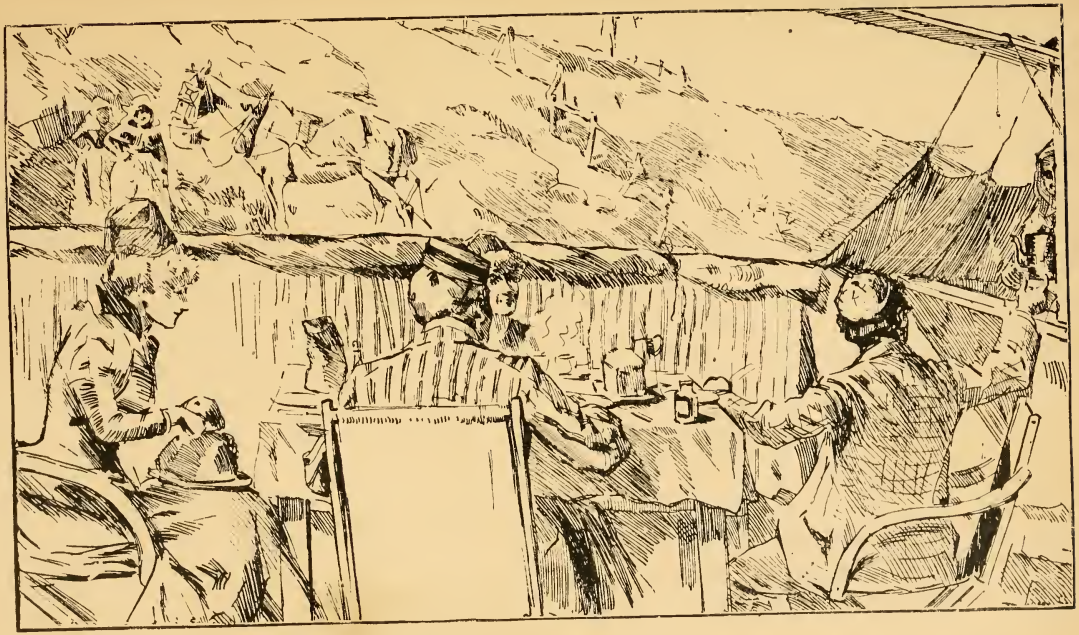
'SLEEPS! WHY, 'UD SLEEP TILL SUVEN O' THE MORNING'

but the cut glass of the sherbet tumbler refracts in a way that has been unknown to science until now.

Even the Bargee is hopelessly nonplused, for he only shaves, it appears, in answer to inquiries, when he goes 'on the purposely' to the nearest town. . . .

Breakfast in the middle of the barge might have served as an epitome of character for Mr. James, had he wished to study an illogical quartet.

Mrs. Bargee 'mashed' our tea, and she made it very good. To mash your tea is colloquial canal. We hadn't got a fire so we couldn't mash our own, but we bought a spirit-lamp at Rickmansworth, price one shilling, with a tin saucepan all attached for the special purpose, and the first time we used it it blew up. At least, it made such a conflagration as to discourage further efforts, so Mrs. Bargee mashed our tea, while he of artistic tendencies foraged for the milk, which presently arrived, in a paper bag and dripping at all the corners. Unluckily, the principal commodity that there was on board seemed just then to be sweet biscuits and Bath Chap. However, Mrs. Bargee lent us a great liberal cottage loaf, the consumption of which was considerably interrupted by the



MRS. BARGEE 'MASHED' OUR TEA

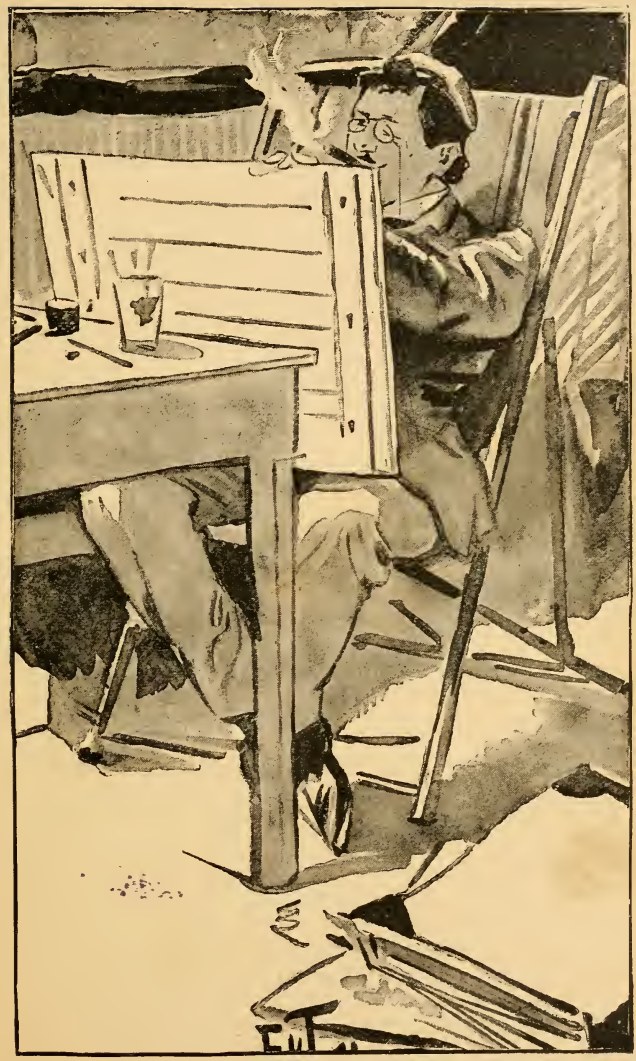
necessity we found not to miss the view. In this matter of provisions, we got them whenever we were hungry, and that usually chanced in some particularly lonely spot. That day, for breakfast I remember, there wasn't any sugar, but, then, the unexpected mushrooms! The Cadet's face was falling rather as he chivvied the air bubbles in the tablecloth with his hands full of spoons—he possessed a 'club,' you know, in the ordinary process of events —when Edna appeared upon the bank requesting to be taken in with a great bowl of them. Æsthetically creamy terra-cotta tinted things that we could all appreciate. She had got them in a daisy field and the dew was on them still.

But it was the solitary farms that stood back in their unkempt clover fields with their red poppies nodding on the breezy uplands that really fascinated us. We rifled their hen roosts—carrying off the new-laid eggs perilously in blazer pockets, where they hob-a-nobbed with Indian ink and dainty tubes of paint, while the ample mistress of farm produce, in her sun-bonnet and bib, looked on and cautioned recklessness with the concern of thrift.

Simple, fresh-complexioned people! Owners of wide barley fields and rickety old barns and sweet hay-scented byres, it was no wonder Girton suddenly discovered she had a genius for country life! For, once past the boundary of metropolitan indifference, with its puny self-centreing of all interest and concern, and out among the Bargee people on the brown canal, you come to a strong, independent mould of thinking that does not reason cavilling as we others do. Bargees are not affected by half the trifles that make such a clattering of tin patty-pans beyond the towing-path. In the first place, they have no land taxes, and that is something, anyway! And Mrs. Sunbonneted Farmmistress who lives by the canal, with her roomy chimney corner, and her apple orchard, and her yellow butter, and wide, flat bowls of milk, would no more let you go away without testing her abundance than she could deprive herself of the pleasure of her own broad smile as the Cadet informs her, standing in her dairy drinking it, that cream is his only weakness, and—sadly—we have *no* accommodation for a cow.

It was a halcyon way of taking life.

Our 'usually' attitude, as the Bargee would say, was an extreme content with idleness. Idleness in action, idleness at leisure. There was small apparent difference. Idleness in action perhaps may indicate the artist sketching, which was the very luxury of idleness. His drawing-boards and pencils strewed the narrow gangway with that air of negligence peculiar to artistic properties, and his feet dangled blissfully. He never made bad shots or began again. When he felt like it he sketched, and the sketch grew of itself. When he didn't feel like it he didn't sketch. Generally Mrs. Bargee steered, sometimes the Cadet. That was very idle; and we bumped against the bank. In fact, the only people who were really busy were Edna and myself, sitting on the yellow cabin watching Dob. I don't know why we called him Dob—his name was Tom; and he was known to the Bargees simply as 'the 'orse.' Perhaps it was that Eccles said he 'waddled more than the old mare.' But that hardly seems a reason. Mrs. Bargee reproved Eccles when he said it; she told him not to be



IDLENESS IN ACTION

'ondacent'—I should not have repeated it, perhaps.

So we left Uxbridge far behind, with its funny little streets and utterly uncomprehending air. It seemed to be holding on to a ragged corner of Nurse London's city cloak, and sucking a chubby sun-tanned finger, as if it didn't quite know what to make of all the baby brick-kilns standing round about it so perplexingly. And dawdling through the morning, we came after a long while to Rickmansworth. Another of those funny little centres, blistered, overgrown, and under-populated, that have been silted up high and dry between the railway and canal. Rickmansworth, however, has two stations, and you see its name on Great Western notice-boards. That was quite ridiculous, and the brown tracks flowed off on either side; one to nobody knows where, the other to everybody knows what sordid destination. But neither stayed a moment, needlessly, for fear of being overtaken of that continual procrastination winding in and out and round the little stranded centre, like the tangles of a first offence.

Here we shopped extensively. We bought provisions and a mirror, and a spirit-lamp and a pair of canvas shoes. Rather, we did not buy the shoes, for the Rickmansworthian foot seems of an excessive and unyielding similarity, and Mr. Squif entirely refused to cultivate a foot to fit the size. We, in turn, refused to have the mirror laid to a purely frivolous account in the Rickmansworthian estimate of womankind, and stopped outside an advanced tobacconist's—the only emporium for such articles of bijouterie in Rickmansworth—with a deprecatory unconsciousness of attitude.

About provisions, we didn't know precisely how much one could eat on board a barge, neither did we wish to appear ridiculously ignorant. So we told the little lady of the bread and butter shop to give us enough bread for four. She looked gravely out of her blue eyes and asked how many loaves we would like to take. We deliberated carefully. If you cut a two pound loaf into equal junks each junk would not be so very small; but then it wouldn't do not to have enough, consideringly. On the other hand we would on no

account anticipate our wants, we would provide only for immediate need. But—for one may as well confess it first as last—though we ate, and ate, and ate that bread for days, and Eccles helped us all he could, it got staler, staler, and more stale, till we thought it never would be done. The milk and butter quantities were very puzzling, too. 'Half a pound?' inquired she of the china eyes. 'Do you think that would be very much?'—Edna consulted her, suggestively. 'Two and three,' said she, with such complete irrelevance as seemed astonishing. Edna thought we should take a pound to be on the safe side—and would she kindly show us how much half a pint of milk would look?

We bought the most applicable little red stone jug to take the milk away in, and divided the loaves and butter and the buns into equitable portions that we carried with some pride. But it was very odd how Rickmansworth insisted, in the person of every worthy citizen we met, in regarding us as the wandering fractions of some harmless sort of joke.

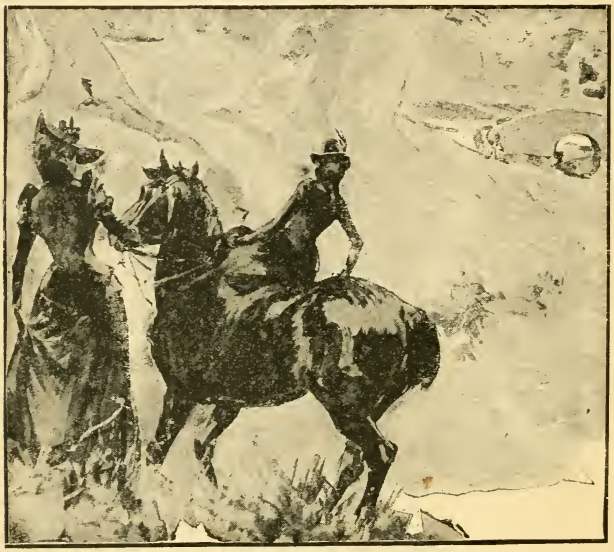
CHAPTER IV

WE found our canal lingering lovingly through Lady Keppel's park the third morning of our wanderings; and there we lingered too, where the big trees come up to the water's edge and dip their branches in, telling all the secrets that they know. It was pleasant idling through the shadows and among the 'applepie,' that half-submerged fringe to the meadow mantle. And the soft green light that came down into the water showed tiny brown minnows lurking and glinted with a sudden flash on their red fins, scattering in dismay as our dark reflection fell on them. The Cadet could not refrain from the expression of a sentiment.

'After all,' he said, 'it seems to me there is a modicum of bliss in this sort of thing, if you set your mind to it.'

We had come to Lady Keppel's acres through

'a many' locks. First a pound and then a lock, a lock and then a pound—'pound' being a canal definition of the level reaches that lie between the locks—and we had begun to feel like some sort of



THROUGH LADY KEPPEL'S PARK

accomplices in a very old book of the Arabian Nights. For these locks were, many of them, quaintly picturesque, with the quaintness that arises from an undisturbed possession of themselves. The lock-house never interferes. It stands

back into the scenery, and the flickering shadows of the damson orchards that have crept up from behind play hide-and-seek with it continually. The lock is merely a sort of fallow source of revenue that concerns nobody but us and the Bargee. We never saw a lock-keeper in that capacity, from the first gate to the last that we went through. But his house is overgrown with clematis and climbing pear, and he sits on the low sunny wall in front of it in a wide planter's hat, doing nothing all day long. He looks very happy and contented doing it, and the Bargee sturdily toiling at his windlass tells us that *his* ambition too is to own a lock. We agree with him that it is pleasant labour and not difficult. But we, by preference, would choose a lock that has a disused lobe, a sedge garden, sleeping by it. The one with the old ferry boat that lies all water-logged and grass-grown in the quiescence of decay.

Apart from a proprietorship, however, there are disadvantages about a lock. We smashed nearly all our remaining crockery in one. But then our cups and saucers came to grief on every

possible occasion. There seemed a sort of fate about it. Nearly every time Mr. Squif or the Cadet descended with any violence from the cabin roof to the crosswise beam, an array of 'crocks' would inevitably have been just balanced there. And this, in conjunction with a further career of having boiling afternoon tea on a most unsteady table during the processes of locks, had left us with a minimum of crockery that necessitated drinking it in tumblers, and decided us that on the whole it was considerably safer to begin with those upon the floor. It was the Cadet who finally insisted on this lowly situation. For in the excitement of the moment of a bump one instinctively held on to what came handiest, and the Cadet unfortunately had just held on to the red end of his cigar instead of the damp and luscious one as he grasped at the spirit-kettle—which had been nearest him.

And we, lingering, floated away from Lady Keppel's park and through the wooded country that lay on its other side, and under dainty little bridges through which our canal wound on. These little round stone bridges, where Eccles halloed and

chanted to make the echoes answer him, were our Academician's happiness and pain. He despaired for them. They were such self-conscious pictures; they even framed themselves—in smooth dark reflections that semicircled underneath till it was hard to say where the reality began and the shadow ended. And sometimes a mediæval barge would shelter in their shadow—the 'Shannon' or the 'March,' full of yellow bricks or dusky tiles, watched over by some old sunburned bargee as taciturn as they.

These other barges that we passed filled us with admiration for our small boy, Eccles, and with emulation of the canal dwellers themselves. In the first place, passing by at all seemed an inextricable proceeding when the relative towing lines had once got into an X, fastened at every end by either a Dobbin or a barge. Until, exactly in the nick of time, Dob and Albert would slack their line into the water, while the other barge passed over it, and the other horse stepped gingerly across it, and we each passed on as though this thing had never been.

As to the emulation they aroused, one barge in particular struck this note in us as we crossed lines with it. It was being drawn by a gipsy girl. Rather, a bargee girl with a gipsy face, and a red kerchief on her head, and whose brown donkey browsed along beside her like a patient Familiar waiting for his turn. It had a Neapolitan effect that we envied her. In fact, we attempted it ourselves, but our disadvantages outbalanced the effect. For the dear Bargee was quite distressed, and our Crew would offer foolish help as it smoked its cigarettes in two supercilious little spiral wreaths of blissful satire. And then Dob wouldn't follow us, he only stood regarding the performance with a quite peculiar expression, half resentfully. . . .

I am sorry to accuse him of it, but I am afraid there are no extenuating circumstances—the Cadet was mathematical. It was borne in on us persistently, and yet was a continual surprise on this vessel of illogical development. His interest in locks was a most suspicious circumstance; it had no connection with the dusky tints of the old stones and the subdued tone of the mosses. His analysis

chanted to concerned itself with the weight of cubic feet of water and the immutable laws of leverage. I am afraid there is no possibility of screening Talbot from the inevitable deduction—he was not illogical. He grew restless when one talked of mosses, or Mr. Squif and Edna began discussing Art. He inspired the beholder with a secret horrible conviction that he comprehended vulgar fractions, and that he would even wish to be conversant with the rule of three whenever the National Gallery was mentioned or the Salon seemed impending. For Mr. Squif and Edna talked a good deal of Art. They raved of colour and of colourists from Whistler and Duran to Titian; they ranged the painter's globe discoursing—what I cannot tell; but *that* boldly dominating whole designs, and which was broad, or *chic*, or fine, as enthusiasm seemed to prompt. . . .

Mr. Squif was sketching as we crept on our noiseless errand under the overhanging boughs in Lady Keppel's park, idly toying with the balances of happiness in our accustomed attitudes. And already Velasquez had begun to charge the conversational atmosphere, with the usual result. The

Cadet became inscrutable—he always did on these occasions. He retired, as it were, behind his eyeglass. This eyeglass might at times have been a crystal shutter through which he himself could see, yet nobody outside see him. The Cadet interested Edna. His polo cap was striped of such decisive colours, red and white, and he wore it always the same way, a measured inch over his left eye. All his possessions were immaculate, and the eyeglass never tumbled out. He always acted as she knew he would, and yet he was a continual surprise.

Talbot's information, also, was always ready and to hand. Just then he began exhaustively to explain to me the whole construction and theory of a lock, and I found it most instructive. The lock *par exemple* of the moment had two miniature swimming baths attached, and the Cadet knew why the water bubbled up in one and boiled down in the other with no apparent sequence of results. He told me how it is that only half the water is wasted every time a boat goes through a lock instead of all of it—and I didn't understand. It appeared to me unnatural that in a course of years the canal

did not run dry since it was not circular, and the locks all ran out towards the same direction. The Cadet was not explicit on the point. He suddenly remembered he ought to write a letter. Then Edna turned to remonstrate. Here had we broken with the Nineteenth Century—the Bargee might have been Gabriel himself come down to rescue us—what had we to do with wandering letter boys or weekly newspapers? We knew no such innovations. We would not be linked to them by so much as a perforated change of postage stamps. But as he persisted, we fell to wondering vaguely what he would do with his epistle when he had finished it, and watched him unhitch his pencil from his chain with a curious sense of interest.

'By the bye,' said he, 'I suppose this craft has got a name?' And he poised his pencil on his finger like a little gold exclamation mark.

Edna looked at me and her eyes laughed naughtily, for this was a subject we had carefully avoided.

'It is a barge,' she said; 'what would you have more?'

'I believe the name,' our artist murmured, putting in the tassel of her cap abstractedly, 'is very nearly painted out.'

Whereupon the Cadet consulted Mrs. Bargee at the tiller with some determination, for there are things one must not trifle with even on a barge, and Fact is one of them. From our *al fresco* drawing-room the Cadet only had to crane his neck and speak a little louder to get Mrs. Bargee's smiling sun-bonnet to an answering focus from her post beside the tiller.

We consulted Mrs. Bargee on every possible occasion. She couldn't tell us much of the villages we passed, and neither she nor the Bargee knew anything of those that stood even a stone's throw inland, but she gave us a great deal of extraneous information. She didn't 'skamble,' ever; when her day's work was done she got the Bargee's supper and taught Albert his lettering. She never troubled about the places that they passed, 'cept to get her bit of marketing, and that was always the same road. Once she went a journey, it was when they took the boat to Oxford. 'It's what us calls a

MRS. BARGEE

river there,' you understand. But she never wanted to go that way no more, there was very dang'rous places in what us calls a river, and she was skeered to death for fear Eccles should fall in—'King Eccles us calls him – me little soon, you know. Dookie, what are you about? *Ah*! ye naughty boy, why can't ye let it be?' The day the message came from Mr. Corbett that they was to be ready to let us have the boat, first Mr. Fox, he sent for the Bargee, and they couldn't think what they could have done. They thought 'twas something dreadful was the matter, that they did. But *they* never seen such a turn-out not in this canal afore as 'we is now.' She'd a little gurl —talk about a pretty little gurl!—and she was at school down along the Wall Docks, but when she heard about this job she did wish as she could come. . . . No, she didn't know much about the places on the bank, but she daresay Dad would know.' And a shrill scream of, 'Dad, they wants to know!' was a signal that always brought the Bargee, radiant, and primed with tangled information, from his pacing after Dob along

the towing-path. And as we tell him what it is we want to know, his face is like the opening of a water-gate when the canal first begins to drip in gently at the chinks. That was Girton's simile—it is pretty, isn't it?

'Mrs. Bargee, what is our canal boat's name?' inquired the Cadet, in a suave tone of partnership that became him very well. If the Cadet had said 'barge' and not 'canal boat,' Mrs. Bargee's feelings would have suffered an indignity. As it was she paused, looking at him dubiously. 'And you been all this time and not know *that*,' she said. 'Why us be the "*Industrious*" of course.'

Again we felt obliged to remonstrate with the Cadet. He should not, at least, present us to the Nineteenth Century in a pseudo-halo that we could by no possibility retain. If he insisted on a definite delineation and address, he, at any rate, must not reflect upon the divination of the Muse who selected us and it. And a heavy lock gate swinging to behind us, the barge heaved gently upward in its untrammelled course, knocking, rocking, unhampered, unrestrained, as the kelpies

rushed and tumbled where the water was at play.

'"In a lock"'—wrote Talbot, reading his address. 'Is that too definite?—"A barge." "Three days out of London." "Time, date, and century lost or problematical." "England."' If anyone had got a compass he could give it more exactly, he parenthesized regretfully. For the tiny thing inside his watch had not been corrected by a magnetic variation, and might not be accurate, and if the Cadet could not be immaculate he would not be at all. So Mr. Squif made a picture of his present habitation under the address, to elucidate the matter. . . .

Then we had to look for a pillar-box to post the letter in. But we did not find even the illusion of a postman's knock among the 'old man's beard' and bryony and the trailing sweetness of those country lanes. After all, the Nineteenth Century was so far off and so very long ago it really didn't matter, and we fell to playing 'soldiers' with wiry plantain stalks, till a small boy, a very small boy, who might have just come out of a Kate Green-

away canvas, pointing with a grubby, unsophisticated forefinger, told us King's Langley was up there. Up there we went; it was a long, straight road with wide grass on either side, and it proved the boy was right—at least, if you may believe a finger-post that bore also this inscription, 'London, eighteen miles.' *Eighteen miles!* After travelling for three days in all the simple artlessness of complete rusticity. Thus is the modern letter vilified.

But fate having brought us to King's Langley, the city of a Liliputian street, we paid the homage due at the shrine of local precedent. The dapper little hostelry that stands by an iconoclastic finger-post to console the disillusionised wayfarer opened hospitable doors to us through a tiny green verandah, and we were consoled—with mutton and green beans. *Madame*—when mutton belongs to a past century and green beans are a hallucination of it too, one does not forget these things so easily. Neither is it permitted every day to dine at noon in a tiny parlour, with its window darkened by geraniums, and where an amiably fantastic person

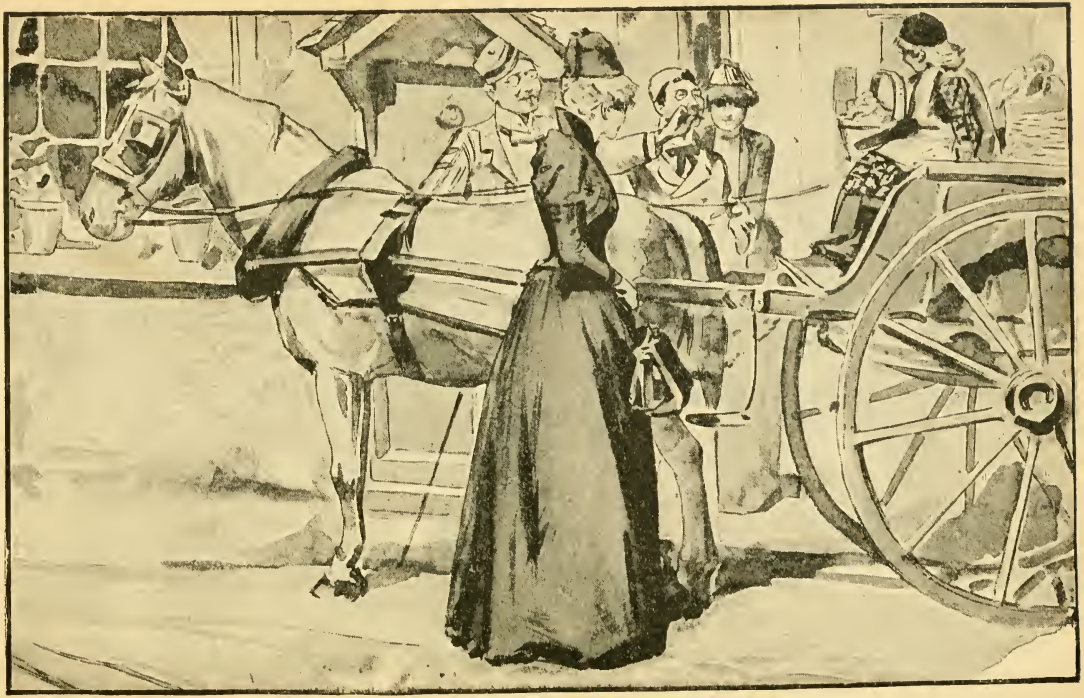
in a lace collar and dress-coat pirouettes in a post of honour on the wall. And let me tell you that Lord Broughton, even pirouetting, is an elevating member of any party in a country inn, and more so should he happen to be *tête-à-tête* with a William the King trampling on a charger to the throne. Though the Cadet did insist that this beruffled gentleman, John Broughton known to fame, was a champion prize-fighter and no Prime Minister at all, there was no mistaking kingly William pirouetting jauntily, yet with a certain pseudo-stateliness, to the rhythm of the old piano, that flooded in long cadences from Edna's head into her fingers and out into the shabby little room.

The commercial traffic of King's Langley would seem to consist of a baker's cart waiting for the baker. It behoved us therefore to regard this vehicle with respectful interest. And, regarding it through the medium of the Cadet's eyeglass, its municipal significance gradually faded and left nothing with us but a yearning—a yearning for more substantial reminiscences of the warm fragrance that pervaded it.

'Polly!' quoth the Artist, interpreting, 'we want a loaf of bread.'

The small mite in charge of the commercial interests of the town arranged herself artistically on the driving-box, settling her small skirts with an air of knowing more than *that*!

'Grab it—and run—before the baker comes,' drawled he of the crystal optic, focussing a particularly big, well-baked magnate of the oven in a manner most suggestive of the opportunity. But we did not feel capable of subjecting the digestion of King's Langley to such an act of violence after its behaviour in the matter of the beans. We discoursed the baker's representative in a spirit of sweet reason. We told her we had come from a Noah's Ark, and when we got back we should have no bread for tea. We described the situation feelingly, thinking that it would appeal to her. Instead, the small imp giggled. We asked with some severity if all the loaves were 'ordered,' if they were already destined to special customers? And the small imp bubbled over. It bubbled, and forcibly restrained itself; it fizzed



FOUR PEOPLE BUBBLING ALL FOR NOTHING ROUND A LITTLE IMP

internally, and then suddenly exploded—till the circle, applicant, around the baker's cart became infected; and, having once begun to bubble, bubbled out of very sympathy of foolishness. So that King's Langley hobbled to its doors inquiringly —a plastic wide inquiry that involuntarily began to bubble too, to see four people bubbling all for nothing round a little imp in a baker's cart.

CHAPTER V

WE always anchored for the night, just as the summer twilight kissed all the country gravely, and the sky drooped, and the meadows fell asleep. It is an evening light that comes back to me the oftenest in writing this. And when the shadows of the poplars stood sharp and cool, and the seven stars of the Waggon showed in the dark, still water where the barge lay moored, even the Cadet sometimes forgot to talk in parallelograms. When the Japanese umbrella made night fantastic about it, and the fairy lamps hung in their own pale light under the dark skyline of the gangway, the artist developed troubadour effects. He whistled from the opera, softly, to lilting castanets; or he would produce a mandoline and play, like the gondolier on a porcelain vase—purely for artistic reasons!

It was in the half-light that we crept up from the canal, and out into the quiet country where the landscape slowly faded and the cornfields rustled, dreaming of the idyll the night air whispered as it passed. Like thieves we stole silently among the hedges and the darkening trees, and came sometimes only to a moonrise beyond a distant stile, and sometimes to a village belated in the fields.

So we found Stoke Brewin, with its low-roofed cottages among its grass-grown roads. A tiny old village, with its lonely churchyard sloping on the hill and the wishing-gate ajar beyond, where the path leads towards the sunset over the wide fields. Vibrations from those years that one only remembers dimly nestle under the wide eaves where the swallows build, and nothing matters any more to the village gaffers smoking on the bridge, and no one goes up to the wishing-gate. The gaffers gossip all they 'mind them.' Till the summer night comes down and warns them of a creeping 'rheumatiz,' and they get stiffly off the round stone wall, and knock the ashes from the long white pipes, and totter off together. They have not learnt that

smocks are out of date, and they touch their forelocks as we pass.

And the wishing-gate swings gently, with the sunset in its bars. And Edna, with her elbow on the topmost rail, made no response to the Cadet, who found Stoke Brewin just what he would have expected it to be if he had been told it was an ordinary little English hamlet in a midland county.

'It's a mistake, you know,' he added, confident; 'people shouldn't be allowed to rust and demoralise the educational tendency down here in the provinces. They ought to be obliged to hitch on to the county centres by Act of Parliament.'

'Hitch their waggons to the Polar system of an Uxbridge or a Rickmansworth!' quoth Mr. Squif, studying the old grey tower of the little church.

But she only wrapped her long cloak more about her and put the other elbow on the meadow gate that the sun had kissed. And presently I think the Cadet must have retracted that utilitarian sentiment of his, for he was arguing the advantages of three acres and a cow in a way known only to the logical.

Well, then, there was Berkhampstead. Berkhampstead reclining its lank self away inland, but staying for a little space on the side of the canal to dabble its white stones. The lamps were being lighted in the darkening streets. There are fewer lamps to be lighted in the High Street of Berkhampstead than in any town of its importance I have ever seen. For, according to the cutler, who told us the annals of the place, on Berkhampstead has depended the historical importance of the British Empire from the time when St. Paul visited it and drove thunderstorms and serpents out of it for ever to the present year of grace. I can't say that personally we met either the one or the other in its forbidden precincts, but the cutler went on to King Wihthraede, and that was just 697 years, when Edna asked him if *he* ever had. He gave us a great deal of interesting information, this historic cutler, as we stood among the tinware in his tiny shop. He told us how William of Hastings came here to be crowned after the battle of Normandy, and that Chaucer the poet was his private secretary at the time, and wrote the account of the proceed-

ings by which we are informed. And he told us of the moss-grown well beside the path in what was Mr. Cooper's garden, now the Rectory well, beside the Rectory tennis-court.

'Some calls him Mr. Cowper, I have heard,' he added, leniently; 'but we addresses Mr. Cooper here, and *we* ought to know, I think.'

Talbot and Mr. Squif seemed to find an inexplicable fascination every now and then in the passers-by outside throughout this conversation, and at last disappeared entirely. So Edna and I wandered up to the old Castle grounds alone. The moat was grown up with reeds, and trees had clustered on the great protecting dyke, and there was nothing left to mark where the courtyard stood. Here and there a fragment of grey masonry showed luminous in the dark circle of the trees.

'Do you feel superstitious?' said Edna, putting her hand into my arm.

'Not if it is an unpleasant sensation,' I answered introspectively.

We were walking up and down among the gnarled roots of the aspens on the huge earthworks

above the moat, and a little pool of water down there gleamed like a steel scabbard in a dark recess.

'Do you know what I've been thinking?' she went on presently. 'I think it was very good of Mr. Grove to come.'

'Yes,' I said; and a white owl hooted in the moonlight as its great silent wings almost brushed our faces; 'he is a splendid chaperon.'

'You are realistic!' said Girton, with a touch of coldness.

'No, I'm not! And I quite agree with you. You know very well what I think of the Cadet. I'd trust him—to be completely logical—in the greatest emergency, as in the most exasperating trifle.'

'At any rate, you are remarkably definite,' said Girton. 'I can't say I have epitomised this logic that you talk so much about to the extent of making it account——'

'No,' I said, 'it doesn't. Talbot's a good fellow—a dear old chap—and we've been chums from the time that we were six.'

'Come,' said Edna, suddenly assuming her

most ordinary tone of voice, 'do you know this place is *haunted* and the sun's quite gone? We shall be meeting the awful black goat that the lord of Berkhampstead met. It was Earl Moreton in those days, you know, and he was walking slowly up and down this very terrace thinking. He didn't know that Rufus had been shot straight through the heart with an arrow in the New Forest that identical afternoon, till suddenly—he was face to face with a great black goat. It was carrying the body of King Rufus, all black and ghastly and horrible. And the lord of Berkhampstead fell on his knees in front of it, and adjured it by the Holy Trinity to tell him what it meant—but the black goat passed on into the shadows.'

'I am glad you didn't say "into the shadows of these very trees,"' I commented, 'because in the days of the black goat the terrace was a castle wall, and had no trees on it. Is the cutler responsible for the blood-curdling tale?'

'No,' said Edna. 'Chaucer told it me himself when he was private secretary to the Conqueror after the battle of Normandy—it must have been

Chauncey whom he meant was his authority, poor dear!'

THE AWFUL BLACK GOAT

'Oh! if you come to that,' I said, 'Chaucer *was* clerk of the works at Berkhampstead—in Richard the Second's time.' . . .

'Leighton Buzzard it 'ull be to-night,' said Mrs. Bargee next day. 'It's a good stoppin' place is Leighton, and there's fodder for the 'orse.' But Mrs. Bargee was flustered as she stated this as a predetermined fact. If she had not been flustered she would immediately have added, 'leastways, in the best of our endeavours it will be Leighton Buzzard.' Perhaps that was an added reason for our not finding ourselves at Leighton when the evening came. Here, however, it is necessary to begin at the beginning. I had just received a telegram—wasn't that enough to fluster anyone? —a telegram requiring a whole barge family to assist at its delivery. I had never received a telegram so instinct with nerves before, and, as I tore the yellow envelope across, it was like an electrified anticipation point in the respiratory organ of a colony. I read out the missive slowly and impressively:—

'Will look in with pleasure. Meet us at station, if you can.—ESSINGTON.'

General and Mrs. Essington! Our flutter of anticipation rivalled the Bargee's. That telegram

was like one of the delightful surprise-packets of one's youth, full of sweets with caraways inside.

'What can we offer them to eat out of?' It

I READ OUT THE MISSIVE SLOWLY AND IMPRESSIVELY

was the housewife's comment, and Edna and I made it simultaneously.

'What can we offer them to eat? that's much more to the point,' the Cadet and the R.A. ejaculated, also simultaneously.

It had never occurred to the Cadet to mention his invitation to the barge in general. Our invitation, I should say, in that we appropriated it at once with pardonable piracy, for of course this consummation was in reply to the letter, which you may possibly remember, we posted at King's Langley. The Cadet's ideas were so large. It had never occurred to him to announce that he had told the Essingtons we should be here, not far from Tring, sometime this afternoon, and that he had promised we would wait for a reply, a personal reply, he hoped. Now the only trouble attendant on this was that our tea-drinking facilities, as I have already told you, at present consisted principally of wine-glasses and saucers; and our provisions when set out for critical inspection seemed more than usually disconnected in appearance.

'Menu!' quoth the Artist, jotting off the items on his fingers daintily. 'Afternoon tea for six, two of them hungry travellers. Item, one teapot and tea, complete; one bag of peanuts'—these Mr. Grove wishes it clearly understood he considers 'low'—and eats immoderately. 'Item, one leg of

a fowl—in parenthesis, I don't want to be rude—an aged one. Items, several bottles of Apollinaris, one milk jug—empty, one butter dish, ditto. Anything to come? Ah, yes, three wine-glasses, two saucers, and a cup!'

Theref re we went up to Tring at once. It was market day, and where the pavement widened, as it did here and there in the principal street of the village, the stalls stood temptingly. A large proportion of the goods were laid out on the ground, and the sellers thereof vociferated of their wares with an aggrieved expression of countenance when we passed them by. Naturally everything was very dusty, particularly the greengrocery; but we got some quite artistic cups and saucers in this village fair. They were blue and white, of a cottage shape, and most appropriate. The demoiselle of the china spread—truth prevents my calling this fair Hebrew's domain a stall—possessed the most fascinating back breadth, Girton said, that she had ever seen. Her front breadth did not inspire us at all, but her demi-train of gorgeous flowery brocade, and the remarkable adroitness with which she

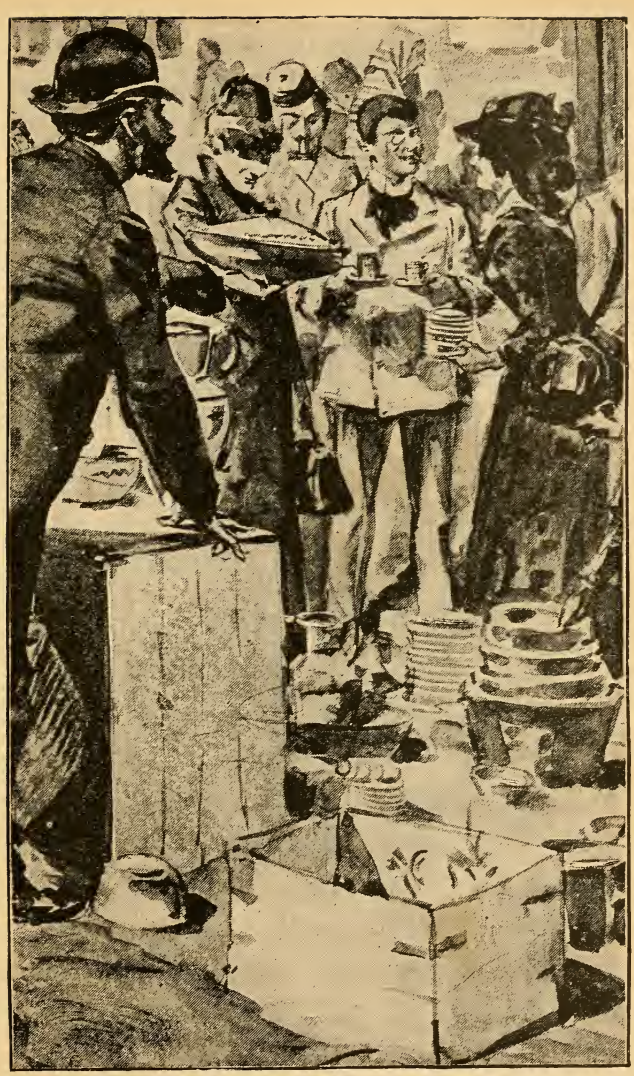
continually gave us the full benefit of it, must, I think, at least have trebled the value of that china set. We were still lost in admiration of it when of a sudden a cab rattled down the village street, and the Essingtons had passed us, unrecognisingly, and were careering away with a good two miles before them in which to out-distance us. They would arrive to find an empty barge. We looked at each other, the four of us, with outraged hospitality written in each attitude.

'Clu-uck!' ejaculated the Artist—an ejaculation that with him denoted any unusual sentiment.

'Couldn't we throw stones to attract their attention somehow?' suggested Girton distractedly.

'Nonsense. They are stopping now, and I could catch them easily,' said the Cadet, looking at her inquiringly. 'But Mrs. Bargee would explain to them in any case.'

'Oh! catch them by all means,' she said. The cab had pulled up at the other end of the long street, and General Essington was getting joys for us again, this time at a confectioner's. The Cadet dashed off to catch up with the stationary



WE GOT SOME QUITE ARTISTIC CUPS AND SAUCERS IN THIS VILLAGE FAIR

cab, and we watched him as he raised his cap to Mrs. Essington, and explained his sudden presence there. The next thing we saw at the far end of the street was a quick, careless vehicle, and the frightened flutter of a white childish pinafore, and the Cadet's sudden dash, and then a sort of squirm and a red-striped polo blazer lying in the middle of the road. And then Mrs. Essington was springing from her cab, and the General had rushed out of the confectioner's, with the pie he had been purchasing caught up in his hand. But Talbot wasn't killed. He had saved the child, and the eyeglass was still blandly in his eye. But his foot was badly crushed, and he was faint as they ensconced him in the cab.

'And this,' he added ruefully, 'is the way that we receive you, Mrs. Essington!'

But the General wouldn't hear of trapsing off, as he expressed it, now to the canal with our V. C. candidate. And the child who had, through Talbot's intervention, so narrowly escaped with its worthless little life, a dirty lint-haired ragamuffin belonging to the fair, stood by on the pavement

watching unconcernedly as we bandaged his crushed foot as well as we were able with embroidered pocket-handkerchiefs. An ungrateful little ragamuffin! It went into fits of laughter as Talbot winced, turning very white when the General ripped his boot, though his only idea was to apologise to Mrs. Essington for having frightened her. And then the General carried us all off to dine at the best hotel. And in spite of our adventures it was a merry dinner at the best hotel!—in the society, at the other end of the room, of the Vet., a nice clean butcher in a smock, the chemist, and the proprietor—and at which the unaccustomed luxuries of gas, and fish-knives, and elaborately folded serviettes, roused in us an enthusiasm that so tickled Mrs. Essington she straightway declared herself a wandering bargee also—for the sake of the sensation. But the Cadet was more hurt than he would allow, and our cheery pseudo-visitors, impressing the necessity of rest and arnica, insisted that they wouldn't let him speak another word, and we said 'good-night' upon the doorstep and they drove away.

The barge, as luck would have it, had gone on, and was moored *somewhere* down there among the meadows. But it had grown quite dark, and we couldn't find it for some time as we limped along

THE SOCIETY AT THE OTHER END OF THE ROOM

with sympathetic footfalls nervously through a pitch-dark lane, Talbot leaning on Mr. Squif's arm, and Edna and I wrapped up in one enormous cloak. It was like a sudden beacon in the night

when the Bargee, hearing voices, threw open the cabin door, and the warm light streamed out and showed the weird ark on the silent water, and

MORE OF THE SOCIETY

kindled all the kindness in our own Noah's rugged face as he commented at intervals, with his eyes on the Cadet, 'Well, well, well! to think of that!—and him starting out so well!'

CHAPTER VI

'QUILL,' came a faint, far-off wail to me, shivering by the rudder.

And again—'Quill!'

'What *are* you doing, and what *is* happening?'

'And so he give a screech and run inter his hole,' I responded lucidly. 'Why don't you come up and see? It's two miles long and black as pitch.'

'Shall we go through alone?' came the voice, reluctantly.

'We are going through like the centre carriage in a train, and before and behind us are barges, each linked to the next one following. At this moment we are waiting outside the tunnel between high banks covered with sparse, stunted firs. The mist is deep on the canal, and beyond the sun is rising. It's rather pretty—you'd better come up yourself.'

'Do they say it's—dangerous?' came the voice as though desirous to face the worst at once.

'The average of accidents is high for a single tunnel. But the "black water" is always hungry. A single slip on a greasy board, or a false step in the darkness, and "the water will swallow you." And nobody knows if you are in or out. Not that it would do much good if they did, for the tug goes forging on, and the barges cannot stop, and the darkness is intense.'

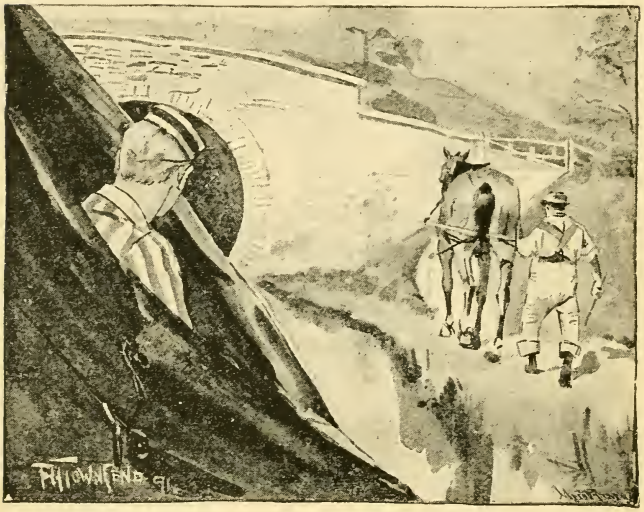
'*Blis*worth,' shuddered the voice, almost involuntarily, it seemed.

'Mr. Bargee,' I remarked, by way of reassurance, 'has departed overland to escort "the 'orse," but Mrs. Bargee is with us. She is not much "in-customed," she tells me, to piloting through the tunnel, for she in-generally goes on with Dob, "ordinary like." But Mr. Bargee thought it "wouldn't be jest what we might consider seemin'ly correc'" on this occasion; and she *thinks* that she can steer us through. You know the place is haunted, I suppose?'

'Do you mean as you've heerd tell of *They*?' It was Mrs. Bargee standing at my elbow with a

huge cup of steaming tea she had been preparing with the kindly forethought we had grown accustomed to depend on, unsolicited.

'You ain't never seen One—real like?' she questioned, in a low, suppressed voice that startled



'MR. BARGEE HAS DEPARTED OVERLAND'

me in its intensity. It was cold as we stood there by the rudder, waiting in the long line of barges before the circular mouth of the tunnel, and her hand trembled as she proffered me the homely cup of tea.

'You ain't never *seen* a haunter?' she insisted, fearfully.

'I have never been through Blisworth,' I answered carelessly. But at that moment someone beckoned—or so it seemed to me. And, suddenly, the little steamer shrieked and rushed into the darkness, dragging us behind it.

We were in a black, domed passage, and it was deathly still; in all that string of barges no one spoke or moved. The gloom of the place encircled us. An indefinable Presence moved with us in the blackness. The nearness of the damp stones impressed itself upon the eyes and played fantastic tricks with the imagination. Every sense became distorted, unnaturally acute; the silence was appalling. The story the Bargee had told us of the great White Spectre, boding evil to the boatman whenever it appears, came back to me with a meaning and a terror that yesterday had seemed impossible. 'Ye jest slips yer foot, or overbalances, and the black water swallows ye.' A vision of a barge, like this one I was on, engrossed all my attention. It was covered up, as ours was, with tar-

paulin, to keep the cargo dry; but two boards, small, mean boards—'wings,' the Bargee had called them—had been placed far out over the cruel water on either side of it. They were narrow, unprotected, slippery boards, and on one of them a little, clinging, frightened boy was lying on his back 'legging' the boat along, with nothing to prevent his slipping off the plank but a hand twisted under him and grasping it. It was the first time he had done it, and he was 'well-nigh skeered.' 'For his father seen it,' the Bargee had said, 'only the day afore, and so then *he* slipped, and the black water swallowed he.'

A cold, dank drop fell on my forehead, and I looked up quickly; we were under a glistening spire with the mists of the upper world entangled round its top. Then all grew dark again. The water became phosphorescent, and the air was stifling, the steamer exhausted it before it got to us. The sudden scr-r-r-ch of a match, struck close beside me, almost overbalanced me; there was so little margin even for a start where the edge of the barge merged in the outer darkness. Mrs.

Bargee grasped my arm, and the red end of the half-burnt match dropped with a fizz in the water. 'Ye see'd It!' she ejaculated, and her voice rang harshly, striking on the stones.

'Light our lamp,' I said sharply, for her foolish superstitions irritated me. But the words took to themselves echoes—'*our* lamp'—'*our* lamp,' like a sort of ghostly requiem that went from barge to barge, rolling and reverberating through the blackness of the corridor.

'Unkid! it *be* unkid,' whispered Mrs. Bargee, as the tiny colzine burner cast a glimmer murkily, which was repeated here and there in a lurid interval along the shadowy chain of boats that had obeyed the echo. 'Unkid—like afore a storm. Miss——' and her voice sank so low I could scarcely catch the words, ''twere just here——'

'You've got my slippers on!' shot up a sudden and indignant protest from regions under the tarpaulin roof. But I could not instantly reply, for Mrs. Bargee was reposing in my arms and gasping, 'It's the Haunter!'

It was like coming from Pandemonium to

perfect peace to issue out into the sunshine from the black mouth of that tunnel. For, meanwhile, the sun had risen, and the air was full of the freshness and exhilaration that breathe when the day is new. It was a dainty sight, as the long parti-coloured barges broke away and spread over the wide basin formed by the wooded banks, and fraught with that gentle luxuriance that only comes after storm. And the R.A., sauntering up, cool, and fresh, and clean, and radiant in his snowy tie, for once agreed with me thoroughly and satisfactorily; and we went amiably together to beg roses from a dewy garden situated on a promontory of the conclusive name of Northampton Amen.

'There was somebody inquiring for you down at Fenny Lock yesterday when I come through,' said a tall brown bargee—'a stranger-man'—accosting the roses principally, as we came back to the barge. Our *al fresco* housekeeping evidently interested him, for the Bargee had carried out instructions, and had taken 'the roof off early.' It was only the roses, however, that he couldn't dismiss from the tunnel in his mind entirely satis-

'THERE WAS SOMEBODY INQUIRING FOR YOU DOWN AT FENNY LOCK YESTERDAY'

factorily as one of the vagaries of four unemployed —because at six o'clock in the morning they seemed to him superfluous. 'Somebody inquiring for us?' We found the stranger-man of surpassing interest. 'What sort of a somebody?' But the stranger-man was entirely preoccupied with the Cadet's bandaged foot that had just limped into the saloon, and beside which we were standing. 'He were down at Fenny Lock,' was the extent of the information the combined efforts of the crew could extract from him, even under the influence of coffee and gingerbread, during the disposal of which he told us, 'Yes, that Elisworth war about the worst of the steamer tunnels, but nothink by comparison with Crick and they, sooch as ye've got to leg.' And, 'Oh! yes,' 'twas a pleasant enough life in summer, but in winter ——Well, he would thank us very kindly, and he *hoped* we'd have good weather for our pleasuring.

Twice again that morning we got messages from Somebody, delivered by passing barges, and our curiosity waxed great. At intervals, in a generally experimental attempt on the part of the

entire crew to tie Talbot's foot up scientifically in accordance with the Ambulance ideas that we all had in embryo our theories about Somebody ranged widely from brigands to the Tax Collector, and back again to brigands. Perhaps he was only a Doctor! But the Cadet entirely refused to be a doctor's object. An Esmark triangular bandage he had no objection to, but lace-edged handkerchiefs and 'lotions' and the 'most comfortable chair' he avoided with a persistency only equalled in the number of times he sat in it by mistake. And such is the contrariety of the military mind, which cannot 'see much in Howells,' that though he read 'The Lady of Aroostook' aloud for several hours, nobody was bored. But then it is true that Somebody occasionally intervened between the sentences.

CHAPTER VII

WE were blacking our boots. The Cadet's foot was better, but still he couldn't use it much, and this was one of our ideas for keeping him amused! Now, the blacking of boots, as you will find if you experiment, is conversationally a most elaborating process, a sort of running commentary on the subject in hand, full of parentheses and mazes of expression—of a glacial nature. We found it a

most interesting and intellectual occupation, for the Cadet meanwhile was expatiating on the tariffs of barge life to a bargee.

'Would you like to know,' he said, 'what an ordinary bargee's wages are?' and he dabbed a smudge of blacking with minute attention to detail on the point of the topmost button of the slipper in his hand.

'Well, whatever his wages are, I think he'll have to raise them if we often indulge in his blacking,' responded Mr. Squif, focussing the last effect of polish on his artistic toe with half-closed eyes over the back of the blacking brush.

'A bargee,' said Edna, maliciously, stippling off the items on the long strap of the sandal she was blacking, 'earns from thirty to thirty-five shillings a week. . . It has been calculated that upon an average he spends six of these in beer. . . The repairs necessary every year from the wear and tear to his boat cost him about eleven pounds. . . . But last year the caulking and tarring of ours cost thirty, or thereabouts, for Mrs. Bargee told me so—but then the whole boat was gone over and

re-done. . . . If a bargee hasn't a boat of his own he pays ten shillings a week to hire one. . . . Now do a subtraction sum, and you'll know exactly what his expenses are. Do you want to know any more?'

'Support us with blacking, sustain us with boots,' murmured the summer breezes, carrying their open-hearted secrets away to tell the leaves upon the bank, and the door behind the curtain opened suddenly.

'*Law*!' said Mrs. Bargee, looking critically at the boots. And then she added, in a tone not to be gainsaid, '*they'll* never shine like *that*! Why don't ye let *me* have 'em?'

After which there was an awkward pause. It was positively cruel to stamp on ambition thus; for from the crushing certainty of this expression of opinion there seemed to be no appeal. A melancholy silence sank, even to the depths of the blacking jar, and as Mrs. Bargee turned on her heel to go, a contemptuous echo certainly whispered, '*Shine* indeed! Not *that* way! — and the curtain fell behind her. We looked at each other

reproachfully. Who had been responsible for this?'

'But then Mrs. Bargee can't be an art critic!' murmured Mr. Squif in the gently reminiscent tone with which one re-establishes a dethroned ideal, and at that moment the door opened once again to admit Mrs. Bargee's head.

'I quite forgot as what I come to tell ye was; there's a gentleman to see ye.' The gentleman, as we subsequently learned, having been left to mind the tiller during the interval.

Whereupon the gentleman came in.

He had bushy hair and kind brown eyes that looked straight out at you. And emanating all about him was the strength and freshness of a Highland moor, or a Platonic philosopher. There was something sincere, something steady and purposeful, with a spice of fun in readiness about everything he said. Frankly and unceremoniously he accepted the only chair, our furniture being limited, and we began to discuss life and the blacking of boots. He seemed to know a good deal about the canal, and spoke of the barges by name, but he didn't ask to

WE BEGAN TO DISCUSS LIFE AND THE BLACKING OF BOOTS

see our passes or appear to be officially connected with his country's Revenue. We were completely at a loss. He told us that we had been very lucky to secure one of Mr. Corbett's boats. He asked us many questions as to how we had been received by the boat-people, and appeared to take an interest in all our impressions, particularly and generally, of barges and bargees, and the Grand Junction Canal at large. And yet he wasn't a Reporter, for, two cleanly-looking barges passing at the moment, the men doffed their wide soft felt hats to him—a thing they never did for us. He called out some genial remark to them as the towing ropes met and crossed, and a strange deference crept into the weather-beaten faces, a strange, wordless deference into the way they answered him, almost pathetic in its implicit, unquestioning confidence. And somehow, just then, as the two barges passed on out of sight, it seemed to me that we had for a moment glimpsed an undercurrent—some motive power sleeping silently between the boaters and ourselves, or such as we—something that made all things possible. For, travelling like this a dozen

years ago through their canal, the boaters would have looked on us as spies, they would by no means

AND YET HE WASN'T A REPORTER

have regarded us as guests. 'Who was this, our most mysterious guest!' I telegraphed to Girton, and she answered in a comprehensively bewildered glance; the subject of them both was preparing to depart.

'Come up and see "The Shanty" when you pass,' he said; 'you'll be within three miles of it to-morrow, and my girls would be delighted to welcome you.'

And as we were collectively determining to clear up this mystery and individually shirking the responsibility, his eye fell and rested for a moment on the table and the blacking jar. So small an act may solve a mystery. For some intellectual shoeblack—whose name shall not be revealed for the opprobrium it merits—had jauntily and insecurely balanced the blacking jar on a green book with a silver title. And the stranger, very properly remonstrating, picked up the book to glance at its title page. 'Canal Adventures by Moonlight,' he said, quietly, with a funny, rather inscrutable twinkle in his amused brown eyes. Whereupon, but whence I can scarcely tell, sudden lights came

to us, and we knew him—A Philanthropist—and the author of the silvery green book!

As for our forgiveness anent the silver-titled book, let it suffice to say that the good-humoured inscription on its flyleaf is dated 'On the Boat "Industrious"' in its author's own caligraphy; and for my private satisfaction let me further add that its present position is quite beyond the fear of boot-blacking.

It is a strange, far-off thing, at least it seemed a strange thing then, as Mr. Gershom sat down again, and the talk went on, interspersed with his funny, appreciative anecdotes, for a man to have submerged every personal aspiration, every intimate ambition, because of a vague ideal. This man had sacrificed everything he had, his position, his prospects, even the necessaries of life, for the sake of an ideal Theory. At least it hardly seems probable that it was for the *pleasure* of it that he travelled five thousand miles through desolate waterways on filthy, objectionable barges, whose owners hated him, and were not particular as to the manner in which they showed it, merely to

learn the sorrows of an unknown, alien people for whom nobody had cared. And I remembered a casual stranger who sat in the House of Commons while his first Canal Boats Registration Bill was being half-heartedly discussed. This Bill he had been living for—it was the only chance for twenty-five thousand boats—to which, from the Visitors' Gallery, the House seemed so indifferent. And I found it difficult to realise 'our' canal, the home of our adoption, as it was twelve years ago.

'Keep still! you're "having your photo took," as Eccles has flatteringly expressed it,' said Mr. Squif, looking up about this time, with his long brush poised horizontally, to measure the Philanthropist's soft, silver beard. 'I suppose you don't mind, Mr. Gershom, "having your photo took?"'

'I suppose, with all the business you must have to attend to,' quoth Mr. Gershom, glancing comically at the boots with eyes that for thirty years had looked into the wrongs of life and yet that laughed so readily—'I suppose you haven't ascertained that there's a gipsy camp within a mile of you? I'm

on my way to it. But if you don't care to come don't hesitate to say so, for I shan't be offended!'

THE GIPSY CAMP

'On the contrary,' responded the Cadet, with all the enthusiasm of him who has no business to think of walking on any pretext whatever,

'we'd like to go immensely—it would be awf'ly neat.'

'Well, I don't know about its being awf'ly *neat*!' observed Mr. Gershom, thoughtfully. '"*Awf*'ly neat"!—it's a good expression! Do to keep me quiet for the moment, isn't that the idea?'

So we went to see the gipsy camp; and on the way, Edna told me afterwards, she asked him of his first crusade to the Brickyards, of which he had written. And he told her how he had worked there as a child, and in manhood had returned, having cast the world behind him, to rescue twenty thousand other children from that inhuman toil. And Edna waxed eloquent upon the Brickyard Bill. Next term she is going to discuss 'Philanthropy *versus* Masters' in the Girton Debating Club.

The gipsies were encamped in a desolate spot near a village, with their wash-tub and their caravans, and all their Moorish-eyed babies. The Philanthropist had lived with them for weeks. He had wandered through the by-ways of the land with them, living in their tents and dining on his portion from the cauldron as dispensed by the tribe's

special hag with the tribe's iron spoon. He admitted it was an uncomfortable way of taking sustenance, for, he said, 'you see it makes your fingers in such a mess!' But the only thing which really appeared to have impressed him was the last ingredient of the pot, a floating pyramid of grease, that was dealt out with Benjamin's Portion as a token of special grace; and 'do you know,' said the Philanthropist, 'there are occasions when it is found better to be Simeon.'

The gipsies greeted the Philanthropist, as we came into their camp, like Freemasons, in a language of their own, in that curious rhythmic Romany that the centuries have cadenced and the Moorish suns have kissed. They regarded us, however, critically, not to say distrustfully Evidently the camp disapproved of 'followers'—even the Philanthropist's! Only the lean horses and the children accepted the situation, and they did it conditionally. The horses browsed hungrily toward us with a tentative inquiry in the gaunt way they sniffed the grass, and the dark-eyed gipsy babies, though they clustered round the strangers, accepted Edna's

cajoleries in the irresponsive spirit of small grubby heathen gods permitting votaries. A handsome rabbit-snaring loafer was smoking contraband tobacco over the half-door of a van, and a fat gipsy mother washed the promiscuous tribal-washing at the tub; but neither responded encouragingly to the Artist's overtures, and none of those swarthy vagrants proposed to tell our fortunes. But as a possibly commercial episode, so to speak, our value rose, and they offered us white osier chairs at ridiculously little cost. The Cadet bought one wherewith to rest his foot, and afterwards carried it home. He looked barbarically aristocratic and autocratic as he sat with perfect composure on his property in the middle of that gipsy camp. But then, nothing could ever have discomposed Talbot seriously.

Whittling willows was these gipsies' industry. They had a caravan hung with chairs and tables and baskets, all made by hand, intertwined and plaited with wonderful ingenuity, without a nail or a tie anywhere. The Cadet's chair might have been built by a nice large tidy crow.

But Mr. Gershom had finished his visit to the

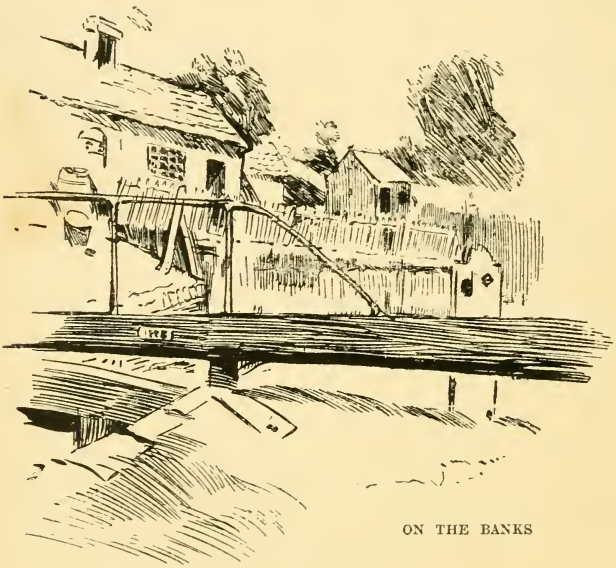
sick gipsy who had wanted him, and was saying good-bye—shaking hands with the left always as a token —to all the grubby little ne'er-do-weels who wouldn't speak to us. And so our ways divided—Mr. Gershom's to 'The Shanty,' ours to carry home our chair.

CHAPTER VIII

SUNDAY had anchored at the Seven Locks with us in idleness. But in the barge world it contained, like other days, twelve hours of hard work. In some cases, even, seventeen. The boats crawled on and took each their turn of the tug as it puffed through Blisworth Tunnel with the same slow pertinacity that beseemed them yesterday, and which would not fail the day after to-morrow. You see, a boatman's time is his own, he gains or loses on it. Can he perform his journey with a day or so to the good, so much the better for him; if he loses time on the way, it is just so much the worse.

Our Bargee considered, for instance, 'as it were bad luck to travel on Sundays and such.' Besides, after a day ''long shore,' the 'orse went twice as well. Judging from Dob's behaviour very early on

Monday morning, I make no comment on the statement. He began by running away. It must have taken nearly fifty yards of towing-path and barge to breathe that animal. The Bargee's excite-



ON THE BANKS

ment was terrible as he helplessly gave chase. Finally, the rope broke ; for the towing-path inconsiderately took advantage of the moment to go across a bridge. Then the rope had to be mended and the harness rectified while the Bargee re-

covered his breath and apostrophised his steed as a 'nasty flock-headed besom.' The effect of a day 'long shore' is quite perceptible!

We had turned out of the Grand Junction and crept up a smaller channel that branches out of the main stream somewhere between Watford and Crick. An unfrequented channel—a sort of a baby canal, where the water was so shallow that, leaning on the bulwark, one could see the tangled roots of the reeds, and the silly little shoots and foolish, straggling grasses which grow on the brown wrack of last year's sedge. Then the stream had grown broader and deeper, and more still and dignified, and there stood in front of us the Seven Locks like seven cool white sisters in some old quiet park with the water all about them.

It was very quiet and green and cool, that piping Sunday morning, as we lay there at anchor in the lazy heart of the country. And the sunlight flirted in the quivering leaves, and flickered on the buttercups, and the fairies' Sanctus tinkled faintly down from the hillside where the daisies

nodded and blinked at the sheep. And yet there was a chastened wistfulness in the attitudes of four who were sitting in the Ark.

'Pon my word,' said the Cadet, in a cadaverous sort of way, 'it is really too absurd.'

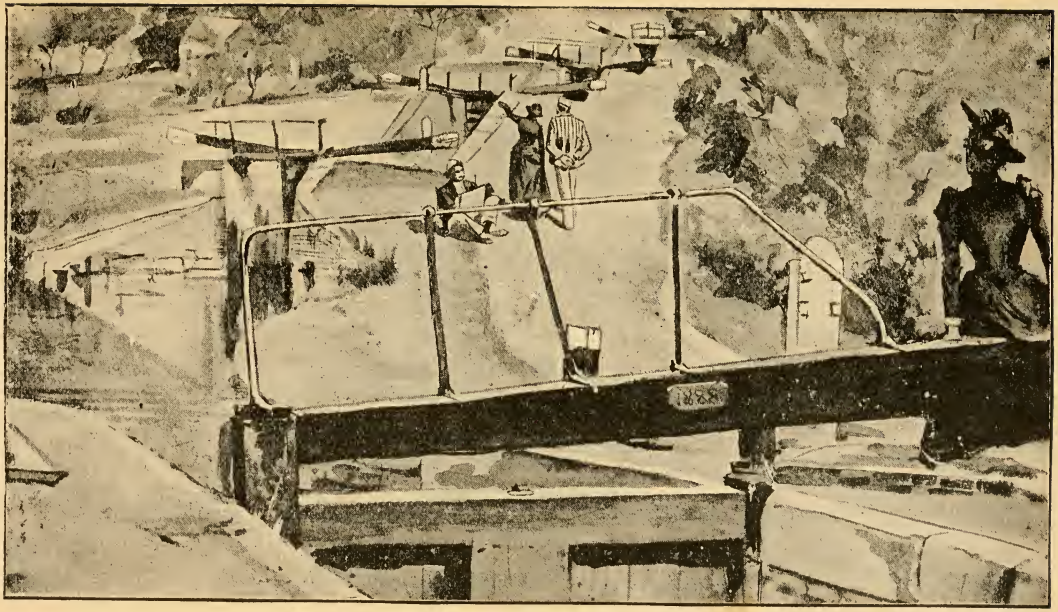
'We *might* have got something at Braunceston if we'd only thought of it!' and Edna tipped back her chair under the trees and looked at the barge in a manner that seemed open to discussion of the point.

'If only we'd stayed on the "Junction,"' murmured the Artist, sadly.

'Yes, if we'd stayed on the "Junction" we could have borrowed bread and cheese, and nectar and ambrosia, from any passing barge; as it is—here in the wilderness—a fellow hasn't a chance.'

'You have looked in the biscuit box—carefully?' inquired Mr. Squif, with a faint accent of expectancy, as if the vision of a ratafia had suddenly dawned brightly in a halo as possible food.

'Why not go and look for "The Shanty!" I suggested, hungrily. 'It can't be more than three



AT THE SEVEN LOCKS

miles, and Mr. Gershom made no limitations as to calling hours in connection with our visit.'

Whereat the Cadet demurred.

For the Bulwarks of Society may not be lightly sundered by a merely physical necessity. But the merely physical necessity being sturdily cherished by three, who declared themselves strangers and sojourners, and innocent not only of the times and dinner-bells, but of the very direction and locality of 'The Shanty' in question, we were at length permitted to reconnoitre for a dinner.

Reconnoitring, we had to skirt the canal for some distance and cross at the head of the locks. This we had accomplished, and, passing on briskly enough, walked almost in at a door in an enormous creeper. The door, overhung by this growth of bushy eyebrow, gave on the tiniest abode, I think, that was ever built. And, just inside, a little old woman, clad in rusty silk and wearing a black lace cap twined about her ears by means of a violet thread, sat in a low chair watching. She did not speak. She did not seem surprised, or pleased, or annoyed. She raised her eyes reluct-

antly. They were disapproving eyes. They focussed themselves slowly through steel-rimmed spectacles and awaited results. They would have waited one of those unblinking periods which are only measured in the infinite.

'Do you know Mr. Gershom's address?'

'Oh!' The woman's whole manner altered.

Yes, she *might* say she knew Mr. Gershom. What did *we* want with him?

Quoth the Cadet, unblushingly, 'We lunch at "The Shanty" to-day. I shall be obliged if you can direct me to the nearest road.'

Direct him—of course she could. Didn't she know 'The Shanty'? who should, indeed, if she didn't? Hadn't she found Mrs. Gershom the best friend she had in the world? No she hadn't found so many that it was difficult to count 'em.

We might as well come in, she added condescendingly.

No, we would not go in.

'Oh, *please*—do 'e come in. I warn't very pressing at first, but it's on'y a way with me. I'm very pleased to make yer acquaintance—and I

'opes as you'll not notice it. And so you'll please come in.'

Of course we had to go in. And the taciturn old lady grew voluble—as voluble as she of renown. She also developed a peculiarly embryonic wave of the hand, a gesture which appeared to have lain by.

This Lady of the Locks would have it clearly perceived that she understood the entertaining of guests. She seated us all in a row. She said—'You'll *inscuse* as there's no interduction?'

We said we were happy to do so.

'We've been expecting of you. I didn't think of it first. But p'raps ye are them folk?'

We replied that we weren't quite sure.

'Well'—at any rate the young ladies had come down from 'The Shanty,' and had mentioned 'them folk' to her. She 'considered' we must be they, and it *was* unlucky that she had no 'sherry-wine.' She really must apologise for not offering it to us, but she happened to be *out* of it. And then 'alcoholly fluids,' she added brilliantly, 'is always so heating to the stimic.'

'Oh yes,' certainly she would put us on the nearest road to 'The Shanty.' Unfortunately she did not walk quite so smart as she used, but still—if we had no *objections?*—she would walk with us part of the way. She was really afraid we should be too late for the Band of Brothers meeting. Mr. Gershom, of course, had told us she belonged to his Band of Brothers?

No! Well that *was* an omission. Really an *omission* on Mr. Gershom's part. A very *gross* omission. She would speak to him about it, but must we really be going? Then she would put on her bonnet—though there really was no hurry—well, of course if we *would*—— But still the lady dallied.

She seemed to have grown nervous. She looked at the old teapot on the window-sill. She turned it the other way. She shut and opened the lid. She arranged the flowerpots, uneasily, one by one. She fidgeted. She glanced at the Cadet. She looked at Mr. Squif, and at last she made up her mind. She would speak to the Cadet. She wavered—and was lost. Then she had an idea.

She turned to Edna hopefully: everyone always did! She would not discriminate between the optic and cravat. Edna should mediate for her. And yet she hesitated still, standing at the window, fingering her tippet's fringe, while I felt in my skirts for my purse. But I did not produce it.

Mr. Gershom had told her we were travelling with a painter-gentleman, and the painter-gentleman could paint 'most h'anythink'! In her growing eagerness the Lady of the Locks forgot she did not aspirate her vowel sounds. Now *would* the dear young lady *h'ask* the painter-gentleman—'whichever of 'em 'tis—if he couldn't just make a *little* picture of my bit of front garden and the 'ous? —if so be he *could*!'

The Artist responded modestly that 'if he *could*' he would, and not only paint the front garden, but insert the paling in front and the teapot in the window beside! The which he did next morning. So the Lady with a Yearning walked out to show us the way in a radiant frame of mind and a frescoed orient shawl, dispensing much volubility and practising the digit wave. The last

we saw of her was in a gesticulatory climax at a stile, from which a final injunction reached us—'Go perpendicular toward the Spinny, and then keep bearing to the left straight on!'

Perpendicular we went toward the Spinny, through Lord Henley's Park, and up and down along a dipping road for a long time—endlessly. And the only soul we met was one old birdscarer in a lean brown coat, with a face like a rosy crab-apple when the first frost wrinkles it. We asked him to direct us. But he could not understand our questioning, though he leant on his long staff with his hand up to his ear, and asked what it was we said those many times.

Then the village appeared. An undeveloped sort of place, with streets that straggled everywhere and whose sole possessors seemed to be two children playing by a ditch in their Sunday clothes. 'The Shanty' opened on this street.

'Mid-England and a mole-hill,' murmured the Cadet, 'alike, are the evidences of a people unseen on a week-day and who spend the Sabbath in bed.' And he lifted the knocker on the door

of the old red house with almost a defrauded air. 'Most likely they'll be out.'

But the Gershoms were not out. That would have been contrary to every natural law and the essence of all things. For there are still lost nooks in England, and walls where the peaches mellow, and doors that are never shut.

With a meditative finger buried in a book, Mr. Gershom answered the knock.

'Here they are!' he called out, cheerily. And then, 'We had almost given you up—do you know that we've been waiting luncheon for hours?'

And it was after sundown, and the hour was falling through the village from the evening bells, before ever we remembered that it isn't always Sunday, and one cannot stay for ever—even at the red house.

From the old walled garden—where the hollyhocks hob-a-nob with the currants, and the pansies entangle them both; where Mr. Gershom plucked reckless bouquets, and Miss Hilda and Miss Valerie and all their brothers 'the boys,' ranging down from Rugby, took possession of us; where to-day

is a daisy-chain and to-morrow a cowslip ball; Mrs. Gershom, standing at the window, called us in to tea. Not frivolous tea in a Sèvres eggshell with a spellican development of spoon which overbalances directly your eye is off it, but dainty little old blue cups arranged on a snowy cloth in a long low-ceilinged room. And tea in a silver teapot with an engraved inscription and Kingsley's name upon it. It was pretty, graceful Miss Valerie who had baked the cakes and spread the snowy cloth, and who blushed so daintily when one approved the citron in the buns. And after tea we sat and talked in the old stone-flagged, carpeted kitchen, for there is no parlour at the red house. The piano in the corner balances the cooking range, and low chairs and latticed windows and a white wooden table play strange tricks with the conventional. Almost as though a mediæval legend were written on an R.S.V.P. card is the kitchen-drawing-room of the red house.

Miss Hilda tended the garden. Miss Hilda had hazel eyes and a daintily moulded brow which I think the Muses might have envied. She

knew all the plants that grew. She weeded and watered the garden. She had planted the golden sunflowers and the big velvet pansies, and the purple 'sops in wine' that grew with the thyme and marjoram, the celery and rue; and she mixed claret cup with the blue borage from under the rose-tree, and grew valerian to heal sore eyes. When the garden was raked and watered Miss Hilda would sit under the trees and draw out a little red book and write fairy tales in it. But the fairies lived only in the little red book and nobody knew they were there. And afterwards, in the evening, when the garden is asleep Miss Hilda sits in the twilight in the old red house and weaves quaint harmonies, mystic and musical, out of the piano opposite the empty stove.

To-night, Miss Hilda led me through the long, low rooms of the red house, and by its winding stairs and down its rambling lobbies, and knocked at a door in an angle. It opened on the study. Inside the Philanthropist sat dozing in his chair. He had trudged twelve miles to Buckby Wharf that afternoon to hold his Bible class. In a corner

stood the old bureau where uncomfortable facts were written which startled fat, well-to-do, easy-going England, and the shelves were full of books. Acts of Parliament, memos, tokens, and memorials strewed the walls and the shelves. On one there were a lamp of clay and an earthen vase. And Miss Hilda's bright face grew sober as she told me these dusky toys formed part of forty-eight pounds weight which had been the daily burden of a tiny girl-child in the brickfields. On a table in a corner stood a queer brass, an extraordinary old snuff-box. It was considered a charm when it belonged to the gipsy Lees. The last descendant of the tribe gave it to Mr. Gershom as the most precious thing he had. There were the hieroglyphics on one side of a gipsy calendar. On the other, small arrows were engraved, designating its first possessor, one 'Mr. Right Door Smith.' There were tiny triangles and stars, which signified when Right Door went to heaven; with a Romany motto, reading—'To the heart away.' A mercenary gipsy had sold the charmed casket to Pope Sixtus the Sixth, but the gipsies got it again and wrote more Romany on it

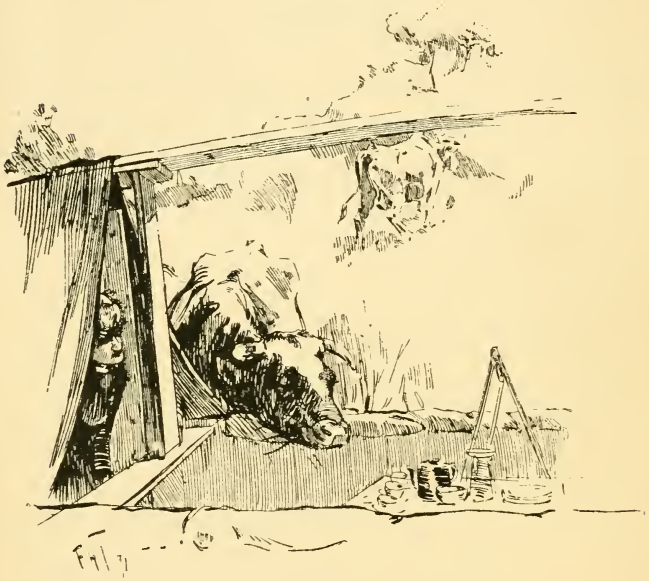
as tribal events took place. There were curious signs, which denoted encampments. And scratched upon a corner, caligraphy, translatable—'E. Lee, 1483.' And Miss Hilda replaced it in the corner of the shelf with a strange, almost reverent, expression in her quiet eyes.

CHAPTER IX

THE Gershoms had promised to breakfast at the Seven Locks, and the dew was deep on the grass as Edna and I discussed the possibility of their arrival without our first sending a waggon or a boat to bear them through the glitter. I remember I had just succeeded in seeing my own eye in our very diminutive handglass, and that it impressed me as betokening an era of increased aptitude for life on a canal—for a minute portion of the opposite wall of about the same diameter was the only reflection we generally managed to focus if vanity prompted us—when a faint interrogating sound outside the cabin door announced our welcome visitors.

'How early you are! Good morning,' and Edna impulsively flung open the wooden shutters to a rush of sudden sunlight. But she paused upon

the threshold with the greeting on her lips. And the wide, mild face of a brindled cow rose from the contemplation of our furniture, and, protruding over the bulwark, lifted up its voice and lowed. Wisdom



'HOW EARLY YOU ARE! GOOD MORNING'

crying in the marketplace was embodied in the attitude of that inquiring cow. But no one heeded Wisdom, and we all attended to the cow. The door at the other end of the barge flew open on the

instant, revealing two more inquiring attitudes, and Wisdom quirked her tail with an injured air of subdued astonishment, and gambolled off as Eccles

ECCLES WITH THE EGGS

came down from the locks playing pitch-and-toss with a basketful of eggs. One gets more morning visitors in the country than in town, and if they are more simple they are not less inquisitive!

Presently the Gershoms arrived, having walked before breakfast all the length of those miles with which we were acquainted. And I think I need hardly tell you how the Philanthropist ensconced himself paternally at once, and the Cadet was in his element, and Mrs. Gershom rested as some sweet old portrait might, dainty, *petite*, a little concerned about us, and wholly charming and pleased; or how awesomely gymnastic were the Gershom boys, and perilously narrow the gangway, and contented were we underneath it. But I possess no spell with which to convey to you the glistening of the dew on the daisies and the early sunshine and that indefinable something—call it a spirit of unworldliness—in Miss Hilda's cool pink dress and Miss Valerie's dark eyes.

And the Artist's elected point of view must be shown to them and approved, so the shady hats wandered away; and I noticed the Cadet had lingered a long way behind with Edna. Then Mrs. Gershom settled her chair in the shade to talk quietly awhile. And it occurred to me that this unobtrusive lady was responsible for a great deal

in her reserve and responsiveness, her reticence and ready interest in the people and things around her.

If I should tell you all the pretty, quaint suggestions of remarks Miss Hilda found in the upholstered incidents we showed her in our cabin I am afraid this chapter would be very long, though our creative pride absorbed them all, and more. She peeped into Mrs. Bargee's domain under the rudder bar, and won the heart of that most flattered boat-woman by begging of her a big, white sunbonnet all newly starched, to write fairy stories in under the old plum-trees in the hollyhock garden at home.

All too soon it began to grow hot, and Eccles and Dob came trailing down the towing-path and Miss Hilda and Miss Valerie and the rampant schoolboys, and gentle Mrs. Gershom, and the Seven Locks faded away behind us till the distance framed them in the peaceful setting of a summer idyl that has passed.

The Philanthropist came on with us, he had business to do at Hillmorton; but Talbot and Mr.

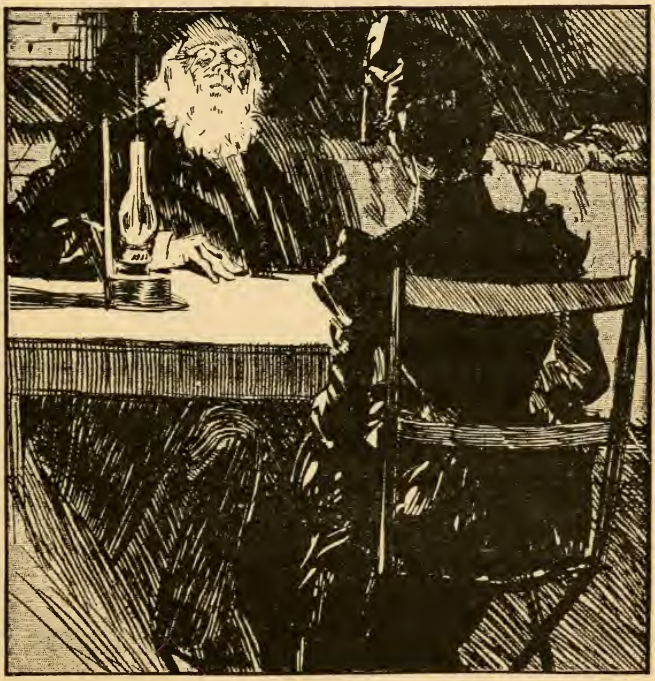
Squif lingered as the barge moved off. They thought they would escort the—schoolboys! home, and catch us up at the other side of the tunnel.

It is a long way by canal from the Seven Locks to the Braunceston Tunnel, and it was noon when we reached the gorge between the quivering larches that creep by the dark portal in the hill. For, from the level of a barge the trees grow overhead into the sky, and in front the gloomy hillside shuts out every murmur of the green world beyond.

'This is not your first experience of tunnel navigation?' asked Mr. Gershom, nervously. I think he was afraid that we might begin to scream as the slow boat entered the darkness. And he set a light to the lamp. Its yellow gleam fell on the murky arches and glittered on long stalactites, pointing grim fingers at the miserable water as if in saturnine derision of its stagnant loathsomeness. And now and again a sullen sparkling tear dripped heavily down from the roof and quivered, prismatic for a moment, as it passed through the light.

'So, the departed spirits ferry with Charon

down the melancholy Styx,' murmured Edna, pensively.



THE PHILANTHROPIST BEGAN TO SPEAK OF THE BAND OF BROTHERS

'Or the grey Sisters on the funeral barge carry off King Arthur,' I responded, flippantly

But our voices seemed to come from a very long

way off, and the silence welled up, intervening like a remorseful memory. Then, and almost as though he were speaking to himself and not to us at all of what lay nearest to his heart, the Philanthropist began to tell us of the Band of Brothers.

We had seen the lodge in which the Brothers were wont to assemble ; a masonic apartment with diamond-shaped window-panes and a wide chimney corner and simple-minded benches with straight backs, as innocent of cushions as of the social problems and ducal precedence. It had once been the granary of the old red house, and still, to an outsider, possessed the comforting sort of roof that only granaries get of those strange mellow lichens which subsist deliciously upon the nutritious dearth contained in a sun-dried brick.

Sitting in the half-light of a subterranean tunnel the Grand Master of the Order told us of its mysteries. The light played fantastically in the flowing whiteness of his beard, and cast queer shadows from his wideawake as he spoke of the time, and the patience, and the trivial things that impeded the adding of one *iota* to the sum of

human contentment. He told us of the simple vows that the Band of Brothers have taken, and the way they are linked together, and the symbols they

SITTING IN THE HALF LIGHT OF A SUBTERRANEAN TUNNEL

employ. And a sudden responsibility came down and overwhelmed me, for the mere mention of a vow holds some magnetic power of attracting

proselytes, and through the murky twilight I knew that Edna's face was full of interest. What if we should emerge from this wrought atmosphere with another Brother on board! A Brother philanthropically callow, but devoted henceforth largely to The Race, to the subtle muffling of that string which, vibrating to a single tension in the individual, had meant to me my friend. Universal humanity is no doubt very noble, but individual selfishness is a great deal more immediate.

'The form of initiation is very impressive and simple,' said Mr. Gershom gently, and in the glow of the light the words struck me as irresistibly persuasive.

'And ever afterwards,' he said, 'Brothers only salute with the left hand, in token that though the left-hand side of society is still unheeded by others we clasp its poorest and its meanest in the kindly grasp of friends.'

Then she'd be a democrat and never go to dances.

'Show me,' said Edna softly, 'how you initiate people.'

It was very still in the half-light of the tunnel. No one had spoken in more than a whisper for the last half hour; but the steam-tug panted a little out of the far distance, and the air grew suddenly cold.

The voice of the white-haired Grand Master fell in measured syllables, as Luther may have spoken to his first proselyte. The initiation proceeded from the beginning to the end. He crossed his hands, wrist touching wrist, masonic-wise, and she put hers upon them, like a child, obediently.

'And hereby the Brothers promise'—but we had passed out of the tunnel.

'It does not seem difficult to become a Brother,' observed Edna carelessly.

'No, it seems very easy,' he answered quietly, responding to the salute of a boatman punting by at the moment.

And then he laughed very merrily. 'In fact, now I come to think of it, I am not at all certain that you aren't formally enrolled in this same Band of Brothers!'

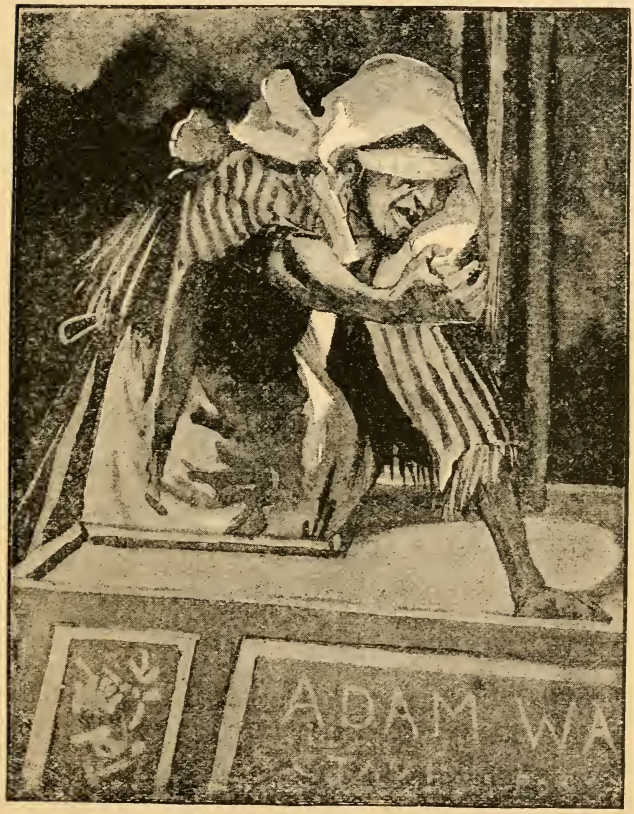
Oh, no!' said Edna seriously. 'I don't think

I'm quite prepared to be so humane as *that*.' It was most unreasonable, but I felt almost provoked with her that moment when the Philanthropist's face fell. I think he would have liked us to have felt a little more deeply on the subject of his cult.

We found our lost pedestrians sitting on a bank, and were working our way slowly through the barges which thronged the mouth of the tunnel, being punted, or rather 'quanted' as he would have called it, by our own Bargee, when sudden undercurrents and certain social rapids lashed themselves about us for the which we were unprepared by any former experience.

After all, our canal was not quite regenerate. But I think besotted Mrs. Bradshaw in her tumbled dirty bonnet on her unkempt, filthy barge was the most melancholy spectacle that I have ever seen. She stood cursing Mr. Gershom. She rated him soundly and roundly with no niceties of sarcasm as we do in polite society, and the contrast was more than pathetic. She, with her passionate ignorance to envenom her woman's tongue, scolding the Philan-

thropist. He, standing silently, with quiet, folded arms—and sundry facts to speak for him—compassionate and sorry. He did not reply by so



BESOTTED MRS. BRADSHAW

much as a single word. But he looked relieved when she remarked that her wrath was individual, and she 'had nothing agin the boat he was on, or the folks as he were with—they hadn't took her children away to send 'em to public school.' This moot point of compulsory education was the rock she foundered on.

It was a difficult question, and beyond even the Cadet's logic to unravel. It *is* hard to remove the children—when there are more than two the Education Act previses, and after the age of twelve—but then so is the life of a bargee. For the tiny cottage on shore, which may be empty this week and next and the one that is to come, for anything Mrs. Bargee knows or can know to the contrary, is scarcely to be expected to compensate her in a single Sunday of home comfort for her cramped wanderings in the interwhile. Therefore it was that Mr. Gershom said, as the harsh voice of the bargee woman died away into the distance—'the first bargee who made his home upon a barge deserved to have been hanged.'

So we glided on, as the afternoon was waning,

to Braunceston, Mrs. Bargee's home. Her little cottage stood among the trees, a new red brick edifice, which she pointed out with a glow of pride in its bare angular walls disproportionate to their appearance. The red brick cottage had been the vista towards which all her careful housewifery had striven for two-and-twenty years. It had not long been built in dry red brick. But it had risen inch by inch with every little saving, as a castle in the air that the Brownies and the fairies might create some day for her and the Bargee. And she stood and watched it till the trees hid it safely away, and quite forgot to nudge Eccles to that undemonstrative decorum which he found so profitless. 'It's a little *house*,' she said, and she took the rudder from Eccles as we went up through the locks.

It was very desolate out in the flat country, and the sky became overcast and grey after we passed Braunceston. There wasn't a sign of life or a figure in the landscape—only once a surly lock-keeper, who wanted to see our passport, and it began to rain in a fitful, irritated way. After a

long time we came to a cluster of cottages standing back sullenly together. They looked rebellious somehow.

'Here,' said Mr. Gershom, 'is the parting of the ways—yours to go on through the fields, mine to face a fact.'

Then he went, as he had come, alone.

The rain spattered on the cottages, and a gust of wind tossed his white hair spitefully. And the Cadet suddenly took off his cap and stood bare-headed for a moment as the old man turned the corner out of sight.

CHAPTER X

HAPPY are they who have no history! Then, floating leisurely beneath a summer sky does not conduce to the making of history. Incident, quotha? The tiniest ripple in the water is an incident to the bargee. One day our Bargee taught us to tell 'what's o'clock' by the sun. But I do not think our telling was quite so correct as his. One day the Cadet rode Dob, and Dob kicked up his heels, objecting to being ridden, for he waxed fat and ate beans in the new order of things. Already we began to contemplate a time when he would sit in the shade and leave us to trail the barge. One day he stood still on the bank, and the Bargee, indicating all the meadows in a large-minded way, observed, 'This be Rugby, sir.' We looked for Rugby, and presently, beyond a tangled vista of green lanes, perceived it on a

hill, bestuck with all its spires—a wholesome, workaday spot, that turns towards the future rather than back to the past.

A town that drives by in its broughams and paces stately on its sidewalks, and is careful for many to-morrows. Rugby is full of good sense and inestimable morals and solid level worth, with a great deal of human charity—once it is indubitably certain that the blind tinker in the road is by no possibility a fraudulent mendicant. Except that I cannot imagine a fraudulent beggar in Rugby! They'd have him in an almshouse before he had been there a day. The almshouses creep up to the lych gate, and the sun lingers on the windows, in the shadow of the church, and town-hall and markets and spires crowd jostling about them in an orderly, tidied confusion. But, in spite of the long wide streets and the sonsy air of the place, a something of immutable reserve pervades these modern white walls, a curious diction of the atmosphere that is only given out of the great persistency of an academic centre or a cathedral town.

And beyond, in a cool, still chapel, we saw Dr.

Arnold's grave, out of the heart-throb and striving, at rest from the common routine. And the rich, red light of the windows glowed, softening in the silence, through the names of Rugby boys: Adams, who fell at Inkerman, and Hodson, of Hodson's Horse, Mansel, and Abercrombie, and Major-General Skerratt, who led the storming party of Bergen-op-Zoom in '14, and General the Earl of Carysfort, and Miller, and Holbeche, and Biddulph, Cave, and Carte, and Parkhurst, Matthew Arnold, Dean Stanley, Walter Savage Landor, and all the mighty schoolboys, from Selborne to Macready.

But a little thing suffices to hitch the story of the sublime to the tag of the grotesque. All sentiment depends on its environment, and, for us, the component parts of Rugby were all mixed in a blue Delft bowl—a best bowl, very precious.

Hear the wail of a bowl. The tale is easily told.

The night we came to Rugby, or ever we got to the town, collectively, we hungered. A little cottage stood on the bank with a flickering light in the window. Edna went in and borrowed the

bowl. In it were sundry fragments of a roasted chicken—which she borrowed first.

'If it had only been the fowl it wouldn't have mattered,' she repeated at intervals afterwards, 'because, of course, I paid for *it*. But the bowl was very precious, and it was only lent.'

What made the matter worse was that the maiden lady to whom the bowl had belonged had confided so much to Edna. She not only had sold her all that was left of her fowl, but she came outside the door and stooped in her little garden to find parsley to embellish it. She fumbled very tenderly in the weedy border.

'They bits,' she said to Edna, 'was once a li'le white Dorkin' with a crest at the back of 'er 'ed. And now I've packed 'er in the best blue bowl and parsley *h*'under 'er wing—and if 'er aint satisfied 'er ought to be!'

'It was like burying a child to her,' quoth Edna hysterically.

We tried to return the best blue bowl. We did our best to return it, but it wouldn't be returned. We couldn't find the cottage. It had been dusk in

the evening, and next day the cottage was gone. The blue bowl haunted us for days. Edna carried it wherever she went. It dogged our footsteps in Rugby. Then it disappeared. And the water lay like a long unwoven skein stretching before and after to far Rugby on the hill before ever I suspected its fate. While we were in the chapel the Cadet *interred* the best blue bowl under a little prickly bush at the top of a very high bank.

One day the shadow of a rival embittered our horizon. A strange cruiser in our waters !—a long, brown, rakish vessel, which we found tethered to a woodyard. We had to investigate this most unlicensed craft. The foreman of the woodyard showed us over it. It was the Survey Company's boat, on which some dozen gentlemen embark once in two or three years and patrol the canal to the navigational extent of several Commissioners' reports. The boat was the sumptuous receptacle of much hard furniture. Benches were nailed to the walls—polished walls, and slippery benches, and with an arid waste of table firmly secured to the floor. A spacious mahogany abode. But not half so

pretty and tasteful as the well of a certain salt barge.

The thing which impressed the foreman, and which he impressed upon us, dated back two years, to the last voyage of the houseboat. The Commissioners, he told us, having journeyed a space, wrote their reports and returned. And in the steward's pantry over and above the mighty zest of their consumption are still fifty-two bottles of choicest Moselle. These our friend the foreman drew out one by one and arranged about us with a deprecating air of argumentative humility.

. . . . . .

But the record of a barge wound on from dusk to dawn along the pleasant waterways. And stealthily, silently creeping up between low banks, slowly gliding by the shingle to the denser shadows of Godiva's town, we came to Coventry, and on the farthest outskirts of her mantle, just where its border wears a sheen of poetry and its hem curves gently to the water, we dropped anchor, lingering.

Yet polite conversation and the mainspring of life in Coventry do not appear to hinge on the

rude Earl and his lady with that fond insistency which the tourist is led to expect. In Godivaland they seem to know less of Godiva than the stranger who sojourns there. They scarcely remember where they buried her so gently in the days that

THE LADY GODIVA

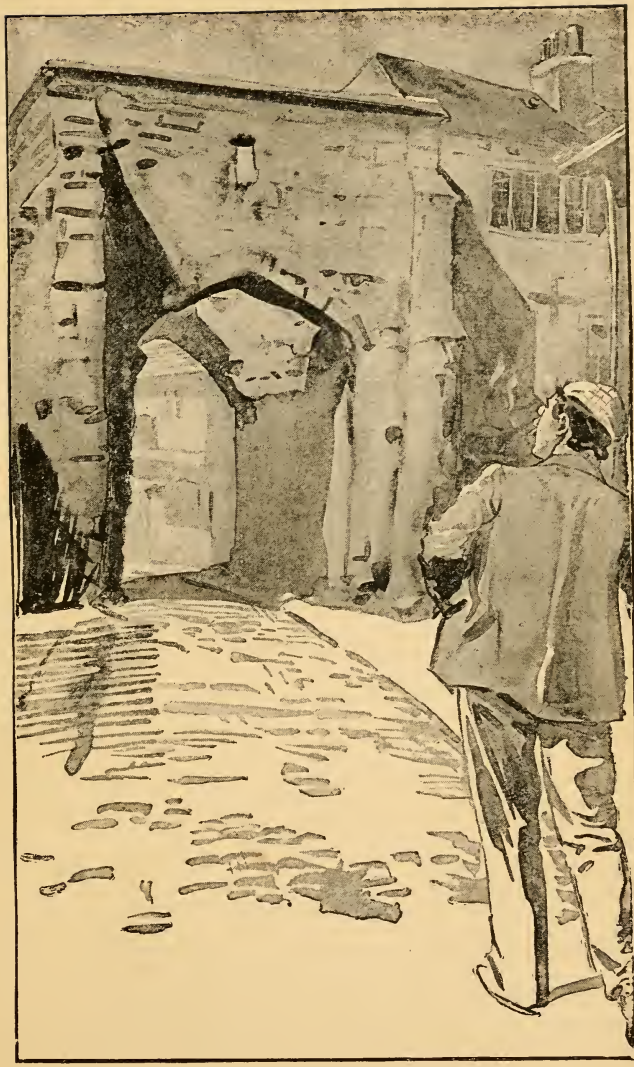
are gone by. Small wonder.. Her grave is in a builder's lot, and nettles and convolvulus have grown over the rude Earl's tomb in the porch of the monastery that has crumbled away into the brick-strewn sod.

But 'ye cittie of Coventrie,' with its bulging

walls and its time stains, has not changed with the ages. It is only the cut of the farthingales and the patter of the clogs which have altered in these streets of a thousand summers. Besides, there is 'Peeping Tom,' one remembers, up among the windows of the King's Head Inn. He has no longer any need to bore 'a little augerhole,' because he has no choice but watch the people passing in the street until his stone eyes chip out with the weather.

We had seen a picture of Coventry, Edna and I, in London. A picture of the street through which Godiva rode, told faithfully and tenderly in sober truthful tones. The painter seemed to have trailed his wonderful pencils through the colour region where the heron gets his wings. He had dreamed and painted those steep cobble stones and twisted gable turrets and sunken window-panes which, gathering conviction in ruddy tints of sepia, formed the street in Coventry that we had come to find. And we sought it conscientiously—by tram.

Sitting in the cramped street car, we went up through Coventry, seeking the painter's picture. We were ready to spring out at the first appear-



COVENTRY

ance of the street, and, with umbrellas used as alpenstocks, do homage to the artist and his immortal canvas. For a long time we journeyed in the serenity inborn of perfect confidence—past the three tall spires, those tapering fingers of the city glinting the sensitive colour of the quick of a human nail; by the tiny white statue of the civic notable; and out beyond that desert place which nestles mildly desolate and comfortably sad about the little station-house, never doubting but the painter would keep faith with us. A thousand times we found the spirit of the work; nowhere its arrangement. The picture was *arranged*. And the tram stopped at the terminus, and they changed the tired horses.

But there are real streets in Coventry. And their crumpled devious turnings, threading back under timbered house-fronts which project in the upper story like petrified forked lightning, if you can imagine such a thing grown very old and decrepit, led us softly through the city, where the old order scarcely changes, and the new has never begun; for, in spite of Cash's factory outside, and

the watchmakers' guilds, and the tricycles, the ancient traditions of the place are not ousted to the back streets. It is not hard, when one is in Coventry, to understand why the Greyfriars' spire was permitted to stand untouched and unmolested in its useless solitary beauty, occupying valuable land for just three hundred years after the old monks, and their masses, and refectory, and all their gates and walls, had passed into oblivion. Even the land agents in Coventry are susceptible and diffident—a race of antiquaries! And it was only when the elements, wind and storm and tempest, threatened the delicate joy, that these reverent guardians approached, and choosing loving architects, the gentlest of their craft, laid the nave of Christ Church beside the old monks' spire. Thus the past and the present are welded, and the feud of the ages forgotten, and the monks' beautiful legend is wedded to the architect's faith.

Come with me to Coventry. And saunter by the tilted doorways under the shelving gables, sitting with the cautious fisher-boys where the shadows lengthen and the town makes way for the pond,

but quietly, not to frighten the minnows, and then steal away very softly to the funniest old bowling-green you have ever stumbled on. It hides behind Bablake Church—built on the 'babblelake' of ground Queen Isabel gave somebody, and a little wooden door admits you to the quaint old square, hedged in by the transverse beams of the plaster walls that the Tudor architects loved. Only a green plot of grass and a blue patch of sky, and the queer old houses all round. But the very breezes blowing from the cornfields grow feudal as they pass. By-and-by hearing voices, a very old bent man, in a long velvet coat, will step out of a high-silled door. He carries a key in his hand, and he raises a wide-brimmed hat and talks with slow garrulity of the 'Hospital' behind him. It is the Hampton Court of Coventry—for those who, like himself, are pensioners in the present on the bounty of the past. At last we say good-bye to him, as one does in Coventry, with a sense of faint regret that is as indefinable as the scarce scent of strawberry leaves, which only gardeners perceive.

And not till the key grates in the closing door will it have seemed possible that we may have been trespassing.

Then there is 'Ford's Hospital,' in Greyfriars' Lane, where twenty old women sit in the sun, happy in the possession of three-and-sixpence a week and coal, living out these latter holidays when the week's wash is folded away and the scouring is done, surrounded by the gateways of a mediæval fairy tale.

But Edna says she will whisper something to you before you buy your ticket on the Metropolitan Extension. *Of course, you must live on a barge when you go to Coventry.* And you must let your coming be unknown and your departure linger always as the shadow of a sorrow which is scarcely understood. You must pass as the slender spires brood in the white moonlight and the great organ of St. Michael's trembles out into the pathway, and go by in the narrow street between the dark piles of the churches up to the big library, where the chairs scroop on the floor.

After that you may go to the play!

FORD'S HOSPITAL, COVENTRY

There are three theatres in Coventry, and while we were there sometimes a Dress Circle. Edna

THE PROPRIETOR KINDLY PERMITTED US TO WEAR MORNING DRESS

and I obtained a dispensation from all three proprietors, and went in our caps and reefers. Our escort asked no permission and went in its over-

coat. At the Royal Opera House we noted that the two people who occupied the Stalls had this privilege also. The Cadet would have preferred us each to sit in a different row, to show our appreciation of the proprietor's courtesy, and lend a crowded air to the house; but Edna thought the compliment might not be understood. I am sorry that we can't remember more about the play. Shrieks fill up most of the gaps. The music, however, consisted of such affecting melodies as 'Flying Moments' and 'The Dove,' and Edna was moved almost to tears. I offered her my pocket-handkerchief.

On sunny mornings the Henry Irving of this company absorbed the dramatic afflatus, in white ducks and a billycock, on the pavements of the High Street. It was wonderful how much afflatus this Henry Irving could absorb. I have even seen him talking down the ventilation grating in the top hat of the Mayor. The Mayor was a little man, and his tiny toes all tingled in his little boots when he walked with this Henry Irving. We took great interest in the Mayor. We got quite

attached to him—from afar and humbly—theoretically attached to him; remembering his civic pomp and dignity, when the Coventry Irving was not walking beside him.

CHAPTER XI

IN one of the oldest streets in Coventry on a sunny afternoon we walked meditativewise; and presently amongst the jovial, jostling eaves grimacing at every angle and winking over the way we found the school where they taught George Eliot the construction of the English tongue. It was an unpretentious old house, just a little taller than its neighbours, and ruddy and sunburned of aspect. It might have been the very same which Maggie Tulliver, her prototype, attended in the town, while Aunts Glegg and Pullet resided over at Guy's Cliff or Nuneaton, a house which the modern architect would straightway have put on a back-board to counteract curvature; for, like all the rest of Godfather Punch's playthings put away in Little Park Street, it crouches blinking in the sun, settling down bulgily, much as the robins do before they go to sleep. Over the door of this house there

is a great concave impression as if some monster mollusk had come and wallowed there, the which

IN ONE OF THE OLDEST STREETS

One-of-us palæontologically alluded to as 'your Amalekite' in conversing with the lady within.

She was an amiable lady, the Principal—for the house is still a school—and she was accustomed to ponder on small errors of orthography. She looked perplexed for a moment, and then she answered quietly that she didn't think the device was exactly an Amalekite, but the Ammonites were connections of theirs she believed?—which was very crushing, and One-of-us nearly blushed.

The Principal didn't personally remember George Eliot—which did not seem extraordinary. She had been one of her predecessor's pupils, and something in her manner suddenly jarred as she offered to show us the schoolroom where Marian Evans had studied.

It was strange, coming in from the sunlight into those old dark passages that George Eliot had known. Down by the canal it had been much simpler to follow the bent of her pen. Mrs. Poysers we had found in half a dozen farms, and there it had not been hard to understand why all time should vibrate to Dinah Morris or an Adam

Bede. But here in the old schoolroom, dingy and emotionless under its low ceiling, and, as it were, pensively revolving the problem of why Maria Jones should always crib Sarah Tomkyn's sums instead of doing her own, everything grew complex, and Romola's deeper insight crept in the dusky corners of the room. The one old-fashioned window was big and square enough, and yet the long dark table stood in perpetual twilight at the further end of the solitude. It was not term time now, and the students had gone home.

Outside, the narrow garden was full of mignonette, and the Principal stooped and picked it, and said genius was a snare, and passing back into the house showed us more of the old school. She was a connection of Shelley's, and his portrait hung over the mantel, a quiet, shy young man, with very fair light whiskers. She gave his genealogy as she stood by the silent portrait, yet I came away with the impression that he was her maternal aunt, which, of course, was quite impossible! But I hadn't been listening to the pedigree, I was thinking of George Eliot and the bit of mignonette.

After that we found another little house at the top of a tiny, steep garden, and a dear old gentle lady who remembered Marian Evans. 'Yes,' and she was very glad that we had come to her, for she liked to remember those days. Her sister had known Miss Evans when they were both at school, and they had been close friends—with the friendship that exists between a senior pupil and a younger girl. Miss Evans was so strangely quiet, so reserved and diffident amongst them, that it had been difficult to know her. She was too sincere to have many friends; but she had often come to tea in the little parlour where we sat. And there they would talk in the twilight—George Eliot on a footstool at the other's knee, 'as it might be you, my dear,' said the old lady, gently, to Edna. Miss Evans never said very much in those days, but she thought about things, and quietly came to conclusions that startled the elder girl into many discussions, where often she was worsted. The old lady herself had been young with them, but, as a younger sister should, she only listened from her corner unobserved, and said good-night

to the school-girl friends when they put on their hats to go, as she would to the minor prophets. She asked if we had seen the school, offering to be our *cicerone* there, and if we were memoir-hunting, and whether we knew the town? We told her we were only village maidens living on a barge, and come to see the world, with an escort waiting for us in the street below, who were apt to grow impatient. But, she said, in Coventry there was always time, and all George Eliot's characters were faithful portraits of the people she had known, and here in Warwickshire one could trace them nearly all. The doing so might not reveal the hidden spring of her genius, but the secret of her sympathy and her comprehension would unravel at every step. Over there on the wall—did we see?—was the painted half-length of the queer old gentleman who sat to her for the dissenting minister in 'Felix Holt.' George Eliot had loved to study it, noting the deeps and curves of the curious pensive face, and talking of the eccentric kindly personage whom we have also known in 'little Mr. Lyon.'

Elated by these researches, somebody started the theory that Ellen Terry had lived in Coventry. But on this point the town is reticent—ambitious, of course, but quite distressingly truthful. Rumour has selected a little tall dark house in a little short wide street to honour as her sometime home. But inside we found a German Jew was measuring tape by the yard, who only vouchsafed in reply to the Cadet's polite interest in his residence that he had heard something about some other people who had lived there once.

'Lots of folks had lived in houses,' seemed to be the gist of his philosophy—it is impossible to draw any histrionic inspiration from a person who has no more respect for a rumour than that! But there were many dusty, dusky, queer old possibilities about the little tall dark house, and I should like to know if 'our Ellen' loved it before she moved to *Ravenswood* and listened to the prophetic Ailsie? I have observed that information as corroborated by a German Jew is usually satisfying, even in biography, and we did not propose to him to pursue investigation further

than the inner shop. Instead, we went home to ruminate on human fallacies, and stake our kings and aces in that intellectual game, 'Van John.'

It was the last evening of our happy gipsy life, and the dark tarpaulin cavern of the barge

'LOTS OF FOLKS HAD LIVED IN HOUSES'

was no longer either weird or strange, though the lamps flickered and the shadows fell just as they did on that first stormy night, when terror lurked only in the depth of the silence. 'Van John' was going merrily when Eccles crept out of some unexpected retreat. He was cautiously avoiding

his bed-time. That he often did, but to-night there was something more.

'Please, I don't like Qua'ventary,' he wailed.

'Indeed,' inquired Mr. Squif, pausing in the dealing of the cards; 'and why do you disapprove of Coventry?'

But Eccles' only reply was a dismal washing of his little grubby fingers in his big blue eyes.

'Small boy, what's the matter? What have you been doing?' asked the artist kindly, but regarding him with a disconcerted air of helplessness.

'I doesn't warnt mine li'le cubby-housen full o' sarlt,' and the big tears glistened through the lamentable accents of Eccles, the sometime autocrat.

'But, Eccles, you don't take in salt at Coventry.'

'I knows that!' indignantly.

'Well, then, what's the matter?'

But Eccles only wept afresh.

'Look here, young man, I think you ought to be in bed.'

'No-oo,' sobbed the tiny figure, with much

'PLEASE, I DON'T LIKE QUA'VENTARY'

determination, and then: 'I likes terbacker fume;' and through the faint, heavy fragrance of his cigarette, curling up to the open flap of the roof, where the rain spattered in a futile, irritated sort of way, Eccles' unconscious remark encircled Mr. Squif with a delicate rebuke—the Bargee never smoked, *he* was not permitted.

But he did not follow up his advantage.

'I don't likes Qua'ventary,' he echoed dismally; 'I likes milk for breakfas'.'

'Eccles,' said Edna, gravely, 'is that the only reason you are sorry we are going?'

But Eccles, being whisked away in Mrs. Bargee's arms, only sobbed pathetically, 'I likes milk for breakfas'.'

. . . . . .

'There is nothing for it,' said the Cadet, decisively, 'but to charter the town crier and advertise the lot.'

'Or take it back to London.'

'Or shirk the responsibility, and go!'

The Cadet did not swear 'by Peter and by Paul,' but he very strongly objected to taking it

back to London. It was a pretty dilemma. Here were we possessed of a barge-load of furniture, hourly expecting to see our saloon heave anchor and swing out to other waters, leaving our chairs and chattels piled neatly on the towing-path.

'Why not sell by auction?'

I don't know who suggested it. Of course we would sell by auction! Dutch auction on the towing-path.

'But not h'everythink!' exclaimed Mrs. Bargee, 'you won't never part from h'everythink?'

'"H'everythink"!' I answered, counting out the cups.

'But not the li'le red washstand?'

'Even the little red washstand.'

The Cadet made, straightway, an inventory; the Artist painted a poster.

The poster we hung on the gangway, where it fluttered, brilliant red letters, to the huge excitement of Eccles and the neighbours over the way. Eccles spelt it out in shrill, small, unfinished gasps, a syllable in every interlude of elbowing the urchins who were hurrying down from the town to see

what was going on. Then this same Eccles was despatched to advertise his knowledge to Rab and Bobtail and Tiglath, his acquaintances.

The poster ran :—

AT ONCE.

THE EFFECTS OF THE BARGE 'INDUSTRIOUS.'

A valuable and unique collection of

HOLIDAY ASSOCIATIONS

Will be Sold by Auction. Owners have to

CATCH A TRAIN.

After selecting the fittest amongst these as a slight token of regard—as the Christmas cards so affectingly put it—to Mrs. Bargee, the inventory of Holiday Associations was complete, and inspired a lordly and magnificent sense of possession in itself.

'One Table,' it began.

'Four Steamer Chairs.

'Two Camp Stools.

'Four Mattresses (very small).

'Four Pillows (very large).

'One Milk Jug.

'One Looking-glass.

'Two Lamps.

'Three Tumblers.

'One Teapot.

'Four Blankets.

'Six Cups and Five Saucers.

'Seventeen Plates.

'One small red Washstand.

'Three Knives.

'Six Spoons and a Fork.'

Mrs. Bargee had lent us forks hitherto, three-pronged iron ones. They were rather sharp, but you soon grew careful in these matters.

Then the people began to arrive—careful boat-women from the towing-path; small dealers from the town; the inevitable Hebrew, of course; the young woman who was thinking of setting up house; and Paterfamilias, the butcher, who came to see because he was passing by; and all the babies of all of them; and everybody who had nothing else to do. We had been perplexed as to the conducting and motive power of this sale, for neither Mr.

Squif nor the Cadet would accept the post of auctioneer. We need not have been uneasy. It conducted itself.

'Good-day to ye, me dears,' said an old barge-woman in the front, 'ye ain't a-goin' to sell they pretty cheers?' The Hebrew elbowed himself nearer warily.

'Yes,' responded Mrs. Bargee, 'we's not a-goin' to keep 'em.'

''Thinks I'll 'ave one o' they,' said the old woman, 'do proper for my house. 'Ow much d'ye want for 'im, neighbour?'

The affair had passed out of our hands altogether. Mrs. Bargee, flushed with her own generosity in parting with our furniture, asked 'what might be' the depth of the barge-woman's desire for a 'cheer.' The barge-woman thought a shilling—and the deck-chair departed, grasped in her capacious arms, to watch its fellows from the outskirts of the acquisitive, whispering, nudging little crowd, round which Eccles danced the exuberant Highland flings of a callow bantam.

The insidious Hebrew bided his time, and carried off all the mattresses by a masterly reluctance, which caused Mrs. Bargee to jump at him and the crowd to draw back in deference, but the Cadet to turn aside to cover his emotions of indignant mirth. Everybody offered her own price and nobody out-bid her, no one coveted her neighbour's goods or forgot to pay for her own, and Mrs. Bargee

reigned everywhere, beneficent and bountiful. A most satisfactory Sale! Only when the young woman of matrimonial intentions professed a

THE SALE

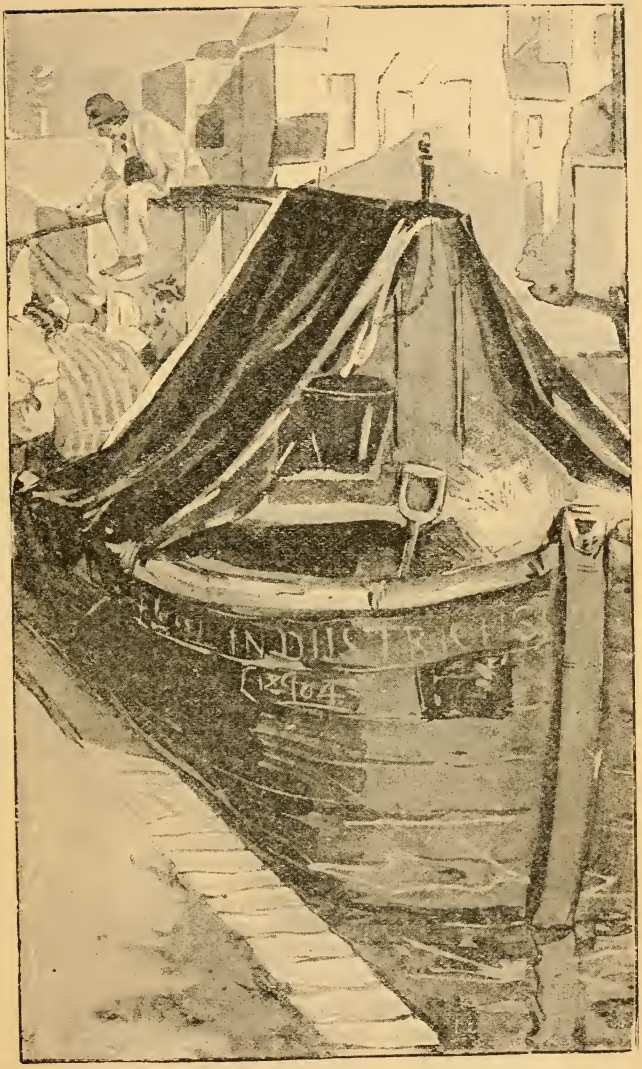
superficial interest in the very last deck chair did unruffled unanimity receive a passing shock. A well-to-do stranger, in the Commercial Travelling interest, was rude enough to out-bid her. But Mrs. Bargee loftily ignored his ill-timed multiple till the young woman was served. Then, 'Ye should 'ave spoken soonder,' she called out to him—and he went away. It was a Sale possessed of principles! And everything was sold, except the li'le red washstand. 'I moight as well 'ave 'im,' one old body had said. 'Very sorry, Mrs. Sanders,' responded our auctioneer, 'but I've made up me mind to 'ave 'im myself.' So, Mrs. Sanders thought she 'moight as well 'ave the teapot instid, for they do always come in so 'andy.'

Everything was sold. The barge looked very desolate denuded of its dhurries and hangings, its chairs and sketchbooks and china. The crowd had dispersed with our furniture. Even the tiny empty cabins on deck belonged to the Bargee as a gift, and the boards and planks would be taken down and turned to other uses as soon as we were gone.

But the little gay cabin at the rudder did not make any change for this. Such a wonderful little

cabin, too, that held so much and showed so very little. The round clock was let in the wall. The table, where the Bargee's supper was already spread —for it had grown late meanwhile—was only a board flap by the stove. But the little stove itself was a kitchen and laundry in one, with its roasting plate and oven, and kettle boiling on the top, and bright brass rail behind to hang the clothes upon. The big, flat cupboard in the wall held all the household gods, and little hooks and hanging jugs and tiny drawers filled all the crannies and the corners of the room. It was the tiniest home next to a bird's nest that ever was imagined. Opposite the stove a deep, wide oilskin bench was the comfortable substitute for chairs, and Eccles' three-legged stool completed the doll's-house. For ornament—and very decorative, too—there was the yellow paint and floral design of the cupboards and the cans. Mrs. Bargee's jugs and cans all wore yellow paint and a design in roses, pink and white, and round the paint and the design Mr. Bargee's name met all the world, strong and blackly blazoned in big square letters, clear to see.

And Mrs. Bargee made us tea in her big brown



THE LAST OF THE BARGE

teapot, and hugged her 'li'le red washstand,' for 'I did jest seem set on 'im sence fust ever I dusted 'is legs,' she said, pulling out the towel-bar and arranging the soap underneath it. 'I couldn't 'ave beared for 'im to go away wi' ye.' She didn't lament *our* departure!

By-and-by the Bargee came in for his supper; he had been ''tending to the 'orse,' he said, for they must start bright and early to-morrow.

'Why, it be nigh three week sence us took on wi' 'em, missus, and it don't seem only like yesterday.'

'Ye mun put the little lad to bed right off,' he added fatherlywise.

And so we said good-night to the kindly country-folk, and the long, pleasant idle days, and the little yellow cabin, and the old deep barge. Mrs. Bargee fumbled for a pencil then, and gave Edna her address on Braunceston Wharf, and the Bargee, taking the Cadet aside, would be always at his 'service, Sir, and vera much obliged to *you*.'

But Eccles had curled up in his corner and was fast asleep already.

And the rudder loomed behind us as we went down to the little dark station, a level bar in the afterglow.

'Yes,' said the Artist, looking back; 'it wasn't a bad idea. But we *might* have squabbled, you know!'

'We did—once,' said Edna.

'Only once.'

And the Cadet, turning to glance at the sunset, answered, 'Yes, Ed—I mean Miss Devize—I believe it was only once.'