CHAPTER XV. - HOUSE-BOAT "ARCADIA."

Scrymgeour had a house-boat called, of course, the Arcadia , to which he was so ill-advised as to invite us all at once. He was at that time lying near Cookham, attempting to catch the advent of summer on a canvas, and we were all, unhappily, able to accept his invitation. Looking back to this nightmare of a holiday, I am puzzled at our not getting on well together, for who should be happy in a house-boat if not five bachelors, well known to each other, and all smokers of the same tobacco? Marriot says now that perhaps we were happy without knowing it; but that is nonsense. We were miserable.

I have concluded that we knew each other too well. Though accustomed to gather together in my rooms of an evening in London, we had each his private chambers to retire to, but in the Arcadia solitude was impossible. There was no escaping from each other.

Scrymgeour, I think, said that we were unhappy because each of us acted as if the house-boat was his own. We retorted that the boy--by no means a William John--was at the bottom of our troubles, and then Scrymgeour said that he had always been against having a boy. We had been opposed to a boy at first, too, fancying that we should enjoy doing our own cooking. Seeing that there were so many of us, this should not have been difficult, but the kitchen was small, and we were always striking against each other and knocking things over. We had to break a window-pane to let the smoke out; then Gilray, in kicking the stove because he had burned his fingers on it, upset the thing, and, before we had time to intervene, a leg of mutton jumped out and darted into the coal-bunk. Jimmy foolishly placed our six tumblers on the window-sill to dry, and a gust of wind toppled them into the river. The draughts were a nuisance. This was owing to windows facing each other being left open, and as a result articles of clothing disappeared so mysteriously that we thought there must be a thief or a somnambulist on board. The third or fourth day, however, going into the saloon unexpectedly, I caught my straw hat disappearing on the wings of the wind. When last seen it was on its way to Maidenhead, bowling along at the rate of several miles an

hour. So we thought it would be as well to have a boy. As far as I remember, this was the only point unanimously agreed upon during the whole time we were aboard. They told us at the Ferry Hotel that boys were rather difficult to get in Cookham; but we instituted a vigorous house-to-house search, and at last we ran a boy to earth and carried him off.

It was most unfortunate for all concerned that the boy did not sleep on board. There was, however, no room for him; so he came at seven in the morning, and retired when his labors were over for the day. I say he came; but in point of fact that was the difficulty with the boy. He couldn't come. He came as far as he could: that is to say, he walked up the tow-path until he was opposite the house-boat, and then he hallooed to be taken on board, whereupon some one had to go in the dingy for him. All the time we were in the house-boat that boy was never five minutes late. Wet or fine, calm or rough, 7 A.M. found the boy on the tow-path hallooing. No sooner were we asleep than the dewy morn was made hideous by the boy. Lying in bed with the blankets over our heads to deaden his cries, his fresh, lusty young voice pierced wood-work, blankets, sheets, everything. "Ya-ho, ahoy, ya-ho, aho, ahoy!" So he kept it up. What followed may easily be guessed. We all lay as silent as the grave, each waiting for some one else to rise and bring the impatient lad across. At last the stillness would be broken by some one's yelling out that he would do for that boy. A second would mutter horribly in his sleep; a third would make himself a favorite for the moment by shouting through the wooden partition that it was the fifth's turn this morning. The fifth would tell us where he would see the boy before he went across for him. Then there would be silence again. Eventually some one would put an ulster over his night-shirt, and sternly announce his intention of going over and taking the boy's life. Hearing this, the others at once dropped off to sleep. For a few days we managed to trick the boy by pulling up our blinds and so conveying to his mind the impression that we were getting up. Then he had not our breakfast ready when we did get up, which naturally enraged us.

As soon as he got on board that boy made his presence felt. He was very strong and energetic in the morning, and spent the first half-hour or so in flinging coals at each other. This was his way of breaking them; and he was by nature so patient and humble that he rather flattered himself when a coal broke at the twentieth attempt. We used to dream that he

was breaking coals on our heads. Often one of us dashed into the kitchen, threatening to drop him into the river if he did not sit quite still on a chair for the next two hours. Under these threats he looked sufficiently scared to satisfy anybody; but as soon as all was quiet again he crept back to the coal-bunk and was at his old games.

It didn't matter what we did, the boy put a stop to it. We tried whist, and in ten minutes there was a "Hoy, hie, ya-ho!" from the opposite shore. It was the boy come back with the vegetables. If we were reading, "Ya-ho, hie!" and some one had to cross for that boy and the water-can. The boy was on the tow-path just when we had fallen into a snooze; he had to be taken across for the milk immediately we had lighted our pipes. On the whole, it is an open question whether it was not even more annoying to take him over than to go for him. Two or three times we tried to be sociable and went into the village together; but no sooner had we begun to enjoy ourselves than we remembered that we must go back and let the boy ashore. Tennyson speaks of a company making believe to be merry while all the time the spirit of a departed one haunted them in their play. That was exactly the effect of the boy on us.

Even without the boy I hardly think we should have been a sociable party. The sight of so much humanity gathered in one room became a nuisance. We resorted to all kinds of subterfuge to escape from each other; and the one who finished breakfast first generally managed to make off with the dingy. The others were then at liberty to view him in the distance, in midstream, lying on his back in the bottom of the boat; and it was almost more than we could stand. The only way to bring him back was to bribe the boy into saying that he wanted to go across to the village for bacon or black lead or sardines. Thus even the boy had his uses.

Things gradually got worse and worse. I remember only one day when as many as four of us were on speaking terms. Even this temporary sociability was only brought about in order that we might combine and fall upon Jimmy with the more crushing force. Jimmy had put us in an article, representing himself as a kind of superior person who was making a study of us. The thing was such a gross caricature, and so dull, that it was Jimmy we were sorry for rather than ourselves. Still, we gathered round him in a body and told him what we thought of the matter. Affairs might have gone more smoothly after this if we four had been able to hold together. Unfortunately, Jimmy won Marriot over, and

next day there was a row all round, which resulted in our division into five parties.

One day Pettigrew visited us. He brought his Gladstone bag with him, but did not stay over night. He was glad to go; for at first none of us, I am afraid, was very civil to him, though we afterward thawed a little. He returned to London and told every one how he found us. I admit we were not prepared to receive company. The house-boat consisted of five apartments--a saloon, three bedrooms, and a kitchen. When he boarded us we were distributed as follows: I sat smoking in the saloon, Marriot sat smoking in the first bedroom, Gilray in the second, Jimmy in the third, and Scrymgeour in the kitchen. The boy did not keep Scrymgeour company. He had been ordered on deck, where he sat with his legs crossed, the picture of misery because he had no coals to break. A few days after Pettigrew's visit we followed him to London, leaving Scrymgeour behind, where we soon became friendly again.