

THE ARGONAUTS

The advent of strangers, of whatever sort, into our circle, had always been a matter of grave dubiety and suspicion; indeed, it was generally a signal for retreat into caves and fastnesses of the earth, into unthreaded copses or remote outlying cowsheds, whence we were only to be extricated by wily nursemaids, rendered familiar by experience with our secret runs and refuges. It was not surprising therefore that the heroes of classic legend, when first we made their acquaintance, failed to win our entire sympathy at once. "Confidence," says somebody, "is a plant of slow growth;" and these stately dark-haired demi-gods, with names hard to master and strange accoutrements, had to win a citadel already strongly garrisoned with a more familiar soldiery. Their chill foreign goddesses had no such direct appeal for us as the mocking malicious fairies and witches of the North; we missed the pleasant alliance of the animal--the fox who spread the bushiest of tails to convey us to the enchanted castle, the frog in the well, the raven who croaked advice from the tree; and--to Harold especially--it seemed entirely wrong that the hero should ever be other than the youngest brother of three. This belief, indeed, in the special fortune that ever awaited the youngest brother, as such,--the "Borough-English" of Faery,--had been of baleful effect on Harold, producing a certain self-conceit and perkiness that called for physical correction. But even in our admonishment we were on his side; and as we distrustfully eyed these new arrivals, old Saturn himself seemed something of a parvenu. Even strangers, however, we may develop into sworn comrades; and these gay swordsmen, after all,

were of the right stuff. Perseus, with his cap of darkness and his wonderful sandals, was not long in winging his way to our hearts; Apollo knocked at Admetus' gate in something of the right fairy fashion; Psyche brought with her an orthodox palace of magic, as well as helpful birds and friendly ants. Ulysses, with his captivating shifts and strategies, broke down the final barrier, and hence forth the band was adopted and admitted into our freemasonry. I had been engaged in chasing Farmer Larkin's calves--his special pride--round the field, just to show the man we hadn't forgotten him, and was returning through the kitchen-garden with a conscience at peace with all men, when I happened upon Edward, grubbing for worms in the dung-heap. Edward put his worms into his hat, and we strolled along together, discussing high matters of state. As we reached the tool-shed, strange noises arrested our steps; looking in, we perceived Harold, alone, rapt, absorbed, immersed in the special game of the moment. He was squatting in an old pig-trough that had been brought in to be tinkered; and as he rhapsodised, anon he waved a shovel over his head, anon dug it into the ground with the action of those who would urge Canadian canoes. Edward strode in upon him.

"What rot are you playing at now?" he demanded sternly.

Harold flushed up, but stuck to his pig-trough like a man.

"I'm Jason," he replied, defiantly; "and this is the Argo. The other fellows are here too, only you can't see them; and we're just going through the Hellespont, so don't you come bothering." And once more he plied the wine-dark sea.

Edward kicked the pig-trough contemptuously.

"Pretty sort of Argo you've got!" said he.

Harold began to get annoyed. "I can't help it," he replied. "It's the best sort of Argo I can manage, and it's all right if you only pretend enough; but YOU never could pretend one bit."

Edward reflected. "Look here," he said presently; "why shouldn't we get hold of Farmer Larkin's boat, and go right away up the river in a real Argo, and look for Medea, and the Golden Fleece, and everything? And I'll tell you what, I don't mind your being Jason, as you thought of it first."

Harold tumbled out of the trough in the excess of his emotion. "But we aren't allowed to go on the water by ourselves," he cried.

"No," said Edward, with fine scorn: "we aren't allowed; and Jason wasn't allowed either, I daresay--but he WENT!"

Harold's protest had been merely conventional: he only wanted to be convinced by sound argument. The next question was, How about the girls? Selina was distinctly handy in a boat: the difficulty about her was, that if she disapproved of the expedition--and, morally considered, it was not exactly a Pilgrim's Progress--she might go and tell; she

having just reached that disagreeable age when one begins to develop a conscience. Charlotte, for her part, had a habit of day-dreams, and was as likely as not to fall overboard in one of her rapt musings. To be sure, she would dissolve in tears when she found herself left out; but even that was better than a watery tomb. In fine, the public voice--and rightly, perhaps--was against the admission of the skirted animal: spite the precedent of Atalanta, who was one of the original crew.

"And now," said Edward, "who's to ask Farmer Larkin? I can't; last time I saw him he said when he caught me again he'd smack my head. YOU'LL have to."

I hesitated, for good reasons. "You know those precious calves of his?" I began.

Edward understood at once. "All right," he said; "then we won't ask him at all. It doesn't much matter. He'd only be annoyed, and that would be a pity. Now let's set off."

We made our way down to the stream, and captured the farmer's boat without let or hindrance, the enemy being engaged in the hayfields. This "river," so called, could never be discovered by us in any atlas; indeed our Argo could hardly turn in it without risk of shipwreck. But to us 't was Orinoco, and the cities of the world dotted its shores. We put the Argo's head up stream, since that led away from the Larkin province; Harold was faithfully permitted to be Jason, and we shared the rest of

the heroes among us. Then launching forth from Thessaly, we threaded the Hellespont with shouts, breathlessly dodged the Clashing Rocks, and coasted under the lee of the Siren-haunted isles. Lemnos was fringed with meadow-sweet, dog-roses dotted the Mysian shore, and the cheery call of the haymaking folk sounded along the coast of Thrace.

After some hour or two's seafaring, the prow of the Argo embedded itself in the mud of a landing-place, plashy with the tread of cows and giving on to a lane that led towards the smoke of human habitations. Edward jumped ashore, alert for exploration, and strode off without waiting to see if we followed; but I lingered behind, having caught sight of a moss-grown water-gate hard by, leading into a garden that from the brooding quiet lapping it round, appeared to portend magical possibilities.

Indeed the very air within seemed stiller, as we circumspectly passed through the gate; and Harold hung back shamefaced, as if we were crossing the threshold of some private chamber, and ghosts of old days were hustling past us. Flowers there were, everywhere; but they drooped and sprawled in an overgrowth hinting at indifference; the scent of heliotrope possessed the place, as if actually hung in solid festoons from tall untrimmed hedge to hedge. No basket-chairs, shawls, or novels dotted the lawn with colour; and on the garden-front of the house behind, the blinds were mostly drawn. A grey old sun-dial dominated the central sward, and we moved towards it instinctively, as the most human thing visible. An antique motto ran round it, and with eyes and fingers

we struggled at the decipherment.

"TIME: TRYETH: TROTHER:" spelt out Harold at last. "I wonder what that means?"

I could not enlighten him, nor meet his further questions as to the inner mechanism of the thing, and where you wound it up.

I had seen these instruments before, of course, but had never fully understood their manner of working.

We were still puzzling our heads over the contrivance, when I became aware that Medea herself was moving down the path from the house. Dark-haired, supple, of a figure lightly poised and swayed, but pale and listless--I knew her at once, and having come out to find her, naturally felt no surprise at all. But Harold, who was trying to climb on the top of the sun-dial, having a cat-like fondness for the summit of things, started and fell prone, barking his chin and filling the pleasance with lamentation.

Medea skimmed the ground swallow-like, and in a moment was on her knees

comforting him,--wiping the dirt out of his chin with her own dainty handkerchief,--and vocal with soft murmur of consolation.

"You needn't take on so about him," I observed, politely. "He'll cry for

just one minute, and then he'll be all right."

My estimate was justified. At the end of his regulation time Harold stopped crying suddenly, like a clock that had struck its hour; and with a serene and cheerful countenance wriggled out of Medea's embrace, and ran for a stone to throw at an intrusive blackbird.

"O you boys!" cried Medea, throwing wide her arms with abandonment. "Where have you dropped from? How dirty you are! I've been shut up here for a thousand years, and all that time I've never seen any one under a hundred and fifty! Let's play at something, at once!"

"Rounders is a good game," I suggested. "Girls can play at rounders. And we could serve up to the sun-dial here. But you want a bat and a ball, and some more people."

She struck her hands together tragically. "I haven't a bat," she cried, "or a ball, or more people, or anything sensible whatever. Never mind; let's play at hide-and-seek in the kitchen garden. And we'll race there, up to that walnut-tree; I haven't run for a century!"

She was so easy a victor, nevertheless, that I began to doubt, as I panted behind, whether she had not exaggerated her age by a year or two. She flung herself into hide-and-seek with all the gusto and abandonment of the true artist, and as she flitted away and reappeared, flushed and laughing divinely, the pale witch-maiden seemed to fall away from her,

and she moved rather as that other girl I had read about, snatched from fields of daffodil to reign in shadow below, yet permitted once again to visit earth, and light, and the frank, caressing air.

Tired at last, we strolled back to the old sundial, and Harold, who never relinquished a problem unsolved, began afresh, rubbing his finger along the faint incisions, "Time tryeth trothe. Please, I want to know what that means."

Medea's face drooped low over the sun-dial, till it was almost hidden in her fingers. "That's what I'm here for," she said presently, in quite a changed, low voice. "They shut me up here--they think I'll forget--but I never will--never, never! And he, too--but I don't know--it is so long--I don't know!"

Her face was quite hidden now. There was silence again in the old garden. I felt clumsily helpless and awkward; beyond a vague idea of kicking Harold, nothing remedial seemed to suggest itself.

None of us had noticed the approach of another she-creature--one of the angular and rigid class--how different from our dear comrade! The years Medea had claimed might well have belonged to her; she wore mittens, too--a trick I detested in woman. "Lucy!" she said, sharply, in a tone with AUNT writ large over it; and Medea started up guiltily.

"You've been crying," said the newcomer, grimly regarding her through

spectacles. "And pray who are these exceedingly dirty little boys?"

"Friends of mine, aunt," said Medea, promptly, with forced cheerfulness.

"I--I've known them a long time. I asked them to come."

The aunt sniffed suspiciously. "You must come indoors, dear," she said, "and lie down. The sun will give you a headache. And you little boys had better run away home to your tea. Remember, you should not come to pay visits without your nursemaid."

Harold had been tugging nervously at my jacket for some time, and I only waited till Medea turned and kissed a white hand to us as she was led away. Then I ran. We gained the boat in safety; and "What an old dragon!" said Harold.

"Wasn't she a beast!" I replied. "Fancy the sun giving any one a headache! But Medea was a real brick. Couldn't we carry her off?"

"We could if Edward was here," said Harold, confidently.

The question was, What had become of that defaulting hero? We were not left long in doubt. First, there came down the lane the shrill and wrathful clamour of a female tongue, then Edward, running his best, and then an excited woman hard on his heel. Edward tumbled into the bottom of the boat, gasping, "Shove her off!" And shove her off we did, mightily, while the dame abused us from the bank in the self same

accents in which Alfred hurled defiance at the marauding Dane.

"That was just like a bit out of Westward Ho!" I remarked approvingly, as we sculled down the stream. "But what had you been doing to her?"

"Hadn't been doing anything," panted Edward, still breathless. "I went up into the village and explored, and it was a very nice one, and the people were very polite. And there was a blacksmith's forge there, and they were shoeing horses, and the hoofs fizzled and smoked, and smelt so jolly! I stayed there quite a long time. Then I got thirsty, so I asked that old woman for some water, and while she was getting it her cat came out of the cottage, and looked at me in a nasty sort of way, and said something I didn't like. So I went up to it just to--to teach it manners, and somehow or other, next minute it was up an apple-tree, spitting, and I was running down the lane with that old thing after me."

Edward was so full of his personal injuries that there was no interesting him in Medea at all. Moreover, the evening was closing in, and it was evident that this cutting-out expedition must be kept for another day. As we neared home, it gradually occurred to us that perhaps the greatest danger was yet to come; for the farmer must have missed his boat ere now, and would probably be lying in wait for us near the landing-place. There was no other spot admitting of debarcation on the home side; if we got out on the other, and made for the bridge, we should certainly be seen and cut off. Then it was that I blessed my stars that our elder brother was with us that day,--he might be little

good at pretending, but in grappling with the stern facts of life he had no equal. Enjoining silence, he waited till we were but a little way from the fated landing-place, and then brought us in to the opposite bank. We scrambled out noiselessly, and--the gathering darkness favouring us--crouched behind a willow, while Edward pushed off the empty boat with his foot. The old Argo, borne down by the gentle current, slid and grazed along the rushy bank; and when she came opposite the suspected ambush, a stream of imprecation told us that our precaution had not been wasted. We wondered, as we listened, where Farmer Larkin, who was bucolically bred and reared, had acquired such range and wealth of vocabulary. Fully realising at last that his boat was derelict, abandoned, at the mercy of wind and wave,--as well as out of his reach,--he strode away to the bridge, about a quarter of a mile further down; and as soon as we heard his boots clumping on the planks, we nipped out, recovered the craft, pulled across, and made the faithful vessel fast to her proper moorings. Edward was anxious to wait and exchange courtesies and compliments with the disappointed farmer, when he should confront us on the opposite bank; but wiser counsels prevailed. It was possible that the piracy was not yet laid at our particular door: Ulysses, I reminded him, had reason to regret a similar act of bravado, and--were he here--would certainly advise a timely retreat. Edward held but a low opinion of me as a counsellor; but he had a very solid respect for Ulysses.