

THE OLD LOCK FARM

A STORY OF CANAL LIFE
BY ANNIE GRAY

CHAPTER 1

THE MARY ANN

Threading its tortuous way through one of England's most picturesque counties, now glistening like a band of silver amid broad acres of pasture land, anon ascending, by means of numerous "locks", till it is lost to sight among the wooded hills, runs one of those great waterways upon whose placid bosom traverses by day and by night so vast a portion of the traffic of our land. For many miles on either side of the quaint old farm which gives its name to our story, this canal is a very beautiful object. Parks and meadows, varied by an occasional tiny farmstead, run down to the water's edge, giving place here and there to pretty groves, particularly as you mount up towards the "fourteen locks", groves made romantic by the multitude of little waterfalls which tumble tumultuously down the slope, and rush with a foam and a tiny dash into the quiet canal. The barges themselves, too, do much towards beautifying this picturesque spot. There are few prettier sights than, in the sunshine of a fair May day, or the twilight of a summer eve, to look down from the rising ground and watch one of these barges gliding calmly along beneath the shadowing trees. And when, as is often the case, you see the whole of its inmates seated on deck enjoying the sweet fresh air, you find it almost difficult to conceive that life on board can be otherwise than wholly delightful.

Yet were we to question the barge folk themselves, how quickly should we be led to change our opinion! Here, for instance, is little Jem Ford – Jem of the Mary Ann – to whom I want now to introduce you. What a different tale he could tell us! - supposing we could succeed in coaxing so wild and untamed a specimen of boyhood to stand still while we questioned him.

Jem could tell us of wild weird tracks of land, miles from here, through which canals must wend their merry way ; of rough and crowded wharves piled with coal heaps, timber, sacks of corn and what not, wharves made horrible oftentimes by the incessant flow of bad language which falls from the lips of all too many of the men and women who spend their lives on the water. He could remind us that it is not always summer, and that the sun is not always shining ; that in rain and hail, in wind and in snow, in the depth of winter as in the height of summer, weary feet must traverse long miles of tow path by the side of the patient horse, stumble over frozen ridges and splash through mud and clay.

Jem could tell us too, child though he is, that canal life is truly not to be judged by appearances, for that in sadly too few of those crowded little cabins is real home happiness to be found. He could speak very shrewdly of the dirty shops, half general store and half beer house, which hide themselves away in some secluded spot on the route. Many a sad story he could tell of these modest looking little places where besides the food, and often the clothing of the family, the barge folk can procure the liquor which brings into their floating homes such misery and sin, such wretchedness and distress.

Alas! Yes ; little Jem could tell us so much of sadness and of sorrow, so much of ignorance and depravity, that as we listened we should speedily come to look upon these picturesque old barges with feelings of strong pity and compassion, rather than admiration. And perchance there might force itself into our hearts the earnest thought whether it were not possible to do something towards changing the tenor of existing barge life, something towards bringing the light of truth into hearts so ignorant, and homes so neglected and unblessed.

Our little hero himself, however, would never have dreamed of grumbling at his own particular lot.

Indeed he had no cause to do so, the Mary Ann having come to be looked upon by both himself and all the other Tanham canal children as a perfect Paradise of comfort and even luxury. Yes, even though to the full the old black barge was as grimy and dirty, as close and stuffy as any of the rest.

But the never ending quarrelling and fighting which went on in the homes of most of Jem's little companions, had no place in his. Jem's father was not a drunkard. Morose he was, silent and gloomy as no other man on the canal. But Jem had never once had to fly in terror from him, and never had known what it was to feel hungry, or shiver from head to foot on the bleak tow path in winter, under clad and under fed. True, he had no mother, and neither brother nor sister, and had never in all his short life known love from his father. All the attention he received from him consisted in his being stolidly told to "turn out" at a certain hour each morning ; next shortly invited to "tuck in" ; then sent off for the day's tramp along the monotonous tow path ; and after that left alone.

But at one end of the barge, well out of the way of the cargoes, stood a small, rough and most amateur erection, which when opened disclosed to view the very joy of Jem's life – some eight or ten fine rabbits. A new coop close by contained a few specimens of rather dwarfed poultry ; while a fine sleek cat, and a rough little terrier dog called "Shag" completed the "happy family". And so, rejoicing in the possession of his treasures, and never having known any other pleasures, Jem's lot was by contrast so unspeakably bright and happy, that he pitied with all his generous heart his less fortunate playmates, and was quite ready to echo their somewhat envious remarks upon his good fortune.

It was a quiet evening, early in the summer. The stars were already beginning to twinkle in the sky, and never a sound disturbed the solemn silence of the brooding twilight.

Jem was spending his evening in his ordinary fashion. The rabbits had had their airing, and now he himself was busily exercising his limbs in the energetic fashion which had long since made him remarkable for strength and agility even among his sturdiest companions. Head over heels tumbled Jem, cartwheel fashion, with Shag running and barking and jumping at his side. Then he sprang to his feet, and went through a most marvellous series of gymnastics of his own invention ; next, with a whistle and a song, he went through a kind of jig which resembled an Indian war dance rather than anything else ; then back to the cart wheel evolutions again ; until, fairly exhausted, and worked up to a state of heat and laughter which made Shag half frantic with excitement, the young athlete flung himself down on the bank to rest.

It was Sunday evening. But what was Sunday to Jem? The Mary Ann had made her journey as usual that day, and Sunday meant no more to Jem or his father than Monday or Tuesday, or any other day. Not very far away from where he lay, there was service going on in a pretty ivy covered little church. But Jem knew nothing of that. And if he had, he never would have dared to venture within so sacred an edifice – he, a bargeman's boy, accustomed from his very earliest years to be looked down upon!

So Jem played with Shag, while his father, leaning against the tiller, puffed great clouds of smoke from his short black pipe ; and sundry ominous sounds of fighting and quarrelling, which all this time had proceeded from another barge at a little distance, gradually died away, and the shades of evening deepened, till Jem's merry whistle died away too, and with Shag in his arms he lay in a kind of awed silence, gazing up into the glorious expanse of cloudless sky.