

XX. HOW THEY LESSENERED THE EFFECT OF THE CALAMITY

Meanwhile Anne Garland had gone home, and, being weary with her ramble in

search of Matilda, sat silent in a corner of the room. Her mother was passing the time in giving utterance to every conceivable surmise on the cause of Miss Johnson's disappearance that the human mind could frame, to

which Anne returned monosyllabic answers, the result, not of indifference, but of intense preoccupation. Presently Loveday, the father, came to the door; her mother vanished with him, and they remained closeted together a long time. Anne went into the garden and seated herself beneath the branching tree whose boughs had sheltered her during so many hours of her residence here. Her attention was fixed more upon the miller's wing of the irregular building before her than upon that occupied by her mother, for she could not help expecting every moment to see some one run out with a wild face and announce some awful clearing up of the mystery.

Every sound set her on the alert, and hearing the tread of a horse in the lane she looked round eagerly. Gazing at her over the hedge was Festus Derriman, mounted on such an incredibly tall animal that he could see to her very feet over the thick and broad thorn fence. She no sooner recognized him than she withdrew her glance; but as his eyes were fixed steadily upon her this was a futile manoeuvre.

'I saw you look round!' he exclaimed crossly. 'What have I done to make you behave like that? Come, Miss Garland, be fair. 'Tis no use to turn your back upon me.' As she did not turn he went on--'Well, now, this is enough to provoke a saint. Now I tell you what, Miss Garland; here I'll stay till you do turn round, if 'tis all the afternoon. You know my temper--what I say I mean.' He seated himself firmly in the saddle, plucked some leaves from the hedge, and began humming a song, to show how absolutely indifferent he was to the flight of time.

'What have you come for, that you are so anxious to see me?' inquired Anne, when at last he had wearied her patience, rising and facing him with the added independence which came from a sense of the hedge between them.

'There, I knew you would turn round!' he said, his hot angry face invaded by a smile in which his teeth showed like white hemmed in by red at chess.

'What do you want, Mr. Derriman?' said she.

""What do you want, Mr. Derriman?"--now listen to that! Is that my encouragement?'

Anne bowed superciliously, and moved away.

'I have just heard news that explains all that,' said the giant, eyeing her movements with somnolent irascibility. 'My uncle has been letting things out. He was here late last night, and he saw you.'

'Indeed he didn't,' said Anne.

'O, now! He saw Trumpet-major Loveday courting somebody like you in that garden walk; and when he came you ran indoors.'

'It is not true, and I wish to hear no more.'

'Upon my life, he said so! How can you do it, Miss Garland, when I, who have enough money to buy up all the Lovedays, would gladly come to terms with ye? What a simpleton you must be, to pass me over for him! There, now you are angry because I said simpleton!--I didn't mean simpleton, I meant misguided--misguided rosebud! That's it--run off,' he continued in a raised voice, as Anne made towards the garden door. 'But I'll have you yet. Much reason you have to be too proud to stay with me. But it won't last long; I shall marry you, madam, if I choose, as you'll see.'

When he was quite gone, and Anne had calmed down from the not altogether

unrelished fear and excitement that he always caused her, she returned to her seat under the tree, and began to wonder what Festus Derriman's story meant, which, from the earnestness of his tone, did not seem like a pure invention. It suddenly flashed upon her mind that she herself had heard

voices in the garden, and that the persons seen by Farmer Derriman, of whose visit and reclamation of his box the miller had told her, might have been Matilda and John Loveday. She further recalled the strange agitation of Miss Johnson on the preceding evening, and that it occurred just at the entry of the dragoon, till by degrees suspicion amounted to conviction that he knew more than any one else supposed of that lady's disappearance.

It was just at this time that the trumpet-major descended to the mill after his talk with his brother on the down. As fate would have it, instead of entering the house he turned aside to the garden and walked down that pleasant enclosure, to learn if he were likely to find in the other half of it the woman he loved so well.

Yes, there she was, sitting on the seat of logs that he had repaired for her, under the apple-tree; but she was not facing in his direction. He walked with a noisier tread, he coughed, he shook a bough, he did everything, in short, but the one thing that Festus did in the same circumstances--call out to her. He would not have ventured on that for the world. Any of his signs would have been sufficient to attract her a day or two earlier; now she would not turn. At last, in his fond anxiety, he did what he had never done before without an invitation, and crossed over into Mrs. Garland's half of the garden, till he stood before her.

When she could not escape him she arose, and, saying 'Good afternoon,

trumpet-major,' in a glacial manner unusual with her, walked away to another part of the garden.

Loveday, quite at a loss, had not the strength of mind to persevere further. He had a vague apprehension that some imperfect knowledge of the previous night's unhappy business had reached her; and, unable to remedy the evil without telling more than he dared, he went into the mill, where his father still was, looking doleful enough, what with his concern at events and the extra quantity of flour upon his face through sticking so closely to business that day.

'Well, John; Bob has told you all, of course? A queer, strange, perplexing thing, isn't it? I can't make it out at all. There must be something wrong in the woman, or it couldn't have happened. I haven't been so upset for years.'

'Nor have I. I wouldn't it should have happened for all I own in the world,' said the dragoon. 'Have you spoke to Anne Garland to-day--or has anybody been talking to her?'

'Festus Derriman rode by half-an-hour ago, and talked to her over the hedge.'

John guessed the rest, and, after standing on the threshold in silence awhile, walked away towards the camp.

All this time his brother Robert had been hastening along in pursuit of the woman who had withdrawn from the scene to avoid the exposure and complete overthrow which would have resulted had she remained. As the distance lengthened between himself and the mill, Bob was conscious of some cooling down of the excitement that had prompted him to set out; but he did not pause in his walk till he had reached the head of the river which fed the mill-stream. Here, for some indefinite reason, he allowed his eyes to be attracted by the bubbling spring whose waters never failed or lessened, and he stopped as if to look longer at the scene; it was really because his mind was so absorbed by John's story.

The sun was warm, the spot was a pleasant one, and he deposited his bundle and sat down. By degrees, as he reflected, first on John's view and then on his own, his convictions became unsettled; till at length he was so balanced between the impulse to go on and the impulse to go back, that a puff of wind either way would have been well-nigh sufficient to decide for him. When he allowed John's story to repeat itself in his ears, the reasonableness and good sense of his advice seemed beyond question. When, on the other hand, he thought of his poor Matilda's eyes, and her, to him, pleasant ways, their charming arrangements to marry, and her probable willingness still, he could hardly bring himself to do otherwise than follow on the road at the top of his speed.

This strife of thought was so well maintained that sitting and standing, he remained on the borders of the spring till the shadows had stretched out eastwards, and the chance of overtaking Matilda had grown

considerably less. Still he did not positively go towards home. At last he took a guinea from his pocket, and resolved to put the question to the hazard. 'Heads I go; tails I don't.' The piece of gold spun in the air and came down heads.

'No, I won't go, after all,' he said. 'I won't be steered by accidents any more.'

He picked up his bundle and switch, and retraced his steps towards Overcombe Mill, knocking down the brambles and nettles as he went with gloomy and indifferent blows. When he got within sight of the house he beheld David in the road.

'All right--all right again, captain!', shouted that retainer. 'A wedding after all! Hurrah!'

'Ah--she's back again?' cried Bob, seizing David, ecstatically, and dancing round with him.

'No--but it's all the same! it is of no consequence at all, and no harm will be done! Maister and Mrs. Garland have made up a match, and mean to marry at once, that the wedding victuals may not be wasted! They felt 'twould be a thousand pities to let such good things get blue-vinnied for want of a ceremony to use 'em upon, and at last they have thought of this.'

'Victuals--I don't care for the victuals!' bitterly cried Bob, in a tone of far higher thought. 'How you disappoint me!' and he went slowly towards the house.

His father appeared in the opening of the mill-door, looking more cheerful than when they had parted. 'What, Robert, you've been after her?' he said. 'Faith, then, I wouldn't have followed her if I had been as sure as you were that she went away in scorn of us. Since you told me that, I have not looked for her at all.'

'I was wrong, father,' Bob replied gravely, throwing down his bundle and stick. 'Matilda, I find, has not gone away in scorn of us; she has gone away for other reasons. I followed her some way; but I have come back again. She may go.'

'Why is she gone?' said the astonished miller.

Bob had intended, for Matilda's sake, to give no reason to a living soul for her departure. But he could not treat his father thus reservedly; and he told.

'She has made great fools of us,' said the miller deliberately; 'and she might have made us greater ones. Bob, I thought th' hadst more sense.'

'Well, don't say anything against her, father,' implored Bob. "'Twas a

sorry haul, and there's an end on't. Let her down quietly, and keep the secret. You promise that?'

'I do.' Loveday the elder remained thinking awhile, and then went on--'Well, what I was going to say is this: I've hit upon a plan to get out of the awkward corner she has put us in. What you'll think of it I can't say.'

'David has just given me the heads.'

'And do it hurt your feelings, my son, at such a time?'

'No--I'll bring myself to bear it, anyhow! Why should I object to other people's happiness because I have lost my own?' said Bob, with saintly self-sacrifice in his air.

'Well said!' answered the miller heartily. 'But you may be sure that there will be no unseemly rejoicing, to disturb ye in your present frame of mind. All the morning I felt more ashamed than I cared to own at the thought of how the neighbours, great and small, would laugh at what they would call your folly, when they knew what had happened; so I resolved to take this step to stave it off, if so be 'twas possible. And when I saw Mrs. Garland I knew I had done right. She pitied me so much for having had the house cleaned in vain, and laid in provisions to waste, that it put her into the humour to agree. We mean to do it right off at once, afore the pies and cakes get mouldy and the blackpot stale. 'Twas a good

thought of mine and hers, and I am glad 'tis settled,' he concluded cheerfully.

'Poor Matilda!' murmured Bob.

'There--I was afraid 'twould hurt thy feelings,' said the miller, with self-reproach: 'making preparations for thy wedding, and using them for my own!'

'No,' said Bob heroically; 'it shall not. It will be a great comfort in my sorrow to feel that the splendid grub, and the ale, and your stunning new suit of clothes, and the great table-cloths you've bought, will be just as useful now as if I had married myself. Poor Matilda! But you won't expect me to join in--you hardly can. I can sheer off that day very easily, you know.'

'Nonsense, Bob!' said the miller reproachfully.

'I couldn't stand it--I should break down.'

'Deuce take me if I would have asked her, then, if I had known 'twas going to drive thee out of the house! Now, come, Bob, I'll find a way of arranging it and sobering it down, so that it shall be as melancholy as you can require--in short, just like a funeral, if thou'lt promise to stay?'

'Very well,' said the afflicted one. 'On that condition I'll stay.'