

XXXI. MIDNIGHT VISITORS

Miss Garland and Loveday walked leisurely to the inn and called for horse-and-gig. While the hostler was bringing it round, the landlord, who knew Bob and his family well, spoke to him quietly in the passage.

'Is this then because you want to throw dust in the eyes of the Black Diamond chaps?' (with an admiring glance at Bob's costume).

'The Black Diamond?' said Bob; and Anne turned pale.

'She hove in sight just after dark, and at nine o'clock a boat having more than a dozen marines on board, with cloaks on, rowed into harbour.'

Bob reflected. 'Then there'll be a press to-night; depend upon it,' he said.

'They won't know you, will they, Bob?' said Anne anxiously.

'They certainly won't know him for a seaman now,' remarked the landlord, laughing, and again surveying Bob up and down. 'But if I was you two, I should drive home-along straight and quiet; and be very busy in the mill all to-morrow, Mr. Loveday.'

They drove away; and when they had got onward out of the town, Anne

strained her eyes wistfully towards Portland. Its dark contour, lying like a whale on the sea, was just perceptible in the gloom as the background to half-a-dozen ships' lights nearer at hand.

'They can't make you go, now you are a gentleman tradesman, can they?' she asked.

'If they want me they can have me, dearest. I have often said I ought to volunteer.'

'And not care about me at all?'

'It is just that that keeps me at home. I won't leave you if I can help it.'

'It cannot make such a vast difference to the country whether one man goes or stays! But if you want to go you had better, and not mind us at all!'

Bob put a period to her speech by a mark of affection to which history affords many parallels in every age. She said no more about the Black Diamond; but whenever they ascended a hill she turned her head to look at the lights in Portland Roads, and the grey expanse of intervening sea.

Though Captain Bob had stated that he did not wish to volunteer, and would not leave her if he could help it, the remark required some

qualification. That Anne was charming and loving enough to chain him anywhere was true; but he had begun to find the mill-work terribly irksome at times. Often during the last month, when standing among the rumbling cogs in his new miller's suit, which ill became him, he had yawned, thought wistfully of the old pea-jacket, and the waters of the deep blue sea. His dread of displeasing his father by showing anything of this change of sentiment was great; yet he might have braved it but for knowing that his marriage with Anne, which he hoped might take place the next year, was dependent entirely upon his adherence to the mill business. Even were his father indifferent, Mrs. Loveday would never intrust her only daughter to the hands of a husband who would be away from home five-sixths of his time.

But though, apart from Anne, he was not averse to seafaring in itself, to be smuggled thither by the machinery of a press-gang was intolerable; and the process of seizing, stunning, pinioning, and carrying off unwilling hands was one which Bob as a man had always determined to hold out against to the utmost of his power. Hence, as they went towards home, he frequently listened for sounds behind him, but hearing none he assured his sweetheart that they were safe for that night at least. The mill was still going when they arrived, though old Mr. Loveday was not to be seen; he had retired as soon as he heard the horse's hoofs in the lane, leaving Bob to watch the grinding till three o'clock; when the elder would rise, and Bob withdraw to bed--a frequent arrangement between them since Bob had taken the place of grinder.

Having reached the privacy of her own room, Anne threw open the window, for she had not the slightest intention of going to bed just yet. The tale of the Black Diamond had disturbed her by a slow, insidious process that was worse than sudden fright. Her window looked into the court before the house, now wrapped in the shadow of the trees and the hill; and she leaned upon its sill listening intently. She could have heard any strange sound distinctly enough in one direction; but in the other all low noises were absorbed in the patter of the mill, and the rush of water down the race.

However, what she heard came from the hitherto silent side, and was intelligible in a moment as being the footsteps of men. She tried to think they were some late stragglers from Budmouth. Alas! no; the tramp was too regular for that of villagers. She hastily turned, extinguished the candle, and listened again. As they were on the main road there was, after all, every probability that the party would pass the bridge which gave access to the mill court without turning in upon it, or even noticing that such an entrance existed. In this again she was disappointed: they crossed into the front without a pause. The pulsations of her heart became a turmoil now, for why should these men, if they were the press-gang, and strangers to the locality, have supposed that a sailor was to be found here, the younger of the two millers Loveday being never seen now in any garb which could suggest that he was other than a miller pure, like his father? One of the men spoke.

'I am not sure that we are in the right place,' he said.

'This is a mill, anyhow,' said another.

'There's lots about here.'

'Then come this way a moment with your light.'

Two of the group went towards the cart-house on the opposite side of the yard, and when they reached it a dark lantern was opened, the rays being directed upon the front of the miller's waggon.

"Loveday and Son, Overcombe Mill," continued the man, reading from the waggon. "Son," you see, is lately painted in. That's our man.'

He moved to turn off the light, but before he had done so it flashed over the forms of the speakers, and revealed a sergeant, a naval officer, and a file of marines.

Anne waited to see no more. When Bob stayed up to grind, as he was doing to-night, he often sat in his room instead of remaining all the time in the mill; and this room was an isolated chamber over the bakehouse, which could not be reached without going downstairs and ascending the step-ladder that served for his staircase. Anne descended in the dark, clambered up the ladder, and saw that light strayed through the chink below the door. His window faced towards the garden, and hence the light could not as yet have been seen by the press-gang.

'Bob, dear Bob!' she said, through the keyhole. 'Put out your light, and run out of the back-door!'

'Why?' said Bob, leisurely knocking the ashes from the pipe he had been smoking.

'The press-gang!'

'They have come? By God! who can have blown upon me? All right, dearest. I'm game.'

Anne, scarcely knowing what she did, descended the ladder and ran to the back-door, hastily unbolting it to save Bob's time, and gently opening it in readiness for him. She had no sooner done this than she felt hands laid upon her shoulder from without, and a voice exclaiming, 'That's how we doos it--quite an obleeing young man!'

Though the hands held her rather roughly, Anne did not mind for herself, and turning she cried desperately, in tones intended to reach Bob's ears: 'They are at the back-door; try the front!'

But inexperienced Miss Garland little knew the shrewd habits of the gentlemen she had to deal with, who, well used to this sort of pastime, had already posted themselves at every outlet from the premises.

'Bring the lantern,' shouted the fellow who held her. 'Why--'tis a girl! I half thought so--Here is a way in,' he continued to his comrades, hastening to the foot of the ladder which led to Bob's room.

'What d'ye want?' said Bob, quietly opening the door, and showing himself still radiant in the full dress that he had worn with such effect at the Theatre Royal, which he had been about to change for his mill suit when Anne gave the alarm.

'This gentleman can't be the right one,' observed a marine, rather impressed by Bob's appearance.

'Yes, yes; that's the man,' said the sergeant. 'Now take it quietly, my young cock-o'-wax. You look as if you meant to, and 'tis wise of ye.'

'Where are you going to take me?' said Bob.

'Only aboard the Black Diamond. If you choose to take the bounty and come voluntarily, you'll be allowed to go ashore whenever your ship's in port. If you don't, and we've got to pinion ye, you will not have your liberty at all. As you must come, willy-nilly, you'll do the first if you've any brains whatever.'

Bob's temper began to rise. 'Don't you talk so large, about your pinioning, my man. When I've settled--'

'Now or never, young blow-hard,' interrupted his informant.

'Come, what jabber is this going on?' said the lieutenant, stepping forward. 'Bring your man.'

One of the marines set foot on the ladder, but at the same moment a shoe from Bob's hand hit the lantern with well-aimed directness, knocking it clean out of the grasp of the man who held it. In spite of the darkness they began to scramble up the ladder. Bob thereupon shut the door, which being but of slight construction, was as he knew only a momentary defence. But it gained him time enough to open the window, gather up his legs upon the sill, and spring across into the apple-tree growing without. He alighted without much hurt beyond a few scratches from the boughs, a shower of falling apples testifying to the force of his leap.

'Here he is!' shouted several below who had seen Bob's figure flying like a raven's across the sky.

There was stillness for a moment in the tree. Then the fugitive made haste to climb out upon a low-hanging branch towards the garden, at which the men beneath all rushed in that direction to catch him as he dropped, saying, 'You may as well come down, old boy. 'Twas a spry jump, and we give ye credit for 't.'

The latter movement of Loveday had been a mere feint. Partly hidden by the leaves he glided back to the other part of the tree, from whence it

was easy to jump upon a thatch-covered out-house. This intention they did not appear to suspect, which gave him the opportunity of sliding down the slope and entering the back door of the mill.

'He's here, he's here!' the men exclaimed, running back from the tree.

By this time they had obtained another light, and pursued him closely along the back quarters of the mill. Bob had entered the lower room, seized hold of the chain by which the flour-sacks were hoisted from story to story by connexion with the mill-wheel, and pulled the rope that hung alongside for the purpose of throwing it into gear. The foremost pursuers arrived just in time to see Captain Bob's legs and shoe-buckles vanishing through the trap-door in the joists overhead, his person having been whirled up by the machinery like any bag of flour, and the trap falling to behind him.

'He's gone up by the hoist!' said the sergeant, running up the ladder in the corner to the next floor, and elevating the light just in time to see Bob's suspended figure ascending in the same way through the same sort of trap into the second floor. The second trap also fell together behind him, and he was lost to view as before.

It was more difficult to follow now; there was only a flimsy little ladder, and the men ascended cautiously. When they stepped out upon the loft it was empty.

'He must ha' let go here,' said one of the marines, who knew more about mills than the others. 'If he had held fast a moment longer, he would have been dashed against that beam.'

They looked up. The hook by which Bob had held on had ascended to the roof, and was winding round the cylinder. Nothing was visible elsewhere but boarded divisions like the stalls of a stable, on each side of the stage they stood upon, these compartments being more or less heaped up with wheat and barley in the grain.

'Perhaps he's buried himself in the corn.'

The whole crew jumped into the corn-bins, and stirred about their yellow contents; but neither arm, leg, nor coat-tail was uncovered. They removed sacks, peeped among the rafters of the roof, but to no purpose. The lieutenant began to fume at the loss of time.

'What cursed fools to let the man go! Why, look here, what's this?' He had opened the door by which sacks were taken in from waggons without, and dangling from the cat-head projecting above it was the rope used in lifting them. 'There's the way he went down,' the officer continued.

'The man's gone.'

Amidst mumblings and curses the gang descended the pair of ladders and came into the open air; but Captain Bob was nowhere to be seen. When they reached the front door of the house the miller was standing on the

threshold, half dressed.

'Your son is a clever fellow, miller,' said the lieutenant; 'but it would have been much better for him if he had come quiet.'

'That's a matter of opinion,' said Loveday.

'I have no doubt that he's in the house.'

'He may be; and he may not.'

'Do you know where he is?'

'I do not; and if I did I shouldn't tell.'

'Naturally.'

'I heard steps beating up the road, sir,' said the sergeant.

They turned from the door, and leaving four of the marines to keep watch round the house, the remainder of the party marched into the lane as far as where the other road branched off. While they were pausing to decide which course to take, one of the soldiers held up the light. A black object was discernible upon the ground before them, and they found it to be a hat--the hat of Bob Loveday.

'We are on the track,' cried the sergeant, deciding for this direction.

They tore on rapidly, and the footsteps previously heard became audible again, increasing in clearness, which told that they gained upon the fugitive, who in another five minutes stopped and turned. The rays of the candle fell upon Anne.

'What do you want?' she said, showing her frightened face.

They made no reply, but wheeled round and left her. She sank down on the bank to rest, having done all she could. It was she who had taken down Bob's hat from a nail, and dropped it at the turning with the view of misleading them till he should have got clear off.