

XXXII. DELIVERANCE

But Anne Garland was too anxious to remain long away from the centre of operations. When she got back she found that the press-gang were standing in the court discussing their next move.

'Waste no more time here,' the lieutenant said. 'Two more villages to visit to-night, and the nearest three miles off. There's nobody else in this place, and we can't come back again.'

When they were moving away, one of the private marines, who had kept his eye on Anne, and noticed her distress, contrived to say in a whisper as he passed her, 'We are coming back again as soon as it begins to get light; that's only said to deceive 'ee. Keep your young man out of the way.'

They went as they had come; and the little household then met together, Mrs. Loveday having by this time dressed herself and come down. A long and anxious discussion followed.

'Somebody must have told upon the chap,' Loveday remarked. 'How should they have found him out else, now he's been home from sea this twelvemonth?'

Anne then mentioned what the friendly marine had told her; and fearing

lest Bob was in the house, and would be discovered there when daylight came, they searched and called for him everywhere.

'What clothes has he got on?' said the miller.

'His lovely new suit,' said his wife. 'I warrant it is quite spoiled!'

'He's got no hat,' said Anne.

'Well,' said Loveday, 'you two go and lie down now and I'll bide up; and as soon as he comes in, which he'll do most likely in the course of the night, I'll let him know that they are coming again.'

Anne and Mrs. Loveday went to their bedrooms, and the miller entered the mill as if he were simply staying up to grind. But he continually left the flour-shoot to go outside and walk round; each time he could see no living being near the spot. Anne meanwhile had lain down dressed upon her bed, the window still open, her ears intent upon the sound of footsteps and dreading the reappearance of daylight and the gang's return. Three or four times during the night she descended to the mill to inquire of her stepfather if Bob had shown himself; but the answer was always in the negative.

At length the curtains of her bed began to reveal their pattern, the brass handles of the drawers gleamed forth, and day dawned. While the light was yet no more than a suffusion of pallor, she arose, put on her

hat, and determined to explore the surrounding premises before the men arrived. Emerging into the raw loneliness of the daybreak, she went upon the bridge and looked up and down the road. It was as she had left it, empty, and the solitude was rendered yet more insistent by the silence of the mill-wheel, which was now stopped, the miller having given up expecting Bob and retired to bed about three o'clock. The footprints of the marines still remained in the dust on the bridge, all the heel-marks towards the house, showing that the party had not as yet returned.

While she lingered she heard a slight noise in the other direction, and, turning, saw a woman approaching. The woman came up quickly, and, to her

amazement, Anne recognized Matilda. Her walk was convulsive, face pale, almost haggard, and the cold light of the morning invested it with all the ghostliness of death. She had plainly walked all the way from Budmouth, for her shoes were covered with dust.

'Has the press-gang been here?' she gasped. 'If not they are coming!'

'They have been.'

'And got him--I am too late!'

'No; they are coming back again. Why did you--'

'I came to try to save him. Can we save him? Where is he?'

Anne looked the woman in the face, and it was impossible to doubt that she was in earnest.

'I don't know,' she answered. 'I am trying to find him before they come.'

'Will you not let me help you?' cried the repentant Matilda.

Without either objecting or assenting Anne turned and led the way to the back part of the homestead.

Matilda, too, had suffered that night. From the moment of parting with Festus Derriman a sentiment of revulsion from the act to which she had been a party set in and increased, till at length it reached an intensity of remorse which she could not passively bear. She had risen before day and hastened thitherward to know the worst, and if possible hinder consequences that she had been the first to set in train.

After going hither and thither in the adjoining field, Anne entered the garden. The walks were bathed in grey dew, and as she passed observantly along them it appeared as if they had been brushed by some foot at a much earlier hour. At the end of the garden, bushes of broom, laurel, and yew formed a constantly encroaching shrubbery, that had come there almost by chance, and was never trimmed. Behind these bushes was a garden-seat, and upon it lay Bob sound asleep.

The ends of his hair were clotted with damp, and there was a foggy film upon the mirror-like buttons of his coat, and upon the buckles of his shoes. His bunch of new gold seals was dimmed by the same insidious dampness; his shirt-frill and muslin neckcloth were limp as seaweed. It was plain that he had been there a long time. Anne shook him, but he did not awake, his breathing being slow and stertorous.

'Bob, wake; 'tis your own Anne!' she said, with innocent earnestness; and then, fearfully turning her head, she saw that Matilda was close behind her.

'You needn't mind me,' said Matilda bitterly. 'I am on your side now. Shake him again.'

Anne shook him again, but he slept on. Then she noticed that his forehead bore the mark of a heavy wound.

'I fancy I hear something!' said her companion, starting forward and endeavouring to wake Bob herself. 'He is stunned, or drugged!' she said; 'there is no rousing him.'

Anne raised her head and listened. From the direction of the eastern road came the sound of a steady tramp. 'They are coming back!' she said, clasping her hands. 'They will take him, ill as he is! He won't open his eyes--no, it is no use! O, what shall we do?'

Matilda did not reply, but running to the end of the seat on which Bob lay, tried its weight in her arms.

'It is not too heavy,' she said. 'You take that end, and I'll take this. We'll carry him away to some place of hiding.'

Anne instantly seized the other end, and they proceeded with their burden at a slow pace to the lower garden-gate, which they reached as the tread of the press-gang resounded over the bridge that gave access to the mill court, now hidden from view by the hedge and the trees of the garden.

'We will go down inside this field,' said Anne faintly.

'No!' said the other; 'they will see our foot-tracks in the dew. We must go into the road.'

'It is the very road they will come down when they leave the mill.'

'It cannot be helped; it is neck or nothing with us now.'

So they emerged upon the road, and staggered along without speaking, occasionally resting for a moment to ease their arms; then shaking him to arouse him, and finding it useless, seizing the seat again. When they had gone about two hundred yards Matilda betrayed signs of exhaustion, and she asked, 'Is there no shelter near?'

'When we get to that little field of corn,' said Anne.

'It is so very far. Surely there is some place near?'

She pointed to a few scrubby bushes overhanging a little stream, which passed under the road near this point.

'They are not thick enough,' said Anne.

'Let us take him under the bridge,' said Matilda. 'I can go no further.'

Entering the opening by which cattle descended to drink, they waded into the weedy water, which here rose a few inches above their ankles. To ascend the stream, stoop under the arch, and reach the centre of the roadway, was the work of a few minutes.

'If they look under the arch we are lost,' murmured Anne.

'There is no parapet to the bridge, and they may pass over without heeding.'

They waited, their heads almost in contact with the reeking arch, and their feet encircled by the stream, which was at its summer lowness now. For some minutes they could hear nothing but the babble of the water over their ankles, and round the legs of the seat on which Bob slumbered, the

sounds being reflected in a musical tinkle from the hollow sides of the arch. Anne's anxiety now was lest he should not continue sleeping till the search was over, but start up with his habitual imprudence, and scorning such means of safety, rush out into their arms.

A quarter of an hour dragged by, and then indications reached their ears that the re-examination of the mill had begun and ended. The well-known tramp drew nearer, and reverberated through the ground over their heads, where its volume signified to the listeners that the party had been largely augmented by pressed men since the night preceding. The gang passed the arch, and the noise regularly diminished, as if no man among them had thought of looking aside for a moment.

Matilda broke the silence. 'I wonder if they have left a watch behind?' she said doubtfully.

'I will go and see,' said Anne. 'Wait till I return.'

'No; I can do no more. When you come back I shall be gone. I ask one thing of you. If all goes well with you and him, and he marries you--don't be alarmed; my plans lie elsewhere--when you are his wife tell him who helped to carry him away. But don't mention my name to the rest of your family, either now or at any time.'

Anne regarded the speaker for a moment, and promised; after which she waded out from the archway.

Matilda stood looking at Bob for a moment, as if preparing to go, till moved by some impulse she bent and lightly kissed him once.

'How can you!' cried Anne reproachfully. When leaving the mouth of the arch she had bent back and seen the act.

Matilda flushed. 'You jealous baby!' she said scornfully.

Anne hesitated for a moment, then went out from the water, and hastened towards the mill.

She entered by the garden, and, seeing no one, advanced and peeped in at the window. Her mother and Mr. Loveday were sitting within as usual.

'Are they all gone?' said Anne softly.

'Yes. They did not trouble us much, beyond going into every room, and searching about the garden, where they saw steps. They have been lucky to-night; they have caught fifteen or twenty men at places further on; so the loss of Bob was no hurt to their feelings. I wonder where in the world the poor fellow is!'

'I will show you,' said Anne. And explaining in a few words what had happened, she was promptly followed by David and Loveday along the road. She lifted her dress and entered the arch with some anxiety on account of

Matilda; but the actress was gone, and Bob lay on the seat as she had left him.

Bob was brought out, and water thrown upon his face; but though he moved he did not rouse himself until some time after he had been borne into the house. Here he opened his eyes, and saw them standing round, and gathered a little consciousness.

'You are all right, my boy!' said his father. 'What hev happened to ye? Where did ye get that terrible blow?'

'Ah--I can mind now,' murmured Bob, with a stupefied gaze around. 'I fell in slipping down the topsail halyard--the rope, that is, was too short--and I fell upon my head. And then I went away. When I came back I thought I wouldn't disturb ye: so I lay down out there, to sleep out the watch; but the pain in my head was so great that I couldn't get to sleep; so I picked some of the poppy-heads in the border, which I once heard was a good thing for sending folks to sleep when they are in pain. So I munched up all I could find, and dropped off quite nicely.'

'I wondered who had picked 'em!' said Molly. 'I noticed they were gone.'

'Why, you might never have woke again!' said Mrs. Loveday, holding up her hands. 'How is your head now?'

'I hardly know,' replied the young man, putting his hand to his forehead

and beginning to doze again. 'Where be those fellows that boarded us? With this--smooth water and--fine breeze we ought to get away from 'em. Haul in--the larboard braces, and--bring her to the wind.'

'You are at home, dear Bob,' said Anne, bending over him, 'and the men are gone.'

'Come along upstairs: th' beest hardly awake now,' said his father and Bob was assisted to bed.