
Chapter 35

Mr. Fentolin, arrived outside on the stone front of the boat-house, pointed the wheel of his chair towards the Hall. Hannah Cox, who kept by his side, however, drew it gently towards the beach.

"Down here," she directed softly. "Bring your chair down the plank-way, close to the water's edge."

"My good woman," Mr. Fentolin exclaimed furiously, "I am not in the humour for this sort of thing! Lock up, Sarson, at once; I am in a hurry to get back."

"But you will come just this little way," she continued, speaking without any change of tone. "You see, the others are waiting, too. I have been down to the village and fetched them up."

Mr. Fentolin followed her outstretched finger and gave a sudden start. Standing at the edge of the sea were a dozen or twenty fishermen. They were all muttering together and looking at the top of the boat-house. As he realised the direction of their gaze, Mr. Fentolin's face underwent a strange transformation. He seemed to shrink in his chair. He was ghastly pale even to the lips. Slowly he turned his head. From a place in the roof of the boat-house a tall support had appeared. On the top was a swinging globe.

"What have you to do with that?" he asked in a low tone.

"I found it," she answered. "I felt that it was there. I have brought them up with me to see it. I think that they want to ask you some questions. But first, come and listen."

Mr. Fentolin shook her off. He looked around for Meekins.

"Meekins, stand by my chair," he ordered sharply. "Turn round; I wish to go to the Hall. Drive this woman away."

Meekins came hurrying up, but almost at the same moment half a dozen of the brown jerseyed fishermen detached themselves from the others. They formed a little bodyguard around the bath-chair.

"What is the meaning of this?" Mr. Fentolin demanded, his voice shrill with anger. "Didn't you hear what I said? This woman annoys me. Send her away."

Not one of the fishermen answered a word or made the slightest movement to obey him. One of them, a grey-bearded veteran, drew the chair a little further down the planked way across the pebbles. Hannah Cox kept close to its side. They came to a standstill only a few yards from where the waves were breaking. She lifted her hand.

"Listen!" she cried. "Listen!"

Mr. Fentolin turned helplessly around. The little group of fishermen had closed in upon Sarson and Meekins. The woman's hand was upon his shoulder; she pointed seaward to where a hissing line of white foam marked the spot where the topmost of the rocks were visible.

"You wondered why I have spent so much of my time out here," she said quietly. "Now you will know. If you listen as I am listening, as I have listened for so many weary hours, so many weary years, you will hear them calling to me, David and John and Stephen. 'The light! Do you hear what they are crying? 'The light! Fentolin's light! Look!'"

She forced him to look once more at the top of the boat-house.

"They were right!" she proclaimed, her voice gaining in strength and intensity. "They were neither drunk nor reckless. They steered as straight as human hand could guide a tiller, for Fentolin's light! And there they are, calling and calling at the bottom of the sea - my three boys and my man. Do you know for whom they call?"

Mr. Fentolin shrank back in his chair.

"Take this woman away!" he ordered the fishermen. "Do you hear? Take her away; she is mad!"

They looked towards him, but not one of them moved. Mr. Fentolin raised his whistle to his lips, and blew it.

"Meekins!" he cried. "Where are you, Meekins?"

He turned his head and saw at once that Meekins was powerless. Five or six of the fishermen had gathered around him. There were at least thirty of them about, sinewy, powerful men. The only person who moved towards Mr. Fentolin's carriage was Jacob, the coast guardsman.

"Mr. Fentolin, sir," he said, "the lads have got your bully safe. It's a year and more that Hannah Cox has been about the village with some story about two lights on a stormy night. It's true what she says - that her man and boys lie drowned. There's William Green, besides, and a nephew of my own - John Kallender. And Philip Green - he was saved. He swore by all that was holy that he steered straight for the light when his boat struck, and that as he swam for shore, five minutes later, he saw the light reappear in another place. It's a strange story. What have you to say, sir, about that?"

He pointed straight to the wire-encircled globe which towered on its slender support above the boat-house. Mr. Fentolin looked at it and looked back at the coast guardsman. The brain of a Machiavelli could scarcely have invented a plausible reply.

"The light was never lit there," he said. "It was simply to help me in some electrical experiments."

Then, for the first time in their lives, those who were looking on saw Mr. Fentolin apart from his carriage. Without any haste but with amazing strength, Hannah Cox leaned over, and, with her arms around his middle, lifted him sheer up into the air. She carried him, clasped in her arms, a weird, struggling object, to the clumsy boat that lay always at the top of the beach. She dropped him into the bottom, took her seat, and unshipped the oars. For one moment the coast guardsman hesitated; then he obeyed her look. He gave the boat a push which sent it grinding down the pebbles into the sea. The woman began to work at the oars. Every now and then she looked over her shoulder at that thin line of white surf which they were all the time approaching.

"What are you doing, woman?" Mr. Fentolin demanded hoarsely. "Listen! It was an accident that your people were drowned. I'll give you an annuity. I'll make you rich for life - rich! Do you understand what that means?"

"Aye!" she answered, looking down upon him as he lay doubled up at the bottom of the boat. "I know what it means to be rich - better than you, maybe. Not to let the gold and silver pieces fall through your fingers, or to live in a great house and be waited upon by servants who desert you in the hour of need. That isn't being rich. It's rich to feel the touch of the one you love, to see the faces around of those you've given birth to, to move on through the days and nights towards the end, with them around; not to know the chill loneliness of an empty life. I am a poor woman, Mr. Fentolin, and it's your hand that made me so, and not all the miracles that the Bible ever told of can make me rich again."

"You are a fool!" he shrieked. "You can buy forgetfulness! The memory of everything passes."

"I may be a fool," she retorted grimly, "and you the wise man; but this day we'll both know the truth."

There was a little murmur from the shore, where the fishermen stood in a long line.

"Bring him back, missus," Jacob called out. "You've scared him enough. Bring him back. We'll leave him to the law."

They were close to the line of surf now; they had passed it, indeed, a little on the left, and the boat was drifting. She stood up, straight and stern, and her face, as she looked towards the land, was lit with the fire of the prophetess.

"Aye," she cried, "we'll leave him to the law - to the law of God!"

Then they saw her stoop down, and once more with that almost superhuman strength which seemed to belong to her for those few moments, she lifted the strange object who lay cowering there, high above her head. From the shore they realised what was going to happen, and a great shout arose. She stood on the side of the boat and jumped, holding her burden tightly in her arms. So they went down and disappeared.

Half a dozen of the younger fishermen were in the water even before the grim spectacle was ended; another ran for a boat that was moored a little way down the beach. But from the first the search was useless. Only Jacob, who was a person afflicted with many superstitions, wiped the sweat from his forehead as he leaned over the bow of his boat and looked down into that fathomless space.

"I heard her singing, her or her wraith," he swore afterwards. "I'll never forget the moment I looked down and down, and the water seemed to grow clearer, and I saw her walking there at the bottom among the rocks, with him over her back, singing as she went, looking everywhere for George and the boys!"

But if indeed his eyes were touched with fire at that moment, no one else in the world saw anything more of Miles Fentolin.