

## CHAPTER XXIX

### A MIDNIGHT SPELL

AFTER some indecision and sundry internal rumblings, the old clock in the kitchen struck one solemn note. Half-past eleven.

Maggie sat up in bed.

The room was dark, the square of the window showed dimly, there was no moon. A faintly diffused light indicated the place of Cassin's bed; her breathing, soft and even, sounded plainly.

She was sleeping. That was well. Maggie groped for her stockings in the darkness. She dare not strike a light lest she should wake Cassin. For Cassin must not know.

The events of the day had forced Maggie to a decision. That which was to divide Andrew and Cassin must come soon or it would be too late. The working of the spell must no longer be delayed.

Cautiously, if clumsily, and with many delays, Maggie succeeded in drawing on her clothes. She lowered her feet to the floor. A board creaked.

Cassin moved slightly.

Maggie waited, her heart beating so loudly that she could no longer hear her cousin's breath. After a few moments of suspense she stood upright and stole across the floor.

Cassin turned over.

"What is it?" she murmured sleepily.

Silence and a beating heart.

A long-drawn sigh from Cassin's bed. She was settling once more to sleep.

It was several minutes before Maggie dared unlatch the door and creep downstairs. Arrived in the kitchen she stopped to slip on the shoes she had carried in her hand. The air of the room felt stale and close. The clock ticked loudly. Maggie glanced up at the time.

“It do be just like her,” she grumbled to herself, “to have gone and made me too late after all.”

She saw no irony in blaming her cousin for innocently hindering the plan that was intended to work her own destruction.

Maggie unlatched the door.

The night met her, dark and windless. There was a dank moisture in the air. Maggie shivered. Like all her race she hated to be alone in the dark. Darkness, without cheerful human comradeship, meant something far worse than solitude. “They” were abroad in the darkness, things that hovered about one, things that moved warily out of one’s path, to turn and follow stealthily behind.

Maggie hesitated before lifting the latch of the gate. There seemed a certain protection in the nearness of the house, all in darkness though it was. It is true the church stood hardly more than a stone’s throw away; but the road that led to it glimmered grey, it had an unreal appearance, as though a foot set upon it might pass through and sink to depths unknown.

Maggie swallowed, drew her shawl tightly about her neck, then passed through the gate. A little lonely wind sped round the corner of the house, moaned in her ears and died away.

Her eyes fixed and wide, her lower jaw hanging, Maggie stole along the road. Here and there a sleeping house rose black against the sky. There was no moon; a thin grey cloud hid the stars; but as her eyes became accustomed to the darkness, Maggie could distinguish different objects, well known to her by day, but now assuming strange fantastic shapes. A straggling privet hedge that tossed despairing arms, a gate-post that bent forward, dark and threatening. Quickly, furtively, she glanced to this side and to that as she hurried along the pale, uncertain greyness of the road. Now the church-tower came in sight, dim and tremendous.

At that moment it seemed an awful thing to Maggie, this that she was going to do. Yet she never thought of turning back.

*Clang, clang—clang, clang!*

Faint and low, muffled as by the distance, came the sound of a bell.

Maggie stopped short, pressing her hand hard over her mouth that she might not scream. It was the bell surely, that sounded from the drowned captain's tomb. His ship struck, as was told, on the rocks, out there, beyond Land's End. The crew were taken off, but he had refused to leave his ship. His dead body had been recovered and buried. It was said that ever and again from his tomb sounded "four bells" and whoso heard that sound was called to his account before the ending of the year.

*Clang, clang—clang, clang, clang!* Fitfully, irregularly came the sound.

"It be only old bell-buoy on they Runnel Rocks," said Maggie, with a sob of relief; "wind be to s'uthard, for sure."

Not a little encouraged by the fact that one, at least, of her fears were groundless, she ventured again upon her way. She stole through the church-yard gate and hurried past the tomb where all that was mortal of the drowned captain lay. A chill air seemed to meet her, as though the breath of those long-buried still hung about their sleeping-places marked by time-tilted stones and spectral rails half eaten by the action of the salt-laden air.

Once again Maggie paused. Even now, had she the courage for her fearsome task?

It was bad enough to walk along the dim road, peering searchingly before her into the darkness. How dreadful, then, to walk backwards in this place of tombs, moving fearfully, unsteadily, into the clutches of she knew not what!

There!

What was that?

Something moving.

Out there—there!

Sick with terror, Maggie crouched behind a head-stone.

*Pat pit-a-pat—steps—footfalls innumerable, falling on the uneven flags.*

Christ, have mercy!

*Baa-a-a.*

It was but a group of sheep disturbed in their feeding amongst the quiet tombs.

A scraping sound—a rounded form dim against the sky—another and another. One by one they scaled and descended the churchyard wall.

All was again quiet.

Maggie rose, she was cold and her limbs trembled under her : but never for a moment did she think of abandoning her task. Slowly, unsteadily, she went, with hands extended behind, meeting every now and then the damp roughness of a churchyard stone ; fearing every moment to touch something else. What ? Something soft, perhaps, and cold. Or—worse—warm and wet—wet with blood !

Maggie's eyes were stiff and dry, her teeth chattering. Things seemed close, creeping away from her, crouching at the church corners, waiting to spring.

Still she went on.

The first time she made the mystic circle, it was in shrinking horror : the second, almost imbecile from panic-stricken terror ; the third time in a deadened almost unconscious condition ; her brain full-filled with emotion refused all further sensation.

Thus thrice she went. And nothing she saw or heard.

The thing was accomplished.

A moment she stood whilst she realised the dread strain was over. Then she pushed open the gate and fled, careless, now, of the sound of her footsteps ringing along the silent road.

*Clang, clang*—sounded the bell-buoy.

*Ting, ting, ting*—from a house she passed. The clock was starting to strike the hour of midnight.

*Tang, tang*—there was another. With hasty hand Maggie unfastened and safely shut again the homely kitchen door.

There was still a dull spark of fire on the hearth.

In its slow, deliberate way the Mayon clock was just completing the stroke of twelve.

## CHAPTER XXX

### THE SEA HUNGERS

*Boom—boom—rumble—roar—boom—boom*—sounded the wind.

*Creak, creak, crickety-creak*—complained the door.

*Racket, racket, squeak—rackety-racket*, went the window.

*Sputter, dash, hiss, drum, drum, drum-m-m*—came the rain and sleet and hail against the glass.

“It do be scarce fit for you to go back ‘up to,’” said old Billie to Cassin.

She had come down earlier in the evening with a message from Mayon, and listening to the old man’s tales she had sat on and on, till now it was nine o’clock, and the weather which had only been threatening when she arrived had risen to a whole gale.

“I was saying, it be scarce fit for she, going ‘up to,’” put in Gracie. It need hardly be mentioned that, till now, she had said nothing of the sort.

“Weather be coming right enough,” went on old Billie, leaning forward and tapping his empty pipe on the hearth; “White Cow, him wurn’t here for nothing.”

Gracie folded her arms contentedly and gazed into the fire; her face shone like a polished apple in the ruddy glow.

“I was saying, White Cow, her do know,” she murmured.

*Boom—boom—rackety—creak—rattle—hiss—roar.*

Andrew looked up from the rope-mat he was making.

“It’s coming on to blow,” he said. Then, after listening attentively, “There be a big ground sea, too,” he added.

Gracie shook her head. Her face was too cheery to express the sympathy she doubtless intended by her words.

“The Lord have mercy on all them poor souls out to sea to-night.”

Her husband rubbed a horny hand over his tousled head.

"Ay! 'tis Lord's mercy them will need. For sea, her won't have none, not she."

"Sea have looked hungry, days past," said Andrew, "'fore White Cow showed."

He bent to throw a fresh piece of driftwood on to the fire.

"It was a night much as this when the Luna went on to Brissons," put in old Billie in a ruminant tone.

"Was it wrecked?" asked Cassin, wide-eyed.

"Wrecked, m' dear? There weren't none of her *to* land, not so much as would serve to make a pulley-house. Matchwood her was. A big fine barque at sundown and matchwood long afore sun was up."

"And the men?" Cassin's eyes were dark and soft. "Were the men saved?"

"Nary a mother's son of them. Drowned they was, 'fore ever no one could get to them. Us did get boat launched, but sea was too high and wind blowing—so as you've never heard it"—he paused as a fresh gust shook the house, lifted the old carpet that covered the flagged floor, sent the smoke whirling down the chimney, and wood ash and soot dancing about the room—"as you never did hear it afore now," amended old Billie.

"Wind were just so high as now," put in Gracie, contentedly nodding her head towards the fire.

Andrew made a sound of vexation.

"I wouldn't like that to happen in my time, I wouldn't. Drowned in sight of land." He shook himself as though to get rid of the thought.

Old Billie laughed.

"You ain't seen nothing, yet, m' son. You wait till you'm aboard boat and sea coming over her bows that fast one lot hasn't time to settle froo scuppers, 'fore another big lot be over your head." He mumbled at his stump of pipe and stretched out his legs more luxuriantly to the fire. "You wait and see who be feart, then."

Andrew had only just got his oar in the lifeboat (called in Cove parlance, simply, the Boat); he had seen no active service as yet. He made no reply to his father's challenge; but Cassin, watching him under her lashes, saw the set look about the young man's mouth, the steady light in his eyes.

“He would not be afraid,” she thought. There was a warm feeling at her heart. She felt glad and proud.

The clock struck half-past nine.

“I’d best be going,” she said, rising to her feet, “Aunt Susie will be anxious, lest.”

“It do be fearful out, and what it’ll be on hill-top Lord only knows,” said old Billie.

“You’d best bide till morning,” suggested Gracie.

Her words were almost drowned by the clatter of hail against the window. Cassin glanced in that direction rather timidly.

“I think I ought to go,” she faltered.

“You’ll never keep your feet,” Gracie assured her.

“Andrew’d best go along too,” said the old man. He was bent over the fire, so no one saw the gleam in his eye, which was bright and knowing as that of a parrot.

Andrew rose with alacrity and reached his tarpaulin and sou’-wester from behind the door.

Cassin began to put on her coat.

“You won’t be feart?” questioned Gracie.

“No, I shall not be frightened. I don’t mind the storm.” There was happy laughter in Cassin’s voice.

“*She* don’t mind the storm. I was saying *she* don’t mind the storm.” Gracie chuckled to herself, as though there were some joke hidden in her words. Perhaps there was.

“Tell your Granma,” she said, “she may keep a leg for me.”

The allusion was to Cassin’s errand concerning a certain fatted pig which was to be offered up at Mayon in anticipation of the Feast.

Andrew opened the door and held it while Cassin passed out. It took all his strength to close it again behind them. For the first moment they stood almost breathless. The wind blew Cassin’s skirts about her legs; the rain sounded like innumerable tiny hammers on Andrew’s tarpaulin; the gutters of the house were gurgling and spluttering; the wind made short rough sounds in the scanty veronica bushes as though it would tear them from their tough roots; above everything else was the incessant roar of the increasing sea. The salt rain stung

in their eyes: little pieces of wood and stone hit them sharply on the cheeks.

"Better we go back?" asked Andrew.

The noise and fury were so tumultuous he had to put his face close to Cassin's to make himself heard.

"No, let's go on," she answered. There was a ring of courage as well as of excitement in her voice.

He put his arm through hers and, with lowered heads, they turned into the teeth of the gale. They had not gone many steps before they were caught by a furious gust, whirled about, buffeted.

Cassin found herself drawn into the shelter of a boat-house.

Neither of them seemed seriously troubled. Cassin laughed softly.

Andrew echoed her laugh.

"You did ought to have borrowed father's oilskins," he said.

At this they both laughed again.

"As soon as it drops a bit, we'll have another try," said Andrew. He still held her arm in his.

"It is a black night," she remarked.

"Iss," Andrew agreed, though he was not looking at the night, but, as well as he could, into her face. She was gazing beyond him, out to sea.

"What is that lighthouse, this side of Cape Cornwall?" she asked suddenly.

"There isn't no lighthouse this side of Cape Cornwall."

"But I saw one quite plain, only a moment since, flash and go out."

"You saw a light." Andrew's figure tautened, he slipped his arm from hers and turned towards the sea.

"You sure you saw a light?"

"Quite distinctly. See. There it is again."

A tremor went through Andrew's frame, for now he had seen the light too.

"'Tis a ship, sure enough," his voice was thrilling with excitement. "I wonder, has the coastguard sighted him. He did never ought to be there, no ship."

"A ship." Cassin's blood ran cold. "You don't mean a wreck?" Her voice rose on the word.

Andrew was gazing sea-ward through the curve of his

hands. The wind shook him, the rain tried to blind him; but, nevertheless, without a doubt, ever and again he caught a point of light not far from the jagged rocks that everywhere line that fatal coast.

"We must go back," he said. "I'd best take you to home, then I'll run to Look-out and see coastguard."

"Never mind me," she cried. "I can stay here, or go alone. Don't lose a moment—think"—there was a sob in her voice—"whilst we are talking the men out there——"

"Like enough coastguard have seen. We'd best call cox'n. 'Come on.'"

He put a strong arm about her, almost lifting her from the ground; for every moment the gale was increasing in fury.

It was only a few seconds before they burst into the cox'n's house with their story. That good man came forward in his jersey and stockinged feet; his jaw was working, and a smell of hot pastry and onions proclaimed the fact that supper was in progress.

Whilst Andrew was briefly telling his story, there came a loud knocking at the door. A coastguard entered.

"A three-masted barque it is," he said; "so far as we can make out, she's been in tow, the cable has parted, and she's drifting before the wind. There's no time to lose before she's on Men-te-haul."

No time to lose!

Cassin looked from one strong man to the other with wide-eyed expectancy. To her mind these three—the cox'n, still quietly disposing of his supper; the coastguard square and stolid-looking; and Andrew, his face keen and grave below the peak of his sou-wester—held in their hands the keys of Life and Death.

*Rush-h-h-h! Bang.*

A new sound above the fury of the night.

"There goes the rocket," Andrew said.

Without further speech the men separated. The coastguard to his duties, Andrew to call his father, the cox'n to the kitchen, where he could be heard loudly demanding his boots and coat.

Cassin was left alone.

A beam of light shone from the narrow opening left by the kitchen door, now almost closed; otherwise the

tiny passage was in darkness. With hasty, fumbling fingers she sought the outer door and found the catch. It was stiff and would not yield. She struggled, fought with it; was alternately hot with excitement, cold with dread. She could not remain inside when out in the night men were facing death. And the time was so short! What had Billie Thomas said about that other ship, the Luna? Before ever the boat was launched! She must get out. She rattled at the latch.

Quite suddenly it yielded and the door burst open. In rushed the wind and rain. The kitchen door banged to. Cassin gave no heed. She was outside.

There was no sign, now, of Andrew; nor, indeed, of any human being. Together the wind and the rain raced along the empty road. Below, the sea thundered on the rocks.

With struggling steps Cassin moved towards the life-boat house. Caught by the wind, stopped, twisted and whirled about, she succeeded in reaching it and found a momentary shelter in an angle of the wall. Save for the fury and hurtle of the gale, the village seemed deserted.

Had then, the rocket not been heard? And time was going on and every moment of value.

Cassin pressed her hands together and uttered a wordless prayer.

Ah! there was a light coming, a lantern blinking and bobbing: footsteps, too, some dozen men or more by the sound. Very silently they came. These men, who went about their daily work, gaily, carelessly as boys, were quiet, even solemn now. Death was near, and they knew it. Very quietly and steadily they came.

The door of the boat-house was quickly rolled back, the big lantern lit.

"You here," said Andrew to Cassin, in passing; "best come inside."

Cassin slipped in with the men.

On projecting pegs along the wall hung tarpaulins and cork jackets. The cox'n had explained these to Cassin one sunny summer day as he showed her round the building which was his pride.

In silence, now, or with only a muttered word, the men were lifting them down and fumbling with the fastenings.

Cassin heard a little vexed sound near her. It was from Andrew, wrestling with the straps of his "jacket." Without a word, she went to his help. Very carefully she fixed the cumbersome thing that was to be his safety against the peril lurking in the storm and darkness outside. Then she looked up proudly into his face and smiled.

In that instant Andrew knew that he loved Cassin. His eyes filled and he turned away.

The cox'n was already aboard. His deep voice was echoing through the building, as he shouted directions to the crew and launchers.

Cassin was outside again now, on the "slips," in the lea of a big pilchard boat. There were other watching forms near her. She did not speak to any one. All were strangely silent.

From the open doors of the house shone a broad beam of light. Down this beam, dark and majestic came the high bows of the boat. A rumbling sound! A rush! A resounding splash!

The boat had taken the water! There was a fizzing sound, a vivid green flare, and out of the darkness flashed the boat, tossing in the surge, the white faces of the crew, the scattered launchers, gleaming tarpaulins and glistening rocks.

Then darkness returned. The boat was swallowed by sea and storm.

Suddenly, from the empty boat-house, came a piercing cry, then the shrill calling of a woman's voice:

"Murder! Murder! They 'a taken my boy! Bring him back! Curse 'em—they 'a taken my Andrew—my son!"

It was Gracie Thomas. Under the light of the big lantern she stood, her arms uplifted, her grey hair streaming back on the wind.

Cassin had been forgetful of all save the boat that had disappeared from view. In the vivid green flare she had seen Andrew's face set and strong. Her soul was filled with high emotional ecstasy. She was only a woman, she could do nothing for those mothers' sons in the grip of death out there in the blackness of the storm; but Andrew had gone to them. Andrew was strong and calm. All must be well.

But, at the old woman's exceeding bitter cry, all Cassin's exaltation came tumbling, like a stricken eagle, to earth. Her heart filled with fresh sympathy. There were those who were left behind! Was not theirs the hardest part?

She must go to old Gracie.

In the darkness, however, she slipped and fell. By the time she was able to reach the boat-house, the big lantern shone on emptiness. Save for the ever-increasing thunder of the gale there was no sound. Every one had gone.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### THE FORM IN THE BOAT

ONCE clear of the little harbour, the boat tossed like a feather at the mercy of the waves. She carried no light; the cox'n's keen eyes were better able to pierce the darkness without one as, the rudder lines held in a grip of steel, he faced the gale. In the bows crouched the vice-cox'n, now and again he shouted hoarse directions or a hurried warning. Five long oars on either side dipped and dragged, or slipped through the heaving surface of the tempestuous sea. Masts and sails were out of the question; they would have been carried away before ever they were stepped.

When last sighted, the doomed barque was drifting towards the bearded Men-te-haul. To reach her the boat must be taken up into the teeth of the wind, and by a circuitous course, taking advantage of a flowing tide, must bear down on her from the north. This the cox'n, who, man and boy, had sailed that cruel coast in every wind that blew, knew was the only chance of reaching her. And it would take time.

It was not more than twenty minutes now since first the barque had been sighted; but that was ample time, driven by wind and tide, for her already to have fallen a prey to the cruel Men-te-haul. There was dull misgiving, then, in the cox'n's heart, but right cheerily he shouted his directions, and his hands that held the rudder lines were steady and firm.

*Smash, bang!* A huge wave came scrambling over the bows. The rowers bent beneath its weight. *Smack, bang!* it took the cox'n in the wind and nearly knocked him breathless. Up came the gallant little boat, light as a cork!

"She got her bellyful, so she did," chuckled old Billie.

"Iss, and me too," bellowed the cox'n.

*Bounce, buffet, souse, bang!*