

Chapter 11

The little station at which Hamel alighted was like an oasis in the middle of a flat stretch of sand and marsh. It consisted only of a few raised planks and a rude shelter - built, indeed, for the convenience of St. David's Hall alone, for the nearest village was two miles away. The station-master, on his return from escorting the young lady to her car, stared at this other passenger in some surprise.

"Which way to the sea?" Hamel asked.

The man pointed to the white gates of the crossing.

"You can take any of those paths you like, sir," he said. "If you want to get to Salthouse, though, you should have got out at the next station."

"This will do for me," Hamel replied cheerfully.

"Be careful of the dikes," the station-master advised him. "Some of them are pretty deep."

Hamel nodded, and passing through the white gates, made his way by a raised cattle track towards the sea. On either side of him flowed a narrow dike filled with salt-water. Beyond stretched the flat marshland, its mossy turf leavened with cracks and creeks of all widths, filled also with sea-slime and sea-water. A slight grey mist rested upon the more distant parts of the wilderness which he was crossing, a mist which seemed to be blown in from the sea in little puffs, resting for a time upon the earth, and then drifting up and fading away like soap bubbles.

More than once where the dikes had overflowed he was compelled to change his course, but he arrived at last at the little ridge of pebbled beach bordering the sea. Straight ahead of him now was that strange-looking building towards which he had all the time been directing his footsteps. As he approached it, his forehead slightly contracted. There was ample confirmation before him of the truth of his fellow-passenger's words. The place, left to itself for so many years, without any attention from its actual owner, was neither deserted nor in ruins. Its solid grey stone walls were sea-stained and a trifle worn, but the arched wooden doors leading into the lifeboat shelter, which occupied one side of the building, had been newly painted, and in the front the window was hung with a curtain, now closely drawn, of some dark red material. The lock from the door had been removed altogether, and in its place was the aperture for a Yale latch-key. The last note of modernity was supplied by the telephone wire attached to the roof of the lifeboat shelter. He walked all round the building, seeking in vain for some other means of ingress. Then he stood for a few moments in front of the curtained window. He was a man of somewhat determined disposition, and he found himself vaguely irritated by the liberties which had been taken with his property. He hammered gently upon the framework with his fist, and the windows opened readily inwards, pushing back the curtain with them. He drew himself up on to the sill, and, squeezing himself through the opening, landed on his feet and looked around him, a little breathless.

He found himself in a simply furnished man's sitting-room. An easel was standing close to the window. There were reams of drawing paper and several unfinished sketches leaning against the wall. There was a small oak table in the middle of the room; against the wall stood an exquisite chiffonier, on which were resting some cut-glass decanters and goblets. There was a Turkey carpet upon the floor which matched the curtains, but to his surprise there was not a single chair of any sort to be seen. The walls had been distempered and were hung with one or two engravings which, although he was no judge, he was quite sure were good. He wandered into the back room, where he found a stove, a tea-service upon a deal table, and several other cooking utensils, all spotlessly clean and of the most expensive description. The walls here were plainly whitewashed, and the floor was of hard stone. He then tried the door on the left, which led into the larger portion of the building - the shed in which the lifeboat had once been kept. Not only was the door locked, but he saw at once that the lock was modern, and the door itself was secured with heavy iron clamps. He returned to the sitting-room.

"The girl with the grey eyes was right enough," he remarked to himself. "Mr. Fentolin has been making himself very much at home with my property."

He withdrew the curtains, noticing, to his surprise, the heavy shutters which their folds had partly concealed. Then he made his way out along the passage to the front door, which from the inside he was able to open easily enough. Leaving it carefully ajar, he went out with the intention of making an examination of the outside of the place. Instead, however, he paused at the corner of the building with his face turned landwards. Exactly fronting him now, about three-quarters of a mile away, on the summit of that strange hill which stood out like a gigantic rock in the wilderness, was St. David's Hall. He looked at it steadily and with increasing admiration. Its long, red brick front with its masses of clustering chimneys, a little bare and weather-beaten, impressed him with a sense of dignity due as much to the purity of its architecture as to the singularity of its situation. Behind - a wonderfully effective background - were the steep gardens from which, even in this uncertain light, he caught faint glimpses of colouring subdued from brilliancy by the twilight. These were encircled by a brick wall of great height, the whole of the southern portion of which was enclosed with glass. From the fragment of rock upon which he had seated himself, to the raised stone terrace in front of the house, was an absolutely straight path, beautifully kept like an avenue, with white posts on either side, and built up to a considerable height above the broad tidal way which ran for some distance by its side. It had almost the appearance of a racing track, and its state of preservation in the midst of the wilderness was little short of remarkable.

"This," Hamel said to himself, as he slowly produced a pipe from his pocket and began to fill it with tobacco from a battered silver box, "is a queer fix. Looks rather like the inn for me!"

"And who might you be, gentleman?"

He turned abruptly around towards his unseen questioner. A woman was standing by the side of the rock upon which he was sitting, a woman from the village, apparently, who must have come with noiseless footsteps along the sandy way. She was dressed in rusty black, and in place of a hat she wore a black woolen scarf tied around her head and underneath her chin. Her face was lined, her hair of a deep brown plentifully besprinkled with grey. She had a curious habit of moving her lips, even when she was not speaking. She stood there smiling at him, but there was something about that smile and about her look which puzzled him.

"I am just a visitor," he replied. "Who are you?"

She shook her head.

"I saw you come out of the Tower," she said, speaking with a strong local accent and yet with a certain unusual correctness, "in at the window and out of the door. You're a brave man."

"Why brave?" he asked.

She turned her head very slowly towards St. David's Hall. A gleam of sunshine had caught one of the windows, which shone like fire. She pointed toward it with her head.

"He's looking at you," she muttered. "He don't like strangers poking around here, that I can tell you."

"And who is he?" Hamel enquired.

"Squire Fentolin," she answered, dropping her voice a little. "He's a very kind-hearted gentleman, Squire Fentolin, but he don't like strangers hanging around."

"Well, I am not exactly a stranger, you see," Hamel remarked. "My father used to stay for months at a time in that little shanty there and paint pictures. It's a good many years ago."

"I mind him," the woman said slowly. "His name was Hamel."

"I am his son," Hamel announced.

She pointed to the Hall. "Does he know that you are here?"

Hamel shook his head. "Not yet. I have been abroad for so long."

She suddenly relapsed into her curious habit. Her lips moved, but no words came. She had turned her head a little and was facing the sea.

"Tell me," Hamel asked gently, "why do you come out here alone, so far from the village?"

She pointed with her finger to where the waves were breaking in a thin line of white, about fifty yards from the beach.

"It's the cemetery, that," she said, "the village cemetery, you know. I have three buried there: George, the eldest; James, the middle one; and David, the youngest. Three of them - that's why I come. I can't put flowers on their graves, but I can sit and watch and look through the sea, down among the rocks where their bodies are, and wonder."

Hamel looked at her curiously. Her voice had grown lower and lower.

"It's what you land folks don't believe, perhaps," she went on, "but it's true. It's only us who live near the sea who understand it. I am not an ignorant body, either. I was schoolmistress here before I married David Cox. They thought I'd done wrong to marry a fisherman, but I bore him brave sons, and I lived the life a woman craves for. No, I am not ignorant. I have fancies, perhaps - the Lord be praised for them! - and I tell you it's true. You look at a spot in the sea and you see nothing - a gleam of blue, a fleck of white foam, one day; a gleam of green with a black line, another; and a grey little sob, the next, perhaps. But you go on looking. You look day by day and hour by hour, and the chasms of the sea will open, and their voices will come to you. Listen!"

She clutched his arm.

"Couldn't you hear that?" she half whispered.

"The light!" It was David's voice! "The light!" Hamel was speechless. The woman's face was suddenly strangely transformed. Her mood, however, swiftly changed. She turned once more towards the hall. "You'll know him soon," she went on, "the kindest man in these parts, they say. It's not much that he gives away, but he's a kind heart. You see that great post at the entrance to the river there?" she went on, pointing to it. "He had that set up and a lamp hung from there. Fentolin's light, they call it. It was to save men's lives. It was burning, they say, the night I lost my lads. Fentolin's light!"

"They were wrecked?" he asked her gently.

"Wrecked," she answered. "Bad steering it must have been. James would steer, and they say that he drank a bit. Bad steering! Yes, you'll meet Squire Fentolin before long. He's queer to look at - a small body but a great, kind heart. A miserable life, his, but it will be made up to him. It will be made up to him!"

She turned away. Her lips were moving all the time. She walked about a dozen steps, and then she returned.

"You're Hamel's son, the painter," she said. "You'll be welcome down here. He'll have you to stay at the Hall - a brave place. Don't let him be too kind to you. Sometimes kindness hurts."

She passed on, walking with a curious, shambling gait, and soon she disappeared on her way to the village. Hamel watched her for a moment and then turned his head towards St. David's Hall. He felt somehow that her abrupt departure was due to something which she had seen in that direction. He rose to his feet. His instinct had been a true one.