



SYLVIA'S LOVERS

ELIZABETH
GASKELL

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THE FLOATING PRESS

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Oh for thy voice to soothe and bless!
What hope of answer, or redress?
Behind the veil! Behind the veil!
—Tennyson

Chapter I - Monkshaven

*

On the north-eastern shores of England there is a town called Monkshaven, containing at the present day about fifteen thousand inhabitants. There were, however, but half the number at the end of the last century, and it was at that period that the events narrated in the following pages occurred.

Monkshaven was a name not unknown in the history of England, and traditions of its having been the landing-place of a throneless queen were current in the town. At that time there had been a fortified castle on the heights above it, the site of which was now occupied by a deserted manor-house; and at an even earlier date than the arrival of the queen and coeval with the most ancient remains of the castle, a great monastery had stood on those cliffs, overlooking the vast ocean that blended with the distant sky. Monkshaven itself was built by the side of the Dee, just where the river falls into the German Ocean. The principal street of the town ran parallel to the stream, and smaller lanes branched out of this, and straggled up the sides of the steep hill, between which and the river the houses were pent in. There was a bridge across the Dee, and consequently a Bridge Street running at right angles to the High Street; and on the south side of the stream there were a few houses of more pretensions around which lay gardens and fields. It was on this side of the town that the local aristocracy lived. And who were the great people of this small town? Not the younger branches of the county families that held hereditary state in their manor-houses on the wild bleak moors, that shut in Monkshaven almost as effectually on the land side as ever the waters did on the sea-board. No; these old families kept aloof from the unsavoury yet adventurous trade which brought wealth to generation after generation of certain families in Monkshaven.

The magnates of Monkshaven were those who had the largest number of ships engaged in the whaling trade. Something like the following was the course of life with a Monkshaven lad of this class:—He was apprenticed as a sailor to one of the great ship-owners—to his own father, possibly—along with twenty other boys, or, it might be, even more. During the summer months he and his fellow-apprentices made voyages to the Greenland seas, returning with their cargoes in the early autumn; and employing the winter months in watching the preparation of the oil from the blubber in the melting-sheds, and learning navigation from some quaint but experienced teacher, half schoolmaster, half sailor, who seasoned his instructions by stirring narrations of the wild adventures of his youth. The house of the ship-owner to whom he was apprenticed was his home and that of his companions during the idle season between October and March. The domestic position of these boys varied according to the premium paid; some took rank with the sons of the family, others were considered as little better than servants. Yet once on board an equality prevailed, in which, if any claimed superiority, it was the bravest and brightest. After a certain number of voyages the Monkshaven lad would rise by degrees to be captain, and as such would have a share in the venture; all these profits, as well as all his savings would go towards building a whaling vessel of his own, if he was not so fortunate as to be the child of a ship-owner. At the time of which I write, there was but little division of labour in the Monkshaven whale fishery. The same man might be the owner of six or seven ships, any one of which he himself was fitted by education and experience to command; the master of a score of apprentices, each of whom paid a pretty sufficient premium; and the proprietor of the melting-sheds into which his cargo

of blubber and whalebone were conveyed to be fitted for sale. It was no wonder that large fortunes were acquired by these ship-owners, nor that their houses on the south side of the river Dee were stately mansions, full of handsome and substantial furniture. It was also not surprising that the whole town had an amphibious appearance, to a degree unusual even in a seaport. Every one depended on the whale fishery, and almost every male inhabitant had been, or hoped to be, a sailor. Down by the river the smell was almost intolerable to any but Monkshaven people during certain seasons of the year; but on these unsavoury 'staites' the old men and children lounged for hours, almost as if they revelled in the odours of train-oil.

This is, perhaps, enough of a description of the town itself. I have said that the country for miles around was moorland; high above the level of the sea towered the purple crags, whose summits were crowned with greensward that stole down the sides of the scaur a little way in grassy veins. Here and there a brook forced its way from the heights down to the sea, making its channel into a valley more or less broad in long process of time. And in the moorland hollows, as in these valleys, trees and underwood grew and flourished; so that, while on the bare swells of the high land you shivered at the waste desolation of the scenery, when you dropped into these wooded 'bottoms' you were charmed with the nestling shelter which they gave. But above and around these rare and fertile vales there were moors for many a mile, here and there bleak enough, with the red freestone cropping out above the scanty herbage; then, perhaps, there was a brown tract of peat and bog, uncertain footing for the pedestrian who tried to make a short cut to his destination; then on the higher sandy soil there was the purple ling, or commonest species of heather growing in beautiful wild luxuriance. Tufts of fine elastic grass were occasionally to be found, on which the little black-faced sheep browsed; but either the scanty food, or their goat-like agility, kept them in a lean condition that did not promise much for the butcher, nor yet was their wool of a quality fine enough to make them profitable in that way to their owners. In such districts there is little population at the present day; there was much less in the last century, before agriculture was sufficiently scientific to have a chance of contending with such natural disqualifications as the moors presented, and when there were no facilities of railroads to bring sportsmen from a distance to enjoy the shooting season, and make an annual demand for accommodation.

There were old stone halls in the valleys; there were bare farmhouses to be seen on the moors at long distances apart, with small stacks of coarse poor hay, and almost larger stacks of turf for winter fuel in their farmyards. The cattle in the pasture fields belonging to these farms looked half starved; but somehow there was an odd, intelligent expression in their faces, as well as in those of the black-visaged sheep, which is seldom seen in the placidly stupid countenances of well-fed animals. All the fences were turf banks, with loose stones piled into walls on the top of these.

There was comparative fertility and luxuriance down below in the rare green dales. The narrow meadows stretching along the brookside seemed as though the cows could really satisfy their hunger in the deep rich grass; whereas on the higher lands the scanty herbage was hardly worth the fatigue of moving about in search of it. Even in these 'bottoms' the piping sea-winds, following the current of the stream, stunted and cut low any trees; but still there was rich thick underwood, tangled and tied together with brambles, and brier-rose, [sic] and honeysuckle; and if the farmer in the comparatively happy valleys had had wife or daughter who cared for gardening, many a flower would have grown on the western or southern side of the rough stone house. But at that time gardening was not a popular art in any part of England; in the north it is not yet. Noblemen and gentlemen may have beautiful gardens; but farmers and day-labourers care little for them north of the Trent, which is all

can answer for. A few 'berry' bushes, a black currant tree or two (the leaves to be used in heightening the flavour of tea, the fruit as medicinal for colds and sore throats), a potato ground (and this was not so common at the close of the last century as it is now), a cabbage bed, a bush of sage, and balm, and thyme, and marjoram, with possibly a rose tree, and 'old man' growing in the midst; a little plot of small strong coarse onions, and perhaps some marigolds, the petals of which flavoured the salt-bee broth; such plants made up a well-furnished garden to a farmhouse at the time and place to which no story belongs. But for twenty miles inland there was no forgetting the sea, nor the sea-trade; refuse shell-fish, seaweed, the offal of the melting-houses, were the staple manure of the district; green ghastly whale-jaws, bleached bare and white, were the arches over the gate-posts to many a field in the moorland stretch. Out of every family of several sons, however agricultural their position might be, one had gone to sea, and the mother looked wistfully seaward at the changes of the keen piping moorland winds. The holiday rambles were to the coast; no one cared to go inland to see aught, unless indeed it might be to the great annual horse-fairs held where the dreary land broke into habitation and cultivation.

Somehow in this country sea thoughts followed the thinker far inland; whereas in most other parts of the island, at five miles from the ocean, he has all but forgotten the existence of such an element as salt water. The great Greenland trade of the coasting towns was the main and primary cause of this, no doubt. But there was also a dread and an irritation in every one's mind, at the time of which I write, in connection with the neighbouring sea.

Since the termination of the American war, there had been nothing to call for any unusual energy in manning the navy; and the grants required by Government for this purpose diminished with every year of peace. In 1792 this grant touched its minimum for many years. In 1793 the proceedings of the French had set Europe on fire, and the English were raging with anti-Gallican excitement, fomented into action by every expedient of the Crown and its Ministers. We had our ships; but where were our men? The Admiralty had, however, a ready remedy at hand, with ample precedent for its use, and with common (if not statute) law to sanction its application. They issued 'press warrants,' calling upon the civil power throughout the country to support their officers in the discharge of their duty. The sea coast was divided into districts, under the charge of a captain in the navy, who again delegated sub-districts to lieutenants; and in this manner all homeward-bound vessels were watched and waited for at all ports were under supervision; and in a day, if need were, a large number of men could be added to the forces of his Majesty's navy. But if the Admiralty became urgent in their demands, they were also willing to be unscrupulous. Landsmen, if able-bodied, might soon be trained into good sailors; and once in the hold of the tender, which always awaited the success of the operations of the press-gang, it was difficult for such prisoners to bring evidence of the nature of their former occupations, especially when none had leisure to listen to such evidence, or were willing to believe it if they did listen, and would act upon it for the release of the captive if they had by possibility both listened and believed. Men were kidnapped, literally disappeared, and nothing was ever heard of them again. The street of a busy town was not safe from such press-gang captures, as Lord Thurlow could have told, after a certain walk he took about this time on Tower Hill, when he, the attorney-general of England, was impressed, when the Admiralty had its own peculiar ways of getting rid of tiresome besiegers and petitioners. Nor yet were lonely inland dwellers more secure; many a rustic went to a statute fair or 'mop,' and never came home to tell of his hiring; many a stout young farmer vanished from his place by the hearth of his father, and was no more heard of by mother or lover; so great was the press of men to serve in the navy during the early years of the war with France, and after every great naval victory of that war.

The servants of the Admiralty lay in wait for all merchantmen and traders; there were many instances of vessels returning home after long absence, and laden with rich cargo, being boarded within a day's distance of land, and so many men pressed and carried off, that the ship, with her cargo, became unmanageable from the loss of her crew, drifted out again into the wild wide ocean, and was sometimes found in the helpless guidance of one or two infirm or ignorant sailors; sometimes such vessels were never heard of more. The men thus pressed were taken from the near grasp of parents and wives, and were often deprived of the hard earnings of years, which remained in the hands of the masters of the merchantman in which they had served, subject to all the chances of honesty and dishonesty, life or death. Now all this tyranny (for I can use no other word) is marvellous to us; we cannot imagine how it is that a nation submitted to it for so long, even under any warlike enthusiasm or any panic of invasion, any amount of loyal subservience to the governing powers. When we read of the military being called in to assist the civil power in backing up the press-gang, of parties of soldiers patrolling the streets, and sentries with screwed bayonets placed at every door while the press-gang entered and searched each hole and corner of the dwelling; when we hear of churches being surrounded during divine service by troops, while the press-gang stood ready at the door to seize men as they came out from attending public worship, and take these instances as merely types of what was constantly going on in different forms, we do not wonder at Lord Mayors, and other civic authorities in large towns, complaining that a stop was put to business by the danger which the tradesmen and their servants incurred in leaving their houses and going into the streets, infested by press-gangs.

Whether it was that living in closer neighbourhood to the metropolis—the centre of politics and news—inspired the inhabitants of the southern counties with a strong feeling of that kind of patriotism which consists in hating all other nations; or whether it was that the chances of capture were so much greater at all the southern ports that the merchant sailors became inured to the danger; or whether it was that serving in the navy, to those familiar with such towns as Portsmouth and Plymouth, had a natural attraction to most men from the dash and brilliancy of the adventurous employment—it is certain that the southerners took the oppression of press-warrants more submissively than the wild north-easterly people. For with them the chances of profit beyond their wages in the whaling or Greenland trade extended to the lowest description of sailor. He might rise by daring and saving to be a ship-owner himself. Numbers around him had done so; and this very fact made the distinction between class and class less apparent; and the common ventures and dangers, the universal interest felt in one pursuit bound the inhabitants of that line of coast together with a strong tie, the severance of which by any violent extraneous measure, gave rise to passionate anger and thirst for vengeance. A Yorkshireman once said to me, 'My county folk are all alike. Their first thought is how to resist. Why! I myself, if I hear a man say it is a fine day, catch myself trying to find out that it is no such thing. It is so in thought; it is so in word; it is so in deed.'

So you may imagine the press-gang had no easy time of it on the Yorkshire coast. In other places they inspired fear, but here rage and hatred. The Lord Mayor of York was warned on 20th January, 1777, by an anonymous letter, that 'if those men were not sent from the city on or before the following Tuesday his lordship's own dwelling, and the Mansion-house also, should be burned to the ground.'

Perhaps something of the ill-feeling that prevailed on the subject was owing to the fact which I have noticed in other places similarly situated. Where the landed possessions of gentlemen of ancient family but limited income surround a centre of any kind of profitable trade or manufacture, there is a sort of latent ill-will on the part of the squires to the tradesman, be he manufacturer, merchant, or ship-owner, in whose hands is held a power of money-making, which no hereditary pride, or

gentlemanly love of doing nothing, prevents him from using. This ill-will, to be sure, is mostly of a negative kind; its most common form of manifestation is in absence of speech or action, a sort of torpid and genteel ignoring all unpleasant neighbours; but really the whale-fisheries of Monkshaven had become so impertinently and obtrusively prosperous of late years at the time of which I write, that the Monkshaven ship-owners were growing so wealthy and consequential, that the squires, who lived at home at ease in the old stone manor-houses scattered up and down the surrounding moorland, felt that the check upon the Monkshaven trade likely to be inflicted by the press-gang, was wisely ordained by the higher powers (how high they placed these powers I will not venture to say), to prevent overhaste in getting rich, which was a scriptural fault, and they also thought that they were only doing their duty in backing up the Admiralty warrants by all the civil power at their disposal, whenever they were called upon, and whenever they could do so without taking too much trouble in affairs which did not after all much concern themselves.

There was just another motive in the minds of some provident parents of many daughters. The captains and lieutenants employed on this service were mostly agreeable bachelors, brought up to a genteel profession, at the least they were very pleasant visitors, when they had a day to spare; who knew what might come of it?

Indeed, these brave officers were not unpopular in Monkshaven itself, except at the time when they were brought into actual collision with the people. They had the frank manners of their profession; they were known to have served in those engagements, the very narrative of which at this day would warm the heart of a Quaker, and they themselves did not come prominently forward in the dirty work which, nevertheless, was permitted and quietly sanctioned by them. So while few Monkshaven people passed the low public-house over which the navy blue-flag streamed, as a sign that it was the rendezvous of the press-gang, without spitting towards it in sign of abhorrence, yet, perhaps, the very same persons would give some rough token of respect to Lieutenant Atkinson if they met him in High Street. Touching their hats was an unknown gesture in those parts, but they would move their heads in a droll, familiar kind of way, neither a wag nor a nod, but meant all the same to imply friendly regard. The ship-owners, too, invited him to an occasional dinner or supper, all the time looking forward to the chances of his turning out an active enemy, and not by any means inclined to give him 'the run of the house,' however many unmarried daughters might grace their table. Still as he could tell a rattling story, drink hard, and was seldom too busy to come at a short notice, he got on better than any one could have expected with the Monkshaven folk. And the principal share of the odium of his business fell on his subordinates, who were one and all regarded in the light of mean kidnappers and spies — 'varmint,' as the common people esteemed them: and as such they were ready at the first provocation to hunt and to worry them, and little cared the press-gang for this. Whatever else they were, they were brave and daring. They had law to back them, therefore their business was lawful. They were serving their king and country. They were using all their faculties, and that is always pleasant. There was plenty of scope for the glory and triumph of outwitting; plenty of adventure in their life. It was a lawful and loyal employment, requiring sense, readiness, courage, and besides called out that strange love of the chase inherent in every man. Fourteen or fifteen miles at sea lay the *Aurora*, good man-of-war; and to her were conveyed the living cargoes of several tenders, which were stationed at likely places along the sea-coast. One, the *Lively Lady*, might be seen from the cliffs above Monkshaven, not so far away, but hidden by the angle of the high lands from the constant sight of the townspeople; and there was always the Randyvow-house (as the public-house with the navy blue-flag was called thereabouts) for the crew of the *Lively Lady* to lounge about, and there to offer drink to unwary passers-by. At present this was all that the press-gang had done at Monkshaven.

Chapter II - Home from Greenland

*

One hot day, early in October of the year 1796, two girls set off from their country homes at Monkshaven to sell their butter and eggs, for they were both farmers' daughters, though rather under different circumstances; for Molly Corney was one of a large family of children, and had to rough it accordingly; Sylvia Robson was an only child, and was much made of in more people's estimation than Mary's by her elderly parents. They had each purchases to make after their sales were effected, and the sales of butter and eggs were effected in those days by the market-women sitting on the steps of the great old mutilated cross till a certain hour in the afternoon, after which, if all their goods were not disposed of, they took them unwillingly to the shops and sold them at a lower price. But good housewives did not despise coming themselves to the Butter Cross, and, smelling and depreciating the articles they wanted, kept up a perpetual struggle of words, trying, often in vain, to beat down prices. A housekeeper of the last century would have thought that she did not know her business, if she had not gone through this preliminary process; and the farmers' wives and daughters treated it all as a matter of course, replying with a good deal of independent humour to the customer, who, once having discovered where good butter and fresh eggs were to be sold, came time after time to depreciate the articles she always ended in taking. There was leisure for all this kind of work in those days.

Molly had tied a knot on her pink-spotted handkerchief for each of the various purchases she had to make; dull but important articles needed for the week's consumption at home; if she forgot any one of them she knew she was sure of a good 'rating' from her mother. The number of them made her pocket-handkerchief look like one of the nine-tails of a 'cat;' but not a single thing was for herself, not indeed, for any one individual of her numerous family. There was neither much thought nor much money to spend for any but collective wants in the Corney family.

It was different with Sylvia. She was going to choose her first cloak, not to have an old one of her mother's, that had gone down through two sisters, dyed for the fourth time (and Molly would have been glad had even this chance been hers), but to buy a bran-new duffle cloak all for herself, with not even an elder authority to curb her as to price, only Molly to give her admiring counsel, and as much sympathy as was consistent with a little patient envy of Sylvia's happier circumstances. Every now and then they wandered off from the one grand subject of thought, but Sylvia, with unconscious art, soon brought the conversation round to the fresh consideration of the respective merits of gray and scarlet. These girls were walking bare-foot and carrying their shoes and stockings in their hands during the first part of their way; but as they were drawing near Monkshaven they stopped, and turned aside along a foot-path that led from the main-road down to the banks of the Dee. There were great stones in the river about here, round which the waters gathered and eddied and formed deep pools. Molly sate down on the grassy bank to wash her feet; but Sylvia, more active (or perhaps lighter hearted with the notion of the cloak in the distance), placed her basket on a gravelly bit of shore, and giving a long spring, seated herself on a stone almost in the middle of the stream. Then she began dipping her little rosy toes in the cool rushing water and whisking them out with childish glee.

'Be quiet, wi' the', Sylvia? Thou'st splashing me all ower, and my feyther'll noane be so keen o' givin'

me a new cloak as thine is, seemingly.'

Sylvia was quiet, not to say penitent, in a moment. She drew up her feet instantly; and, as if to take herself out of temptation, she turned away from Molly to that side of her stony seat on which the current ran shallow, and broken by pebbles. But once disturbed in her play, her thoughts reverted to the great subject of the cloak. She was now as still as a minute before she had been full of frolic and gambolling life. She had tucked herself up on the stone, as if it had been a cushion, and she a little sultana.

Molly was deliberately washing her feet and drawing on her stockings, when she heard a sudden sigh and her companion turned round so as to face her, and said,

'I wish mother hadn't spoken up for t' gray.'

'Why, Sylvia, thou wert saying as we topped t'brow, as she did nought but bid thee think twice afore settling on scarlet.'

'Ay! but mother's words are scarce, and weigh heavy. Feyther's liker me, and we talk a deal o' rubbish; but mother's words are liker to hewn stone. She puts a deal o' meaning in 'em. And then,' said Sylvia, as if she was put out by the suggestion, 'she bid me ask cousin Philip for his opinion. I hate a man who has gotten an opinion on such-like things.'

'Well! we shall niver get to Monkshaven this day, either for to sell our eggs and stuff, or to buy the cloak, if we're sittin' here much longer. T' sun's for slanting low, so come along, lass, and let's be going.'

'But if I put on my stockings and shoon here, and jump back into yon wet gravel, I 'se not be fit to be seen,' said Sylvia, in a pathetic tone of bewilderment, that was funnily childlike. She stood up, her bare feet curved round the curving surface of the stone, her slight figure balancing as if in act to spring.

'Thou knows thou'll have just to jump back barefoot, and wash thy feet afresh, without making all this ado; thou shouldst ha' done it at first, like me, and all other sensible folk. But thou'st gotten no gumption.'

Molly's mouth was stopped by Sylvia's hand. She was already on the river bank by her friend's side.

'Now dunnot lecture me; I'm none for a sermon hung on every peg o' words. I'm going to have a new cloak, lass, and I cannot heed thee if thou dost lecture. Thou shall have all the gumption, and I'll have my cloak.'

It may be doubted whether Molly thought this an equal division.

Each girl wore tightly-fitting stockings, knit by her own hands, of the blue worsted common in the country; they had on neat high-heeled black leather shoes, coming well over the instep, and fastened as well as ornamented with bright steel buckles. They did not walk so lightly and freely now as they did before they were shod, but their steps were still springy with the buoyancy of early youth; for neither of them was twenty, indeed I believe Sylvia was not more than seventeen at this time.

They clambered up the steep grassy path, with brambles catching at their kilted petticoats, through the copse-wood, till they regained the high road; and then they 'settled themselves,' as they called it; that is to say, they took off their black felt hats, and tied up their clustering hair afresh; they shook off every speck of wayside dust; straightened the little shawls (or large neck-kerchiefs, call them which you will) that were spread over their shoulders, pinned below the throat, and confined at the waist by their apron-strings; and then putting on their hats again, and picking up their baskets, they prepared to walk decorously into the town of Monkshaven.

The next turn of the road showed them the red peaked roofs of the closely packed houses lying almost directly below the hill on which they were. The full autumn sun brought out the ruddy colour of the tiled gables, and deepened the shadows in the narrow streets. The narrow harbour at the mouth of the river was crowded with small vessels of all descriptions, making an intricate forest of masts. Beyond lay the sea, like a flat pavement of sapphire, scarcely a ripple varying its sunny surface, that stretched out leagues away till it blended with the softened azure of the sky. On this blue trackless water floated scores of white-sailed fishing boats, apparently motionless, unless you measured their progress by some land-mark; but still, and silent, and distant as they seemed, the consciousness that there were men on board, each going forth into the great deep, added unspeakably to the interest felt in watching them. Close to the bar of the river Dee a larger vessel lay to. Sylvia, who had only recently come into the neighbourhood, looked at this with the same quiet interest as she did at all the others; but Molly, as soon as her eye caught the build of it, cried out aloud—

'She's a whaler! she's a whaler home from t' Greenland seas! T' first this season! God bless her!' and she turned round and shook both Sylvia's hands in the fulness of her excitement. Sylvia's colour rose and her eyes sparkled out of sympathy.

'Is ta sure?' she asked, breathless in her turn; for though she did not know by the aspect of the different ships on what trade they were bound, yet she was well aware of the paramount interest attached to whaling vessels.

'Three o'clock! and it's not high water till five!' said Molly. 'If we're sharp we can sell our eggs, and be down to the staites before she comes into port. Be sharp, lass!'

And down the steep long hill they went at a pace that was almost a run. A run they dared not make in the market-place, and as it was, the rate at which they walked would have caused destruction among eggs less carefully packed. When the descent was ended, there was yet the long narrow street before them, bending and swerving from the straight line, as it followed the course of the river. The girls felt as if they should never come to the market-place, which was situated at the crossing of Bridge Street and High Street. There the old stone cross was raised by the monks long ago; now worn and mutilated, no one esteemed it as a holy symbol, but only as the Butter Cross, where market-women clustered on Wednesday, and whence the town crier made all his proclamations of household sales, things lost or found, beginning with 'Oh! yes, oh! yes, oh! yes!' and ending with 'God bless the king and the lord of this manor,' and a very brisk 'Amen,' before he went on his way and took off the livery-coat, the colours of which marked him as a servant of the Burnabys, the family who held manorial rights over Monkshaven.

Of course the much frequented space surrounding the Butter Cross was the favourite centre for shopping, and on this day, a fine market day, just when good housewives begin to look over their winter store of blankets and flannels, and discover their needs betimes, these shops ought to have had plenty of customers. But they were empty and of even quieter aspect than their every-day wont. The three

legged creepie-stools that were hired out at a penny an hour to such market-women as came too late find room on the steps were unoccupied; knocked over here and there, as if people had passed by haste.

Molly took in all at a glance, and interpreted the signs, though she had no time to explain the meaning, and her consequent course of action, to Sylvia, but darted into a corner shop.

'T' whalers is coming home! There's one lying outside t' bar!'

This was put in the form of an assertion; but the tone was that of eager cross-questioning.

'Ay!' said a lame man, mending fishing-nets behind a rough deal counter. 'She's come back airly, and she's brought good news o' t' others, as I've heered say. Time was I should ha' been on th' staiths throwing up my cap wit' t' best on 'em; but now it pleases t' Lord to keep me at home, and set me mind other folks' gear. See thee, wench, there's a vast o' folk ha' left their skeps o' things wi' me while they're away down to t' quay side. Leave me your eggs and be off wi' ye for t' see t' fun, for mebbe ye'll live to be palsied yet, and then ye'll be fretting ower spilt milk, and that ye didn't tak' all chance when ye was young. Ay, well! they're out o' hearin' o' my moralities; I'd better find a lamiter like mysen to preach to, for it's not iverybody has t' luck t' clargy has of saying their say out whether folk likes it or not.'

He put the baskets carefully away with much of such talk as this addressed to himself while he did so. Then he sighed once or twice; and then he took the better course and began to sing over his tarry work.

Molly and Sylvia were far along the staithes by the time he got to this point of cheerfulness. They ran on, regardless of stitches and pains in the side; on along the river bank to where the concourse of people was gathered. There was no great length of way between the Butter Cross and the harbour; in five minutes the breathless girls were close together in the best place they could get for seeing, on the outside of the crowd; and in as short a time longer they were pressed inwards, by fresh arrivals, into the very midst of the throng. All eyes were directed to the ship, beating her anchor just outside the bay not a quarter of a mile away. The custom-house officer was just gone aboard of her to receive the captain's report of his cargo, and make due examination. The men who had taken him out in his boat were rowing back to the shore, and brought small fragments of news when they landed a little distance from the crowd, which moved as one man to hear what was to be told. Sylvia took a hard grasp of the hand of the older and more experienced Molly, and listened open-mouthed to the answers she was extracting from a gruff old sailor she happened to find near her.

'What ship is she?'

'T' *Resolution* of Monkshaven!' said he, indignantly, as if any goose might have known that.

'An' a good *Resolution*, and a blessed ship she's been to me,' piped out an old woman, close at Mary's elbow. 'She's brought me home my ae' lad—for he shouted to yon boatman to bid him tell me he was well. 'Tell Peggy Christison,' says he (my name is Margaret Christison)—'tell Peggy Christison as her son Hezekiah is come back safe and sound.' The Lord's name be praised! An' me a widow as never thought to see my lad again!'

It seemed as if everybody relied on every one else's sympathy in that hour of great joy.

'I ax pardon, but if you'd gie me just a bit of elbow-room for a minute like, I'd hold my babby up, so that he might see daddy's ship, and happen, my master might see him. He's four months old la Tuesday se'nnight, and his feyther's never clapt eyne on him yet, and he wi' a tooth through, an another just breaking, bless him!'

One or two of the better end of the Monkshaven inhabitants stood a little before Molly and Sylvia; and as they moved in compliance with the young mother's request, they overheard some of the information these ship-owners had received from the boatman.

'Haynes says they'll send the manifest of the cargo ashore in twenty minutes, as soon as Fishburn h looked over the casks. Only eight whales, according to what he says.'

'No one can tell,' said the other, 'till the manifest comes to hand.'

'I'm afraid he's right. But he brings a good report of the *Good Fortune*. She's off St Abb's Head, with something like fifteen whales to her share.'

'We shall see how much is true, when she comes in.'

'That'll be by the afternoon tide to-morrow.'

'That's my cousin's ship,' said Molly to Sylvia. 'He's specksioneer on board the *Good Fortune*.'

An old man touched her as she spoke—

'I humbly make my manners, missus, but I'm stone blind; my lad's aboard yon vessel outside t' bar, and my old woman is bed-fast. Will she be long, think ye, in making t' harbour? Because, if so be she were, I'd just make my way back, and speak a word or two to my missus, who'll be boiling o' into some mak o' mischief now she knows he's so near. May I be so bold as to ax if t' Crooked Neg is covered yet?'

Molly stood on tip-toe to try and see the black stone thus named; but Sylvia, stooping and peeping through the glimpses afforded between the arms of the moving people, saw it first, and told the blind old man it was still above water.

'A watched pot,' said he, 'ne'er boils, I reckon. It's ta'en a vast o' watter t' cover that stone to-day. Anyhow, I'll have time to go home and rate my missus for worritin' hersen, as I'll be bound she's done for all as I bade her not, but to keep easy and content.'

'We'd better be off too,' said Molly, as an opening was made through the press to let out the groping old man. 'Eggs and butter is yet to sell, and tha' cloak to be bought.'

'Well, I suppose we had!' said Sylvia, rather regretfully; for, though all the way into Monkshaven her head had been full of the purchase of this cloak, yet she was of that impressible nature that takes the tone of feeling from those surrounding; and though she knew no one on board the *Resolution*, she was just as anxious for the moment to see her come into harbour as any one in the crowd who had a dear relation on board. So she turned reluctantly to follow the more prudent Molly along the quay back to the Butter Cross.

It was a pretty scene, though it was too familiar to the eyes of all who then saw it for them to notice its beauty. The sun was low enough in the west to turn the mist that filled the distant valley of the river into golden haze. Above, on either bank of the Dee, there lay the moorland heights swelling on behind the other; the nearer, russet brown with the tints of the fading bracken; the more distant, gray and dim against the rich autumnal sky. The red and fluted tiles of the gabled houses rose in crowded irregularity on one side of the river, while the newer suburb was built in more orderly and less picturesque fashion on the opposite cliff. The river itself was swelling and chafing with the incoming tide till its vexed waters rushed over the very feet of the watching crowd on the staithe, as the green sea waves encroached more and more every minute. The quay-side was unsavourily ornamented with glittering fish-scales, for the hauls of fish were cleansed in the open air, and no sanitary arrangements existed for sweeping away any of the relics of this operation.

The fresh salt breeze was bringing up the lashing, leaping tide from the blue sea beyond the bar. Behind the returning girls there rocked the white-sailed ship, as if she were all alive with eagerness for her anchors to be heaved.

How impatient her crew of beating hearts were for that moment, how those on land sickened at the suspense, may be imagined, when you remember that for six long summer months those sailors had been as if dead from all news of those they loved; shut up in terrible, dreary Arctic seas from the hungry sight of sweethearts and friends, wives and mothers. No one knew what might have happened. The crowd on shore grew silent and solemn before the dread of the possible news of death that might toll in upon their hearts with this uprushing tide. The whalers went out into the Greenland seas full of strong, hopeful men; but the whalers never returned as they sailed forth. On land there are deaths among two or three hundred men to be mourned over in every half-year's space of time. Whose bones had been left to blacken on the gray and terrible icebergs? Who lay still until the sea should give up its dead? Who were those who should come back to Monkshaven never, no, never more?

Many a heart swelled with passionate, unspoken fear, as the first whaler lay off the bar on her return voyage.

Molly and Sylvia had left the crowd in this hushed suspense. But fifty yards along the staithe they passed five or six girls with flushed faces and careless attire, who had mounted a pile of timber placed there to season for ship-building, from which, as from the steps of a ladder or staircase, they could command the harbour. They were wild and free in their gestures, and held each other by the hand, and swayed from side to side, stamping their feet in time, as they sang—

Weel may the keel row, the keel row, the keel row,
Weel may the keel row that my laddie's in!

'What for are ye going off, now?' they called out to our two girls. 'She'll be in in ten minutes!' and without waiting for the answer which never came, they resumed their song.

Old sailors stood about in little groups, too proud to show their interest in the adventures they could no longer share, but quite unable to keep up any semblance of talk on indifferent subjects.

The town seemed very quiet and deserted as Molly and Sylvia entered the dark, irregular Bridge Street, and the market-place was as empty of people as before. But the skeps and baskets and three-legged stools were all cleared away.

'Market's over for to-day,' said Molly Corney, in disappointed surprise. 'We mun make the best on' and sell to t' huxters, and a hard bargain they'll be for driving. I doubt mother'll be vexed.'——

She and Sylvia went to the corner shop to reclaim their baskets. The man had his joke at them for the delay.

'Ay, ay! lasses as has sweethearts a-coming home don't care much what price they get for butter an eggs! I dare say, now, there's some un in yon ship that 'ud give as much as a shilling a pound for the butter if he only knowed who churned it!' This was to Sylvia, as he handed her back her property.

The fancy-free Sylvia reddened, pouted, tossed back her head, and hardly deigned a farewell word or thanks or civility to the lame man; she was at an age to be affronted by any jokes on such a subject. Molly took the joke without disclaimer and without offence. She rather liked the unfounded idea of her having a sweetheart, and was rather surprised to think how devoid of foundation the notion was. If she could have a new cloak as Sylvia was going to have, then, indeed, there might be a chance! Under some such good luck, it was as well to laugh and blush as if the surmise of her having a lover was not very far from the truth, and so she replied in something of the same strain as the lame net-maker to his joke about the butter.

'He'll need it all, and more too, to grease his tongue, if iver he reckons to win me for his wife!'

When they were out of the shop, Sylvia said, in a coaxing tone,—

'Molly, who is it? Whose tongue 'll need greasing? Just tell me, and I'll never tell!'

She was so much in earnest that Molly was perplexed. She did not quite like saying that she had alluded to no one in particular, only to a possible sweetheart, so she began to think what young man had made the most civil speeches to her in her life; the list was not a long one to go over, for her father was not so well off as to make her sought after for her money, and her face was rather of the homeliest. But she suddenly remembered her cousin, the specksioneer, who had given her two large shells, and taken a kiss from her half-willing lips before he went to sea the last time. So she smiled a little, and then said,—

'Well! I dunno. It's ill talking o' these things afore one has made up one's mind. And perhaps Charley Kinraid behaves hissen, I might be brought to listen.'

'Charley Kinraid! who's he?'

'Yon specksioneer cousin o' mine, as I was talking on.'

'And do yo' think he cares for yo'?' asked Sylvia, in a low, tender tone, as if touching on a great mystery.

Molly only said, 'Be quiet wi' yo',' and Sylvia could not make out whether she cut the conversation short because she was offended, or because they had come to the shop where they had to sell the butter and eggs.

'Now, Sylvia, if thou'll leave me thy basket, I'll make as good a bargain as iver I can on 'em; and thou can be off to choose this grand new cloak as is to be, afore it gets any darker. Where is ta going to?'

~~'Mother said I'd better go to Foster's,' answered Sylvia, with a shade of annoyance in her face. 'Feyth said just anywhere.'~~

'Foster's is t' best place; thou canst try anywhere afterwards. I'll be at Foster's in five minutes, for I reckon we mun hasten a bit now. It'll be near five o'clock.'

Sylvia hung her head and looked very demure as she walked off by herself to Foster's shop in the market-place.

Chapter III - Buying a New Cloak

*

Foster's shop was the shop of Monkshaven. It was kept by two Quaker brothers, who were now old men; and their father had kept it before them; probably his father before that. People remembered it as an old-fashioned dwelling-house, with a sort of supplementary shop with unglazed windows projecting from the lower story. These openings had long been filled with panes of glass that at the present day would be accounted very small, but which seventy years ago were much admired for their size. I can best make you understand the appearance of the place by bidding you think of the long openings in a butcher's shop, and then to fill them up in your imagination with panes about eight inches by six, in a heavy wooden frame. There was one of these windows on each side the door-place, which was kept partially closed through the day by a low gate about a yard high. Half the shop was appropriated to grocery; the other half to drapery, and a little mercery. The good old brothers gave all their known customers a kindly welcome; shaking hands with many of them, and asking all after their families and domestic circumstances before proceeding to business. They would not for the world have had any sign of festivity at Christmas, and scrupulously kept their shop open at that holy festival, ready themselves to serve sooner than tax the consciences of any of their assistants, only nobody ever came. But on New Year's Day they had a great cake, and wine, ready in the parlour behind the shop, of which all who came in to buy anything were asked to partake. Yet, though scrupulous in most things, it did not go against the consciences of these good brothers to purchase smuggled articles. There was a back way from the river-side, up a covered entry, to the yard-door of the Fosters, and a peculiar kind of knock at this door always brought out either John or Jeremiah, or if not them, their shopman, Philip Hepburn; and the same cake and wine that the excise officer's wife might just have been tasting, was brought out in the back parlour to treat the smuggler. There was a little locking of doors, and drawing of the green silk curtain that was supposed to shut out the shop, but really all this was done very much for form's sake. Everybody in Monkshaven smuggled who could, and every one wore smuggled goods who could, and great reliance was placed on the excise officer's neighbourly feelings.

The story went that John and Jeremiah Foster were so rich that they could buy up all the new towns across the bridge. They had certainly begun to have a kind of primitive bank in connection with the shop, receiving and taking care of such money as people did not wish to retain in their houses for fear of burglars. No one asked them for interest on the money thus deposited, nor did they give any; but, on the other hand, if any of their customers, on whose character they could depend, wanted a little advance, the Fosters, after due inquiries made, and in some cases due security given, were not unwilling to lend a moderate sum without charging a penny for the use of their money. All the articles they sold were as good as they knew how to choose, and for them they expected and obtained ready money. It was said that they only kept on the shop for their amusement. Others averred that there was some plan of a marriage running in the brothers' heads—a marriage between William Coulson, Mr. Jeremiah's wife's nephew (Mr. Jeremiah was a widower), and Hester Rose, whose mother was some kind of distant relation, and who served in the shop along with William Coulson and Philip Hepburn. Again, this was denied by those who averred that Coulson was no blood relation, and that if the Fosters had intended to do anything considerable for Hester, they would never have allowed her and her mother to live in such a sparing way, eking out their small income by having Coulson and

Hepburn for lodgers. No, John and Jeremiah would leave all their money to some hospital or to some charitable institution. But, of course, there was a reply to this; when are there not many sides to an argument about a possibility concerning which no facts are known? Part of the reply turned on the old gentlemen had, probably, some deep plan in their heads in permitting their cousin to take Coulson and Hepburn as lodgers, the one a kind of nephew, the other, though so young, the head man in the shop; if either of them took a fancy to Hester, how agreeably matters could be arranged!

All this time Hester is patiently waiting to serve Sylvia, who is standing before her a little shy, a little perplexed and distracted, by the sight of so many pretty things.

Hester was a tall young woman, sparely yet largely formed, of a grave aspect, which made her look older than she really was. Her thick brown hair was smoothly taken off her broad forehead, and put in a very orderly fashion, under her linen cap; her face was a little square, and her complexion sallow, though the texture of her skin was fine. Her gray eyes were very pleasant, because they looked at you so honestly and kindly; her mouth was slightly compressed, as most have it who are in the habit of restraining their feelings; but when she spoke you did not perceive this, and her rare smile slowly breaking forth showed her white even teeth, and when accompanied, as it generally was, by a sudden uplifting of her soft eyes, it made her countenance very winning. She was dressed in stuff of sober colours, both in accordance with her own taste, and in unasked compliance with the religious customs of the Fosters; but Hester herself was not a Friend.

Sylvia, standing opposite, not looking at Hester, but gazing at the ribbons in the shop window, as hardly conscious that any one awaited the expression of her wishes, was a great contrast; ready to smile or to pout, or to show her feelings in any way, with a character as undeveloped as a child's; affectionate, wilful, naughty, tiresome, charming, anything, in fact, at present that the chances of an hour called out. Hester thought her customer the prettiest creature ever seen, in the moment she had her for admiration before Sylvia turned round and, recalled to herself, began,—

'Oh, I beg your pardon, miss; I was thinking what may the price of yon crimson ribbon be?'

Hester said nothing, but went to examine the shop-mark.

'Oh! I did not mean that I wanted any, I only want some stuff for a cloak. Thank you, miss, but I am very sorry—some duffle, please.'

Hester silently replaced the ribbon and went in search of the duffle. While she was gone Sylvia was addressed by the very person she most wished to avoid, and whose absence she had rejoiced over on first entering the shop, her cousin Philip Hepburn.

He was a serious-looking young man, tall, but with a slight stoop in his shoulders, brought on by his occupation. He had thick hair standing off from his forehead in a peculiar but not displeasing manner, a long face, with a slightly aquiline nose, dark eyes, and a long upper lip, which gave a disagreeable aspect to a face that might otherwise have been good-looking.

'Good day, Sylvie,' he said; 'what are you wanting? How are all at home? Let me help you!'

Sylvia pursed up her red lips, and did not look at him as she replied,

'I'm very well, and so is mother; feyther's got a touch of rheumatiz, and there's a young woman getting what I want.'

She turned a little away from him when she had ended this sentence, as if it had comprised all she could possibly have to say to him. But he exclaimed,

'You won't know how to choose,' and, seating himself on the counter, he swung himself over after the fashion of shop-men.

Sylvia took no notice of him, but pretended to be counting over her money.

'What do you want, Sylvie?' asked he, at last annoyed at her silence.

'I don't like to be called "Sylvie;" my name is Sylvia; and I'm wanting duffle for a cloak, if you must know.'

Hester now returned, with a shop-boy helping her to drag along the great rolls of scarlet and gray cloth.

'Not that,' said Philip, kicking the red duffle with his foot, and speaking to the lad. 'It's the gray you want, is it not, Sylvie?' He used the name he had had the cousin's right to call her by since her childhood, without remembering her words on the subject not five minutes before; but she did, and was vexed.

'Please, miss, it is the scarlet duffle I want; don't let him take it away.'

Hester looked up at both their countenances, a little wondering what was their position with regard to each other; for this, then, was the beautiful little cousin about whom Philip had talked to her mother as sadly spoilt, and shamefully ignorant; a lovely little dunce, and so forth. Hester had pictured Sylvia Robson, somehow, as very different from what she was: younger, more stupid, not half so bright and charming (for, though she was now both pouting and cross, it was evident that this was not her accustomed mood). Sylvia devoted her attention to the red cloth, pushing aside the gray.

Philip Hepburn was vexed at his advice being slighted; and yet he urged it afresh.

'This is a respectable, quiet-looking article that will go well with any colour; you niver will be so foolish as to take what will mark with every drop of rain.'

'I'm sorry you sell such good-for-nothing things,' replied Sylvia, conscious of her advantage, and relaxing a little (as little as she possibly could) of her gravity.

Hester came in now.

'He means to say that this cloth will lose its first brightness in wet or damp; but it will always be a good article, and the colour will stand a deal of wear. Mr. Foster would not have had it in his shop else.'

Philip did not like that even a reasonable peace-making interpreter should come between him and Sylvia, so he held his tongue in indignant silence.

Hester went on:

'To be sure, this gray is the closer make, and would wear the longest.'

'I don't care,' said Sylvia, still rejecting the dull gray. 'I like this best. Eight yards, if you please, miss'

'A cloak takes nine yards, at least,' said Philip, decisively.

'Mother told me eight,' said Sylvia, secretly conscious that her mother would have preferred the more sober colour; and feeling that as she had had her own way in that respect, she was bound to keep to the directions she had received as to the quantity. But, indeed, she would not have yielded to Philip anything that she could help.

There was a sound of children's feet running up the street from the river-side, shouting with excitement. At the noise, Sylvia forgot her cloak and her little spirit of vexation, and ran to the half-door of the shop. Philip followed because she went. Hester looked on with passive, kindly interest, soon as she had completed her duty of measuring. One of those girls whom Sylvia had seen as she and Molly left the crowd on the quay, came quickly up the street. Her face, which was handsome enough as to feature, was whitened with excess of passionate emotion, her dress untidy and flying, her movements heavy and free. She belonged to the lowest class of seaport inhabitants. As she came near Sylvia saw that the tears were streaming down her cheeks, quite unconsciously to herself. She recognized Sylvia's face, full of interest as it was, and stopped her clumsy run to speak to the pretty sympathetic creature.

'She's o'er t' bar! She's o'er t' bar! I'm boun' to tell mother!'

She caught at Sylvia's hand, and shook it, and went on breathless and gasping.

'Sylvia, how came you to know that girl?' asked Philip, sternly. 'She's not one for you to be shaking hands with. She's known all down t' quay-side as "Newcastle Bess."'

'I can't help it,' said Sylvia, half inclined to cry at his manner even more than his words. 'When folks are glad I can't help being glad too, and I just put out my hand, and she put out hers. To think o' your ship come in at last! And if yo'd been down seeing all t' folk looking and looking their eyes out, as they feared they should die afore she came in and brought home the lads they loved, yo'd ha' shaken hands wi' that lass too, and no great harm done. I never set eyne upon her till half an hour ago on t' staithes, and maybe I'll niver see her again.'

Hester was still behind the counter, but had moved so as to be near the window; so she heard what they were saying, and now put in her word:

'She can't be altogether bad, for she thought o' telling her mother first thing, according to what she said.'

Sylvia gave Hester a quick, grateful look. But Hester had resumed her gaze out of the window, and did not see the glance.

And now Molly Corney joined them, hastily bursting into the shop.

'Hech!' said she. 'Hearken! how they're crying and shouting down on t' quay. T' gang's among 'em lik t' day of judgment. Hark!'

No one spoke, no one breathed, I had almost said no heart beat for listening. Not long; in an instant there rose the sharp simultaneous cry of many people in rage and despair. Inarticulate at that distance it was yet an intelligible curse, and the roll, and the roar, and the irregular tramp came nearer and nearer.

'They're taking 'em to t' Randyvowse,' said Molly. 'Eh! I wish I'd King George here just to tell him m mind.'

The girl clenched her hands, and set her teeth.

'It's terrible hard!' said Hester; 'there's mothers, and wives, looking out for 'em, as if they were sta dropt out o' t' lift.'

'But can we do nothing for 'em?' cried Sylvia. 'Let us go into t' thick of it and do a bit of help; I can stand quiet and see 't!' Half crying, she pushed forwards to the door; but Philip held her back.

'Sylvie! you must not. Don't be silly; it's the law, and no one can do aught against it, least of a women and lasses.

By this time the vanguard of the crowd came pressing up Bridge Street, past the windows of Foster's shop. It consisted of wild, half-amphibious boys, slowly moving backwards, as they were compelled by the pressure of the coming multitude to go on, and yet anxious to defy and annoy the gang by insults, and curses half choked with their indignant passion, doubling their fists in the very faces of the gang who came on with measured movement, armed to the teeth, their faces showing white with repressed and determined energy against the bronzed countenances of the half-dozen sailors, who were all they had thought it wise to pick out of the whaler's crew, this being the first time an Admiralty warrant had been used in Monkshaven for many years; not since the close of the American war, in fact. One of the men was addressing to his townspeople, in a high pitched voice, an exhortation which few could hear, for, pressing around this nucleus of cruel wrong, were women crying aloud, throwing up their arms in imprecation, showering down abuse as hearty and rapid as if they had been a Greek chorus. Their wild, famished eyes were strained on faces they might not kiss, their cheeks were flushed to purple with anger or else livid with impotent craving for revenge. Some of them looked scarce human; and yet an hour ago these lips, now tightly drawn back so as to show the teeth with the unconscious action of an enraged wild animal, had been soft and gracious with the smile of hope; eyes, that were fiery and bloodshot now, had been loving and bright; hearts, never to recover from the sense of injustice and cruelty, had been trustful and glad only one short hour ago.

There were men there, too, sullen and silent, brooding on remedial revenge; but not many, the great proportion of this class being away in the absent whalers.

The stormy multitude swelled into the market-place and formed a solid crowd there, while the press-gang steadily forced their way on into High Street, and on to the rendezvous. A low, deep growl went up from the dense mass, as some had to wait for space to follow the others—now and then going up, a lion's growl goes up, into a shriek of rage.

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