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A Little Maid of Province Town

Alice Turner Curtis

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The Creature Sprang to Its Feet

A Blanket Fell Over Her Head

She Worked Steadily

“This Is From Boston”

The Boat Began to Tip

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A Little Maid of Province Town

CHAPTER I

ANNE NELSON

"I don't know what I can do with you, I'm sure!" declared Mistress Stoddard, looking down at the small girl who stood on her door-step gazing wistfully up at her.

"A man at the wharf said that you didn't have any little girls," responded the child, "and so I thought—"

"'Twas Joe Starkweather told you, I'll be bound," said Mrs. Stoddard. "Well, he's seven of his own to fend for."

"Seven little girls?" said Anne Nelson, in an almost terror-stricken voice, her dark eyes looking earnestly into the stern face that frowned down upon her. "And what would become of them if their mother should die, and their father be lost at sea?"

"Sure enough. You have sense, child. But the Starkweathers are all boys. Well, come in. You can take your bundle to the loft and leave it, and we'll see what I can find for you to do. How old are you?"

"Eight last March," responded Anne.

"Well, a child of eight isn't much use in a house, but maybe you can save me steps."

"Yes, indeed, Mistress Stoddard; I did a deal to help my father about the house. He said I could do as much as a woman. I can sweep out for you, and lay the table and wash the dishes, and bring in the wood and water, and—"

there came a break in the little girl's voice, and the woman reached out a kindly hand and took the child's bundle.

"Come in," she said, and Anne instantly felt the tenderness of her voice. "We are poor enough, but you'll be welcome to food and shelter, child, till such time as some of your own kinsfolk send for thee."

"I have no kinsfolk," declared Anne; "my father told me that."

"Come you in; you'll have a bed and a crust while I have them to give you," declared the woman, and Anne Nelson went across the threshold and up to the bare loft, where she put her 3 bundle down on a wooden stool and looked about the room.

There was but a narrow bed in the corner, covered with a patchwork quilt, and the wooden stool where Anne had put her bundle. The one narrow window looked off across the sandy cart tracks which served as a road toward the blue waters of Cape Cod Bay. It was early June, and the strong breath of the sea filled the rough little house, bringing with it the fragrance of the wild cherry blossoms and an odor of pine from the scrubby growths on the low line of hills back of the little settlement.

It was just a year ago, Anne remembered, as she unwrapped her bundle, that she and her father had sailed across the harbor from Ipswich, where her mother had died.

"We will live here, at the very end of the world, where a man may think as he pleases," her father had said, and had moved their few household possessions into a three-roomed house near the shore. Then he had given his time to fishing, leaving Anne alone in the little house to do as she pleased.

She was a quiet child, and found entertainment in building sand houses on the beach, in 4 wandering along the shore searching for bright shells and smooth pebbles, and in doing such simple household tasks as her youth admitted. A week before her appearance at Mrs. Stoddard's door, John Nelson had gone out in his fishing-boat, and now he had been given up as lost. No sign of him had been seen by the other fishermen, and it was generally believed by his neighbors that his sloop had foundered and that John Nelson had perished.

Some there were, however, who declared John Nelson to be a British spy, and hesitated not to say that he had sailed away to join some vessel of the British fleet with information as to the convenience of the harbor of Province Town, and with such other news as he had brought from Ipswich and the settlements nearer Boston. For it was just before the war of the American Revolution, when men were watched sharply and taken to task speedily for any lack of loyalty to the American colonies. And John Nelson had many a time

declared that he believed England meant well by her American possessions,—a statement which set many of his neighbors against him.

“‘Mean well,’ indeed!” Joseph Starkweather 5 had replied to his neighbor’s remark. “When they have closed the port of Boston, so that no ship but the king’s war-ships dare go in and out? Even our fishing-boats are closely watched. Already the Boston people are beginning to need many things. Americans are not going to submit to feeding British soldiers while their own men go hungry.”

But now Joseph Starkweather was the only man who interested himself in the lonely child. Day after day of that first week of her father’s absence Anne had stayed close to the little house, looking hopefully out across the harbor for a sight of his boat; and day after day Joseph Starkweather had come lounging down the beach to speak with the child, to ask her what she had for breakfast, and if she slept safe and unafraid.

“The meal is gone,” she told him one morning, “and I do not sleep now—I wait and listen for my father;” and then it was that he told her she must seek another home.

“You are too young to stay alone,” he said; “pick up a bundle of your clothes and go to Mrs. Stoddard on the hill. She hasn’t a chick or child of her own. Like as not you’ll be a blessing 6 to her.” And Anne, used to obedience and sorrow, obeyed.

There was nothing of much value in the small house, but on the day after Anne’s entrance as a member of the Stoddard family, Captain Stoddard loaded the poor sticks of furniture on a handcart, and pulled it through the sandy tracks to his cottage door.

“It’s the child of an English spy you’re giving shelter to,” he had said, when Martha Stoddard had told him that Anne was to live with them, “and she’ll bring no luck to the house.” But his wife had made no response; the dark-eyed, elfish-looking child had already found a place in the woman’s heart.

“I don’t eat so very much,” Anne announced as Mrs. Stoddard gave her a bowl of corn mush and milk when she came down-stairs.

"You'll eat what you want in this house, child," answered her new friend, and Anne ate hungrily.

"Now come to the door, Anne, and I'll brush out this tangle of hair of yours," said Mrs. Stoddard; "and after this you must keep it brushed and braided neatly. And bring down your other frock. I'll be doing some washing this 7 afternoon, and I venture to say your frock is in need of it."

The first few days in the Stoddard family seemed almost unreal to Anne. She no longer watched for her father's boat, she no longer wandered about the beach, playing in the sand and hunting for shells. Her dresses were not now the soiled and ragged covering which had served as frocks, but stout cotton gowns, made from a skirt of Mrs. Stoddard's, and covered with a serviceable apron. A sunbonnet of striped cotton covered the dark head, and Anne was as neat and well-dressed as the other children of the settlement. To be sure her slender feet were bare and tanned, and hardened by exposure; but there was not a child in the neighborhood who wore shoes until the frost came, and Mrs. Stoddard was already making plans for Anne's winter foot-gear.

"I'll trade off something for some moccasins for the child before fall," she had resolved; "some of the Chatham Indians will get down this way when the beach plums begin to ripen, and will be glad of molasses, if I am lucky enough to have it."

For those were the days when the little coast 8 settlements had but few luxuries, and on Cape Cod the settlers were in fear of the British. Province Town was especially exposed, and at that time there were but thirty houses; and the people had no established communication with the outside world. The sea was their thoroughfare, as a journey over the sandy country from Province Town to Boston was almost impossible. News was a long time in reaching the little settlement of fishermen. But they knew that King George III had resolved to punish Boston for destroying his cargoes of tea, and had made Salem the seat of government in the place of Boston. War-ships from England hovered about the coast, and the children of Province Town were quick to recognize these unwelcome craft.

"Mistress Stoddard," said Anne one morning, when she had returned from driving the cow to the enclosed pasturage at some little

distance from the house, "Jimmie Starkweather says there is a big ship off Race Point, and that it is coming into harbor here. He says 'tis a British ship, and that like as not the men will land and burn down the houses and kill all the cows." Anne looked at Mrs. Stoddard questioningly.

"Nonsense!" responded the good woman. 9 "Jimmie was but trying to make you afraid. 'Twas he sent thee running home last week in fear of a wolf that he told you was prowling about."

"But there is a ship, Mistress Stoddard. I went up the hill and looked, and 'tis coming along like a great white bird."

"Like enough. The big ships go up toward Boston and Salem on every fair day. You know that well, child."

"This seems a different kind," persisted Anne; and at last Mrs. Stoddard's curiosity was aroused, and with Anne close beside her she walked briskly up to the hill and looked anxiously across the blue waters.

"'Tis much nearer, now," said Anne. "See, it's coming to—'twill anchor."

"Sure enough," answered Mrs. Stoddard. "Jimmie Starkweather is a wise lad. 'Tis a British man-of-war. Trouble is near at hand, child."

"Will they kill our cow?" questioned Anne. "Jimmie said they would, and eat her," and Anne's voice trembled; for the small brown cow was the nearest approach to a pet that the little girl had. It seemed a loss hardly to be borne if "Brownie" was to be sacrificed. 10

"It's like enough they will," replied Mrs. Stoddard. "They'll be sending their boats ashore and taking what they can see. Run back to the pasture, Anne, and drive Brownie down the further slope toward the salt-meadow. There's good feed for her beyond the wood there, and she'll not wander far before nightfall, and she will not be quickly seen there."

Anne needed no urging. With another look toward the big ship, she fled back along the sandy road toward the pasture, and in a short time the brown cow, much surprised and offended, was being

driven at a run down the pasture slope, around the grove of scrub-by maples to the little valley beyond.

Anne waited until Brownie had sufficiently recovered from her surprise to begin feeding again, apparently well content with her new pasturage, and then walked slowly back toward the harbor. The village seemed almost deserted. The children were not playing about the boats; there was no one bringing water from the spring near the shore, and as Anne looked out toward the harbor, she saw two more big ships coming swiftly toward anchorage.

"Poor Brownie!" she said aloud, for if there 11 was danger in one ship she was sure that three meant that there was no hope for the gentle brown cow which she had just driven to a place of safety.

Before night a boatload of British sailors had landed, filled their water-barrels at the spring, bought some young calves of Joseph Starkweather and returned quietly to their ships.

"They seem civil enough," said Captain Stoddard that night as he talked the newcomers over with his wife. "They know we could make no stand against them, but they treated Joseph Starkweather fairly enough."

Anne listened eagerly. "Will they take Brownie?" she asked.

"Indeed they won't if I can help it," answered Mrs. Stoddard; "we'll not drive the creature back and forth while the British are about. I can slip over the hill with a bucket and milk her night and morning. She's gentle, and there's no need of letting the pirates see how sleek and fat the creature is."

"And may I go with you, Mistress Stoddard?" asked Anne.

"Of course, child," answered Mrs. Stoddard, smilingly. 12

After Anne had gone up to the loft to bed Captain Stoddard said slowly: "She seems a good child."

"That she does, Enos. Good and careful of her clothes, and eager to be of help to me. She saves me many a step."

"'Tis John Nelson, they say, who has brought the Britishers into harbor," responded Captain Enos slowly. "Joseph Starkweather

swears that one of the sailors told him so when he bargained for the calves."

"Anne's not to blame!" declared Mrs. Stoddard loyally, but there was a note of anxiety in her voice; "as you said yourself, Enos, she's a good child."

"I'll not be keeping her if it proves true," declared the man stubbornly. "True it is that they ask no military duty of any man in Province Town, but we're loyal folk just the same. We may have to barter with the British to save our poor lives, instead of turning guns on them as we should; but no man shall say that I took in a British spy's child and cared for it."

"They'd but say you did a Christian deed at the most," said his wife. "You're not a hard man, Enos." 13

"I'll not harbor a traitor's child," he insisted, and Mrs. Stoddard went sorrowfully to bed and lay sleepless through the long night, trying to think of some plan to keep Anne Nelson safe and well cared for until peaceful days should come again.

And Anne, too, lay long awake, wondering what she could do to protect the little brown cow which now rested so securely on the further side of the hill.

CHAPTER II

ANNE WINS A FRIEND

"Come, Anne," called Mrs. Stoddard at so early an hour the next morning that the June sun was just showing itself above the eastern horizon.

"Yes, Mistress Stoddard," answered the little girl promptly, and in a few minutes she came down the steep stairs from the loft.

"It is early to call you, child," said the good woman kindly, "but the captain has made an early start for the fishing grounds, and I liked not to leave you alone in the house in these troublous times; and so eat your porridge and we'll go and milk Brownie."

Anne hastened to obey; and in a few moments the two were making their way up the slope through the fragrant bayberry bushes, and breathing in the sweet morning air. No one else seemed astir in the little settlement. Now and then a flutter of some wild bird would betray that they had stepped near some low-nesting bird; and the air was full of the morning songs and chirrupings of robins, red-winged blackbirds, song sparrows, and of many sea-loving birds which built their nests among the sand-hills, but found their food upon the shore.

Anne noticed all these things as they walked along, but her thoughts were chiefly occupied with other things. There was one question she longed to ask Mrs. Stoddard, yet almost feared to ask. As they reached the summit of the hill and turned for a look at the beautiful harbor she gained courage and spoke:

"Mistress Stoddard, will you please to tell me what a 'spy' is?"

"A spy? and why do you wish to know, Anne?" responded her friend; "who has been talking to you of spies?"

"Is it an ill-seeming word?" questioned the child anxiously. "The Cary children did call it after me yesterday when I went to the spring."

"Did they that!" exclaimed Mrs. Stoddard angrily, "and what reply did you make, Anne?"

The little girl shook her head. "I said nothing. I knew not what they might mean. Does it mean an orphan child, Mistress Stoddard?" 16 and the little girl lifted her dark eyes appealingly.

"I will tell you its meaning, Anne, and then you will see that it has naught to do with little girls. A 'spy' is like this: Suppose some one should wish to know if I kept my house in order, and what I gave the captain for dinner, and could not find out, and so she came to you and said, 'Anne Nelson, if you will tell me about the Stoddard household, and open the door that I may come in and see for myself, I will give thee a shilling and a packet of sweets'; then, if you should agree to the bargain, then you could be called a spy."

"But I would not do such a thing!" declared Anne, a little flash of resentment in her dark eyes. "Do the Cary children think me like that? I will throw water on them when next we meet at the spring-aye, and sand."

"Nay, Anne," reproved Mrs. Stoddard, but she was not ill-pleased at the child's spirit. "Then you would be as bad as they. It does not matter what they may say; that is neither here nor there. If you be an honest-thinking child and do well they cannot work harm against you." 17

As they talked they had walked on and now heard a low "Moo!" from behind a bunch of wild cherry trees.

"There's Brownie!" exclaimed Anne, "but I do wish she would not 'moo' like that, Mistress Stoddard. The British might hear her if they come up this far from shore."

"'Tis only to remind me that it is time she was milked," said Mrs. Stoddard. "You can play about here, child, till I have finished."

Anne did not wander far. There was something else she wished to know, and when the bucket was filled with foamy, fragrant milk, of which Mrs. Stoddard bade the child drink, she said:

"'Tis near a month since my father went. The Cary children also called after me that my father was a 'traitor'; is that an ill-seeming word?"

"The little oafs!" exclaimed Mrs. Stoddard, "and what else did they say?"