

XV. 'CAPTAIN' BOB LOVEDAY OF THE MERCHANT SERVICE

While Loveday and his neighbours were thus rambling forth, full of expectancy, some of them, including Anne in the rear, heard the crackling of light wheels along the curved lane to which the path was the chord. At once Anne thought, 'Perhaps that's he, and we are missing him.' But recent events were not of a kind to induce her to say anything; and the others of the company did not reflect on the sound.

Had they gone across to the hedge which hid the lane, and looked through it, they would have seen a light cart driven by a boy, beside whom was seated a seafaring man, apparently of good standing in the merchant service, with his feet outside on the shaft. The vehicle went over the main bridge, turned in upon the other bridge at the tail of the mill, and halted by the door. The sailor alighted, showing himself to be a well-shaped, active, and fine young man, with a bright eye, an anonymous nose, and of such a rich complexion by exposure to ripening suns that he might have been some connexion of the foreigner who calls his likeness the Portrait of a Gentleman in galleries of the Old Masters. Yet in spite of this, and though Bob Loveday had been all over the world from Cape Horn to Peking, and from India's coral strand to the White Sea, the most conspicuous of all the marks that he had brought back with him was an

increased resemblance to his mother, who had lain all the time beneath Overcombe church wall.

Captain Loveday tried the house door; finding this locked he went to the mill door: this was locked also, the mill being stopped for the night.

'They are not at home,' he said to the boy. 'But never mind that. Just help to unload the things and then I'll pay you, and you can drive off home.'

The cart was unloaded, and the boy was dismissed, thanking the sailor profusely for the payment rendered. Then Bob Loveday, finding that he had still some leisure on his hands, looked musingly east, west, north, south, and nadir; after which he bestirred himself by carrying his goods, article by article, round to the back door, out of the way of casual passers. This done, he walked round the mill in a more regardful attitude, and surveyed its familiar features one by one--the panes of the grinding-room, now as heretofore clouded with flour as with stale hoarfrost; the meal lodged in the corners of the window-sills, forming a soil in which lichens grew without ever getting any bigger, as they had done since his smallest infancy; the mosses on the plinth towards the river, reaching as high as the capillary power of the walls would fetch up moisture for their nourishment, and the penned mill-pond, now as ever on the point of overflowing into the garden. Everything was the same.

When he had had enough of this it occurred to Loveday that he might get

into the house in spite of the locked doors; and by entering the garden, placing a pole from the fork of an apple-tree to the window-sill of a bedroom on that side, and climbing across like a Barbary ape, he entered the window and stepped down inside. There was something anomalous in being close to the familiar furniture without having first seen his father, and its silent, impassive shine was not cheering; it was as if his relations were all dead, and only their tables and chests of drawers left to greet him. He went downstairs and seated himself in the dark parlour. Finding this place, too, rather solitary, and the tick of the invisible clock preternaturally loud, he unearthed the tinder-box, obtained a light, and set about making the house comfortable for his father's return, divining that the miller had gone out to meet him by the wrong road.

Robert's interest in this work increased as he proceeded, and he bustled round and round the kitchen as lightly as a girl. David, the indoor factotum, having lost himself among the quart pots of Budmouth, there had been nobody left here to prepare supper, and Bob had it all to himself. In a short time a fire blazed up the chimney, a tablecloth was found, the plates were clapped down, and a search made for what provisions the house afforded, which, in addition to various meats, included some fresh eggs of the elongated shape that produces cockerels when hatched, and had been set aside on that account for putting under the next broody hen.

A more reckless cracking of eggs than that which now went on had never been known in Overcombe since the last large christening; and as Loveday

gashed one on the side, another at the end, another longways, and another diagonally, he acquired adroitness by practice, and at last made every son of a hen of them fall into two hemispheres as neatly as if it opened by a hinge. From eggs he proceeded to ham, and from ham to kidneys, the result being a brilliant fry.

Not to be tempted to fall to before his father came back, the returned navigator emptied the whole into a dish, laid a plate over the top, his coat over the plate, and his hat over his coat. Thus completely stopping in the appetizing smell, he sat down to await events. He was relieved from the tediousness of doing this by hearing voices outside; and in a minute his father entered.

'Glad to welcome ye home, father,' said Bob. 'And supper is just ready.'

'Lard, lard--why, Captain Bob's here!' said Mrs. Garland.

'And we've been out waiting to meet thee!' said the miller, as he entered the room, followed by representatives of the houses of Cripplestraw, Comfort, Mitchell, Beach, and Snooks, together with some small beginnings of Fencible Tremlett's posterity. In the rear came David, and quite in the vanishing-point of the composition, Anne the fair.

'I drove over; and so was forced to come by the road,' said Bob.

'And we went across the fields, thinking you'd walk,' said his father.

'I should have been here this morning; but not so much as a wheelbarrow could I get for my traps; everything was gone to the review. So I went too, thinking I might meet you there. I was then obliged to return to the harbour for the luggage.'

Then there was a welcoming of Captain Bob by pulling out his arms like drawers and shutting them again, smacking him on the back as if he were choking, holding him at arm's length as if he were of too large type to read close. All which persecution Bob bore with a wide, genial smile that was shaken into fragments and scattered promiscuously among the spectators.

'Get a chair for 'n!' said the miller to David, whom they had met in the fields and found to have got nothing worse by his absence than a slight slant in his walk.

'Never mind--I am not tired--I have been here ever so long,' said Bob.

'And I--' But the chair having been placed behind him, and a smart touch in the hollow of a person's knee by the edge of that piece of furniture having a tendency to make the person sit without further argument, Bob sank down dumb, and the others drew up other chairs at a convenient nearness for easy analytic vision and the subtler forms of good fellowship. The miller went about saying, 'David, the nine best glasses from the corner cupboard!'--'David, the corkscrew!'--'David, whisk the tail of thy smock-frock round the inside of these quart pots afore you

draw drink in 'em--they be an inch thick in dust!--'David, lower that chimney-crook a couple of notches that the flame may touch the bottom of the kettle, and light three more of the largest candles!--'If you can't get the cork out of the jar, David, bore a hole in the tub of Hollands that's buried under the scroff in the fuel-house; d'ye hear?--Dan Brown left en there yesterday as a return for the little porker I gied en.'

When they had all had a thimbleful round, and the superfluous neighbours had reluctantly departed, one by one, the inmates gave their minds to the supper, which David had begun to serve up.

'What be you rolling back the tablecloth for, David?' said the miller.

'Maister Bob have put down one of the under sheets by mistake, and I thought you might not like it, sir, as there's ladies present!'

'Faith, 'twas the first thing that came to hand,' said Robert. 'It seemed a tablecloth to me.'

'Never mind--don't pull off the things now he's laid 'em down--let it bide,' said the miller. 'But where's Widow Garland and Maidy Anne?'

'They were here but a minute ago,' said David. 'Depend upon it they have slinked off 'cause they be shy.'

The miller at once went round to ask them to come back and sup with him;

and while he was gone David told Bob in confidence what an excellent place he had for an old man.

'Yes, Cap'n Bob, as I suppose I must call ye; I've worked for yer father these eight-and-thirty years, and we have always got on very well together. Trusts me with all the keys, lends me his sleeve-waistcoat, and leaves the house entirely to me. Widow Garland next door, too, is just the same with me, and treats me as if I was her own child.'

'She must have married young to make you that, David.'

'Yes, yes--I'm years older than she. 'Tis only my common way of speaking.'

Mrs. Garland would not come in to supper, and the meal proceeded without her, Bob recommending to his father the dish he had cooked, in the manner of a householder to a stranger just come. The miller was anxious to know more about his son's plans for the future, but would not for the present interrupt his eating, looking up from his own plate to appreciate Bob's travelled way of putting English victuals out of sight, as he would have looked at a mill on improved principles.

David had only just got the table clear, and set the plates in a row under the bakehouse table for the cats to lick, when the door was hastily opened, and Mrs. Garland came in, looking concerned.

'I have been waiting to hear the plates removed to tell you how frightened we are at something we hear at the back-door. It seems like robbers muttering; but when I look out there's nobody there!'

'This must be seen to,' said the miller, rising promptly. 'David, light the middle-sized lantern. I'll go and search the garden.'

'And I'll go too,' said his son, taking up a cudgel. 'Lucky I've come home just in time!'

They went out stealthily, followed by the widow and Anne, who had been afraid to stay alone in the house under the circumstances. No sooner were they beyond the door when, sure enough, there was the muttering almost close at hand, and low upon the ground, as from persons lying down in hiding.

'Bless my heart!' said Bob, striking his head as though it were some enemy's: 'why, 'tis my luggage. I'd quite forgot it!'

'What!' asked his father.

'My luggage. Really, if it hadn't been for Mrs. Garland it would have stayed there all night, and they, poor things! would have been starved. I've got all sorts of articles for ye. You go inside, and I'll bring 'em in. 'Tis parrots that you hear a muttering, Mrs. Garland. You needn't be afraid any more.'

'Parrots?' said the miller. 'Well, I'm glad 'tis no worse. But how couldst forget so, Bob?'

The packages were taken in by David and Bob, and the first unfastened were three, wrapped in cloths, which being stripped off revealed three cages, with a gorgeous parrot in each.

'This one is for you, father, to hang up outside the door, and amuse us,' said Bob. 'He'll talk very well, but he's sleepy to-night. This other one I brought along for any neighbour that would like to have him. His colours are not so bright; but 'tis a good bird. If you would like to have him you are welcome to him,' he said, turning to Anne, who had been tempted forward by the birds. 'You have hardly spoken yet, Miss Anne, but I recollect you very well. How much taller you have got, to be sure!'

Anne said she was much obliged, but did not know what she could do with such a present. Mrs. Garland accepted it for her, and the sailor went on--'Now this other bird I hardly know what to do with; but I dare say he'll come in for something or other.'

'He is by far the prettiest,' said the widow. 'I would rather have it than the other, if you don't mind.'

'Yes,' said Bob, with embarrassment. 'But the fact is, that bird will

hardly do for ye, ma'am. He's a hard swearer, to tell the truth; and I am afraid he's too old to be broken of it.'

'How dreadful!' said Mrs. Garland.

'We could keep him in the mill,' suggested the miller. 'It won't matter about the grinder hearing him, for he can't learn to cuss worse than he do already!'

'The grinder shall have him, then,' said Bob. 'The one I have given you, ma'am, has no harm in him at all. You might take him to church o' Sundays as far as that goes.'

The sailor now untied a small wooden box about a foot square, perforated with holes. 'Here are two marmosets,' he continued. 'You can't see them to-night; but they are beauties--the tufted sort.'

'What's a marmoset?' said the miller.

'O, a little kind of monkey. They bite strangers rather hard, but you'll soon get used to 'em.'

'They are wrapped up in something, I declare,' said Mrs. Garland, peeping in through a chink.

'Yes, that's my flannel shirt,' said Bob apologetically. 'They suffer

terribly from cold in this climate, poor things! and I had nothing better to give them. Well, now, in this next box I've got things of different sorts.'

The latter was a regular seaman's chest, and out of it he produced shells of many sizes and colours, carved ivories, queer little caskets, gorgeous feathers, and several silk handkerchiefs, which articles were spread out upon all the available tables and chairs till the house began to look like a bazaar.

'What a lovely shawl!' exclaimed Widow Garland, in her interest forestalling the regular exhibition by looking into the box at what was coming.

'O yes,' said the mate, pulling out a couple of the most bewitching shawls that eyes ever saw. 'One of these I am going to give to that young lady I am shortly to be married to, you know, Mrs. Garland. Has father told you about it? Matilda Johnson, of Southampton, that's her name.'

'Yes, we know all about it,' said the widow.

'Well, I shall give one of these shawls to her--because, of course, I ought to.'

'Of course,' said she.

'But the other one I've got no use for at all; and,' he continued, looking round, 'will you have it, Miss Anne? You refused the parrot, and you ought not to refuse this.'

'Thank you,' said Anne calmly, but much distressed; 'but really I don't want it, and couldn't take it.'

'But do have it!' said Bob in hurt tones, Mrs. Garland being all the while on tenter-hooks lest Anne should persist in her absurd refusal.

'Why, there's another reason why you ought to!' said he, his face lighting up with recollections. 'It never came into my head till this moment that I used to be your beau in a humble sort of way. Faith, so I did, and we used to meet at places sometimes, didn't we--that is, when you were not too proud; and once I gave you, or somebody else, a bit of my hair in fun.'

'It was somebody else,' said Anne quickly.

'Ah, perhaps it was,' said Bob innocently. 'But it was you I used to meet, or try to, I am sure. Well, I've never thought of that boyish time for years till this minute! I am sure you ought to accept some one gift, dear, out of compliment to those old times!'

Anne drew back and shook her head, for she would not trust her voice.

'Well, Mrs. Garland, then you shall have it,' said Bob, tossing the shawl to that ready receiver. 'If you don't, upon my life I will throw it out to the first beggar I see. Now, here's a parcel of cap ribbons of the splendidest sort I could get. Have these--do, Anne!'

'Yes, do,' said Mrs. Garland.

'I promised them to Matilda,' continued Bob; 'but I am sure she won't want 'em, as she has got some of her own: and I would as soon see them upon your head, my dear, as upon hers.'

'I think you had better keep them for your bride if you have promised them to her,' said Mrs. Garland mildly.

'It wasn't exactly a promise. I just said, "Til, there's some cap ribbons in my box, if you would like to have them." But she's got enough things already for any bride in creation. Anne, now you shall have 'em--upon my soul you shall--or I'll fling them down the mill-tail!'

Anne had meant to be perfectly firm in refusing everything, for reasons obvious even to that poor waif, the meanest capacity; but when it came to this point she was absolutely compelled to give in, and reluctantly received the cap ribbons in her arms, blushing fitfully, and with her lip trembling in a motion which she tried to exhibit as a smile.

'What would Tilly say if she knew!' said the miller silyly.

'Yes, indeed--and it is wrong of him!' Anne instantly cried, tears running down her face as she threw the parcel of ribbons on the floor.

'You'd better bestow your gifts where you bestow your l--l--love, Mr. Loveday--that's what I say!' And Anne turned her back and went away.

'I'll take them for her,' said Mrs. Garland, quickly picking up the parcel.

'Now that's a pity,' said Bob, looking regretfully after Anne. 'I didn't remember that she was a quick-tempered sort of girl at all. Tell her, Mrs. Garland, that I ask her pardon. But of course I didn't know she was too proud to accept a little present--how should I? Upon my life if it wasn't for Matilda I'd--Well, that can't be, of course.'

'What's this?' said Mrs. Garland, touching with her foot a large package that had been laid down by Bob unseen.

'That's a bit of baccy for myself,' said Robert meekly.

The examination of presents at last ended, and the two families parted for the night. When they were alone, Mrs. Garland said to Anne, 'What a close girl you are! I am sure I never knew that Bob Loveday and you had walked together: you must have been mere children.'

'O yes--so we were,' said Anne, now quite recovered. 'It was when we first came here, about a year after father died. We did not walk together in any regular way. You know I have never thought the Lovedays high enough for me. It was only just--nothing at all, and I had almost forgotten it.'

It is to be hoped that somebody's sins were forgiven her that night before she went to bed.

When Bob and his father were left alone, the miller said, 'Well, Robert, about this young woman of thine--Matilda what's her name?'

'Yes, father--Matilda Johnson. I was just going to tell ye about her.'

The miller nodded, and sipped his mug.

'Well, she is an excellent body,' continued Bob; 'that can truly be said--a real charmer, you know--a nice good comely young woman, a miracle of genteel breeding, you know, and all that. She can throw her hair into the nicest curls, and she's got splendid gowns and headclothes. In short, you might call her a land mermaid. She'll make such a first-rate wife as there never was.'

'No doubt she will,' said the miller; 'for I have never known thee wanting in sense in a jeneral way.' He turned his cup round on its axis

till the handle had travelled a complete circle. 'How long did you say in your letter that you had known her?'

'A fortnight.'

'Not very long.'

'It don't sound long, 'tis true; and 'twas really longer--'twas fifteen days and a quarter. But hang it, father, I could see in the twinkling of an eye that the girl would do. I know a woman well enough when I see her--I ought to, indeed, having been so much about the world. Now, for instance, there's Widow Garland and her daughter. The girl is a nice little thing; but the old woman--O no!' Bob shook his head.

'What of her?' said his father, slightly shifting in his chair.

'Well, she's, she's--I mean, I should never have chose her, you know. She's of a nice disposition, and young for a widow with a grown-up daughter; but if all the men had been like me she would never have had a husband. I like her in some respects; but she's a style of beauty I don't care for.'

'O, if 'tis only looks you are thinking of,' said the miller, much relieved, 'there's nothing to be said, of course. Though there's many a duchess worse-looking, if it comes to argument, as you would find, my son,' he added, with a sense of having been mollified too soon.

The mate's thoughts were elsewhere by this time.

'As to my marrying Matilda, thinks I, here's one of the very genteelest sort, and I may as well do the job at once. So I chose her. She's a dear girl; there's nobody like her, search where you will.'

'How many did you choose her out from?' inquired his father.

'Well, she was the only young woman I happened to know in Southampton, that's true. But what of that? It would have been all the same if I had known a hundred.'

'Her father is in business near the docks, I suppose?'

'Well, no. In short, I didn't see her father.'

'Her mother?'

'Her mother? No, I didn't. I think her mother is dead; but she has got a very rich aunt living at Melchester. I didn't see her aunt, because there wasn't time to go; but of course we shall know her when we are married.'

'Yes, yes, of course,' said the miller, trying to feel quite satisfied.

'And she will soon be here?'

'Ay, she's coming soon,' said Bob. 'She has gone to this aunt's at Melchester to get her things packed, and suchlike, or she would have come with me. I am going to meet the coach at the King's Arms, Casterbridge, on Sunday, at one o'clock. To show what a capital sort of wife she'll be, I may tell you that she wanted to come by the Mercury, because 'tis a little cheaper than the other. But I said, "For once in your life do it well, and come by the Royal Mail, and I'll pay." I can have the pony and trap to fetch her, I suppose, as 'tis too far for her to walk?'

'Of course you can, Bob, or anything else. And I'll do all I can to give you a good wedding feast.'

XVI. THEY MAKE READY FOR THE ILLUSTRIOUS STRANGER

Preparations for Matilda's welcome, and for the event which was to follow, at once occupied the attention of the mill. The miller and his man had but dim notions of housewifery on any large scale; so the great wedding cleaning was kindly supervised by Mrs. Garland, Bob being mostly away during the day with his brother, the trumpet-major, on various errands, one of which was to buy paint and varnish for the gig that Matilda was to be fetched in, which he had determined to decorate with