

XIX. MISS JOHNSON'S BEHAVIOUR CAUSES NO LITTLE SURPRISE

Partly from the excitement of having his Matilda under the paternal roof, Bob rose next morning as early as his father and the grinder, and, when the big wheel began to patter and the little ones to mumble in response, went to sun himself outside the mill-front, among the fowls of brown and speckled kinds which haunted that spot, and the ducks that came up from the mill-tail.

Standing on the worn-out mill-stone inlaid in the gravel, he talked with his father on various improvements of the premises, and on the proposed arrangements for his permanent residence there, with an enjoyment that was half based upon this prospect of the future, and half on the penetrating warmth of the sun to his back and shoulders. Then the different troops of horses began their morning scramble down to the mill-pond, and, after making it very muddy round the edge, ascended the slope again. The bustle of the camp grew more and more audible, and presently David came to say that breakfast was ready.

'Is Miss Johnson downstairs?' said the miller; and Bob listened for the answer, looking at a blue sentinel aloft on the down.

'Not yet, maister,' said the excellent David.

'We'll wait till she's down,' said Loveday. 'When she is, let us know.'

David went indoors again, and Loveday and Bob continued their morning survey by ascending into the mysterious quivering recesses of the mill, and holding a discussion over a second pair of burr-stones, which had to be re-dressed before they could be used again. This and similar things occupied nearly twenty minutes, and, looking from the window, the elder of the two was reminded of the time of day by seeing Mrs. Garland's table-cloth fluttering from her back door over the heads of a flock of pigeons that had alighted for the crumbs.

'I suppose David can't find us,' he said, with a sense of hunger that was not altogether strange to Bob. He put out his head and shouted.

'The lady is not down yet,' said his man in reply.

'No hurry, no hurry,' said the miller, with cheerful emptiness. 'Bob, to pass the time we'll look into the garden.'

'She'll get up sooner than this, you know, when she's signed articles and got a berth here,' Bob observed apologetically.

'Yes, yes,' said Loveday; and they descended into the garden.

Here they turned over sundry flat stones and killed the slugs sheltered beneath them from the coming heat of the day, talking of slugs in all their branches--of the brown and the black, of the tough and the tender,

of the reason why there were so many in the garden that year, of the coming time when the grass-walks harbouring them were to be taken up and

gravel laid, and of the relatively exterminatory merits of a pair of scissors and the heel of the shoe. At last the miller said, 'Well, really, Bob, I'm hungry; we must begin without her.'

They were about to go in, when David appeared with haste in his motions, his eyes wider vertically than crosswise, and his cheeks nearly all gone.

'Maister, I've been to call her; and as 'a didn't speak I rapped, and as 'a didn't answer I kicked, and not being latched the door opened, and--she's gone!'

Bob went off like a swallow towards the house, and the miller followed like the rather heavy man that he was. That Miss Matilda was not in her room, or a scrap of anything belonging to her, was soon apparent. They searched every place in which she could possibly hide or squeeze herself, every place in which she could not, but found nothing at all.

Captain Bob was quite wild with astonishment and grief. When he was quite sure that she was nowhere in his father's house, he ran into Mrs. Garland's, and telling them the story so hastily that they hardly understood the particulars, he went on towards Comfort's house, intending to raise the alarm there, and also at Mitchell's, Beach's, Cripplestraw's, the parson's, the clerk's, the camp of dragoons, of

hussars, and so on through the whole county. But he paused, and thought it would be hardly expedient to publish his discomfiture in such a way. If Matilda had left the house for any freakish reason he would not care to look for her, and if her deed had a tragic intent she would keep aloof from camp and village.

In his trouble he thought of Anne. She was a nice girl and could be trusted. To her he went, and found her in a state of excitement and anxiety which equalled his own.

"'Tis so lonely to cruise for her all by myself!' said Bob disconsolately, his forehead all in wrinkles, 'and I've thought you would come with me and cheer the way?'

'Where shall we search?' said Anne.

'O, in the holes of rivers, you know, and down wells, and in quarries, and over cliffs, and like that. Your eyes might catch the loom of any bit of a shawl or bonnet that I should overlook, and it would do me a real service. Please do come!'

So Anne took pity upon him, and put on her hat and went, the miller and David having gone off in another direction. They examined the ditches of fields, Bob going round by one fence and Anne by the other, till they met at the opposite side. Then they peeped under culverts, into outhouses, and down old wells and quarries, till the theory of a tragical end had

nearly spent its force in Bob's mind, and he began to think that Matilda had simply run away. However, they still walked on, though by this time the sun was hot and Anne would gladly have sat down.

'Now, didn't you think highly of her, Miss Garland?' he inquired, as the search began to languish.

'O yes,' said Anne, 'very highly.'

'She was really beautiful; no nonsense about her looks, was there?'

'None. Her beauty was thoroughly ripe--not too young. We should all have got to love her. What can have possessed her to go away?'

'I don't know, and, upon my life, I shall soon be drove to say I don't care!' replied the mate despairingly. 'Let me pilot ye down over those stones,' he added, as Anne began to descend a rugged quarry. He stepped forward, leapt down, and turned to her.

She gave him her hand and sprang down. Before he relinquished his hold, Captain Bob raised her fingers to his lips and kissed them.

'O, Captain Loveday!' cried Anne, snatching away her hand in genuine dismay, while a tear rose unexpectedly to each eye. 'I never heard of such a thing! I won't go an inch further with you, sir; it is too barefaced!' And she turned and ran off.

'Upon my life I didn't mean it!' said the repentant captain, hastening after. 'I do love her best--indeed I do--and I don't love you at all! I am not so fickle as that! I merely just for the moment admired you as a sweet little craft, and that's how I came to do it. You know, Miss Garland,' he continued earnestly, and still running after, 'tis like this: when you come ashore after having been shut up in a ship for eighteen months, women-folks seem so new and nice that you can't help liking them, one and all in a body; and so your heart is apt to get scattered and to yaw a bit; but of course I think of poor Matilda most, and shall always stick to her.' He heaved a sigh of tremendous magnitude, to show beyond the possibility of doubt that his heart was still in the place that honour required.

'I am glad to hear that--of course I am very glad!' said she, with quick petulance, keeping her face turned from him. 'And I hope we shall find her, and that the wedding will not be put off, and that you'll both be happy. But I won't look for her any more! No; I don't care to look for her--and my head aches. I am going home!'

'And so am I,' said Robert promptly.

'No, no; go on looking for her, of course--all the afternoon, and all night. I am sure you will, if you love her.'

'O yes; I mean to. Still, I ought to convoy you home first?'

'No, you ought not; and I shall not accept your company. Good-morning, sir!' And she went off over one of the stone stiles with which the spot abounded, leaving the friendly sailor standing in the field.

He sighed again, and, observing the camp not far off, thought he would go to his brother John and ask him his opinion on the sorrowful case. On reaching the tents he found that John was not at liberty just at that time, being engaged in practising the trumpeters; and leaving word that he wished the trumpet-major to come down to the mill as soon as possible, Bob went back again.

"'Tis no good looking for her,' he said gloomily. 'She liked me well enough, but when she came here and saw the house, and the place, and the old horse, and the plain furniture, she was disappointed to find us all so homely, and felt she didn't care to marry into such a family!'

His father and David had returned with no news.

'Yes, 'tis as I've been thinking, father,' Bob said. 'We weren't good enough for her, and she went away in scorn!'

'Well, that can't be helped,' said the miller. 'What we be, we be, and have been for generations. To my mind she seemed glad enough to get hold of us!'

'Yes, yes--for the moment--because of the flowers, and birds, and what's pretty in the place,' said Bob tragically. 'But you don't know, father--how should you know, who have hardly been out of Overcombe in your life?--you don't know what delicate feelings are in a real refined woman's mind. Any little vulgar action unreaves their nerves like a marline-spike. Now I wonder if you did anything to disgust her?'

'Faith! not that I know of,' said Loveday, reflecting. 'I didn't say a single thing that I should naturally have said, on purpose to give no offence.'

'You was always very homely, you know, father.'

'Yes; so I was,' said the miller meekly.

'I wonder what it could have been,' Bob continued, wandering about restlessly. 'You didn't go drinking out of the big mug with your mouth full, or wipe your lips with your sleeve?'

'That I'll swear I didn't!' said the miller firmly. 'Thinks I, there's no knowing what I may do to shock her, so I'll take my solid victuals in the bakehouse, and only a crumb and a drop in her company for manners.'

'You could do no more than that, certainly,' said Bob gently.

'If my manners be good enough for well-brought-up people like the

Garlands, they be good enough for her,' continued the miller, with a sense of injustice.

'That's true. Then it must have been David. David, come here! How did you behave before that lady? Now, mind you speak the truth!'

'Yes, Mr. Captain Robert,' said David earnestly. 'I assure ye she was served like a royal queen. The best silver spoons wez put down, and yer poor grandfer's silver tanket, as you seed, and the feather cushion for her to sit on--'

'Now I've got it!' said Bob decisively, bringing down his hand upon the window-sill. 'Her bed was hard!--and there's nothing shocks a true lady like that. The bed in that room always was as hard as the Rock of Gibraltar!'

'No, Captain Bob! The beds were changed--wasn't they maister? We put the goose bed in her room, and the flock one, that used to be there, in yours.'

'Yes, we did,' corroborated the miller. 'David and I changed 'em with our own hands, because they were too heavy for the women to move.'

'Sure I didn't know I had the flock bed,' murmured Bob. 'I slept on, little thinking what I was going to wake to. Well, well, she's gone; and search as I will I shall never find another like her! She was too good

for me. She must have carried her box with her own hands, poor girl. As far as that goes, I could overtake her even now, I dare say; but I won't entreat her against her will--not I.'

Miller Loveday and David, feeling themselves to be rather a desecration in the presence of Bob's sacred emotions, managed to edge off by degrees, the former burying himself in the most floury recesses of the mill, his invariable resource when perturbed, the rumbling having a soothing effect upon the nerves of those properly trained to its music.

Bob was so impatient that, after going up to her room to assure himself once more that she had not undressed, but had only lain down on the outside of the bed, he went out of the house to meet John, and waited on the sunny slope of the down till his brother appeared. John looked so brave and shapely and warlike that, even in Bob's present distress, he could not but feel an honest and affectionate pride at owning such a relative. Yet he fancied that John did not come along with the same swinging step he had shown yesterday; and when the trumpet-major got nearer he looked anxiously at the mate and waited for him to speak first.

'You know our great trouble, John?' said Robert, gazing stoically into his brother's eyes.

'Come and sit down, and tell me all about it,' answered the trumpet-major, showing no surprise.

They went towards a slight ravine, where it was easier to sit down than on the flat ground, and here John reclined among the grasshoppers, pointing to his brother to do the same.

'But do you know what it is?' said Robert. 'Has anybody told ye?'

'I do know,' said John. 'She's gone; and I am thankful!'

'What!' said Bob, rising to his knees in amazement.

'I'm at the bottom of it,' said the trumpet-major slowly.

'You, John?'

'Yes; and if you will listen I'll tell you all. Do you remember what happened when I came into the room last night? Why, she turned colour and nearly fainted away. That was because she knew me.'

Bob stared at his brother with a face of pain and distrust.

'For once, Bob, I must say something that will hurt thee a good deal,' continued John. 'She was not a woman who could possibly be your wife-- and so she's gone.'

'You sent her off?'

'Well, I did.'

'John!--Tell me right through--tell me!'

'Perhaps I had better,' said the trumpet-major, his blue eyes resting on the far distant sea, that seemed to rise like a wall as high as the hill they sat upon.

And then he told a tale of Miss Johnson and the --th Dragoons which wrung his heart as much in the telling as it did Bob's to hear, and which showed that John had been temporarily cruel to be ultimately kind. Even Bob, excited as he was, could discern from John's manner of speaking what a terrible undertaking that night's business had been for him. To justify the course he had adopted the dictates of duty must have been imperative; but the trumpet-major, with a becoming reticence which his brother at the time was naturally unable to appreciate, scarcely dwelt distinctly enough upon the compelling cause of his conduct. It would, indeed, have been hard for any man, much less so modest a one as John, to do himself justice in that remarkable relation, when the listener was the lady's lover; and it is no wonder that Robert rose to his feet and put a greater distance between himself and John.

'And what time was it?' he asked in a hard, suppressed voice.

'It was just before one o'clock.'

'How could you help her to go away?'

'I had a pass. I carried her box to the coach-office. She was to follow at dawn.'

'But she had no money.'

'Yes, she had; I took particular care of that.' John did not add, as he might have done, that he had given her, in his pity, all the money he possessed, and at present had only eighteen-pence in the world. 'Well, it is over, Bob; so sit ye down, and talk with me of old times,' he added.

'Ah, Jack, it is well enough for you to speak like that,' said the disquieted sailor; 'but I can't help feeling that it is a cruel thing you have done. After all, she would have been snug enough for me. Would I had never found out this about her! John, why did you interfere? You had no right to overhaul my affairs like this. Why didn't you tell me fairly all you knew, and let me do as I chose? You have turned her out of the house, and it's a shame! If she had only come to me! Why didn't she?'

'Because she knew it was best to do otherwise.'

'Well, I shall go after her,' said Bob firmly.

'You can do as you like,' said John; 'but I would advise you strongly to leave matters where they are.'

'I won't leave matters where they are,' said Bob impetuously. 'You have made me miserable, and all for nothing. I tell you she was good enough for me; and as long as I knew nothing about what you say of her history, what difference would it have made to me? Never was there a young woman who was better company; and she loved a merry song as I do myself. Yes, I'll follow her.'

'O, Bob,' said John; 'I hardly expected this!'

'That's because you didn't know your man. Can I ask you to do me one kindness? I don't suppose I can. Can I ask you not to say a word against her to any of them at home?'

'Certainly. The very reason why I got her to go off silently, as she has done, was because nothing should be said against her here, and no scandal should be heard of.'

'That may be; but I'm off after her. Marry that girl I will.'

'You'll be sorry.'

'That we shall see,' replied Robert with determination; and he went away

rapidly towards the mill. The trumpet-major had no heart to follow--no good could possibly come of further opposition; and there on the down he remained like a graven image till Bob had vanished from his sight into the mill.

Bob entered his father's only to leave word that he was going on a renewed search for Matilda, and to pack up a few necessaries for his journey. Ten minutes later he came out again with a bundle in his hand, and John saw him go diagonally across the lower fields towards the high-road.

'And this is all the good I have done!' said John, musingly readjusting his stock where it cut his neck, and descending towards the mill.