

## XXIX. A DISSEMBLER

To cursory view, John Loveday seemed to accomplish this with amazing ease. Whenever he came from barracks to Overcombe, which was once or twice a week, he related news of all sorts to her and Bob with infinite zest, and made the time as happy a one as had ever been known at the mill, save for himself alone. He said nothing of Festus, except so far as to inform Anne that he had expected to see him and been disappointed. On the evening after the King's arrival at his seaside residence John appeared again, staying to supper and describing the royal entry, the many tasteful illuminations and transparencies which had been exhibited, the quantities of tallow candles burnt for that purpose, and the swarms of aristocracy who had followed the King thither.

When supper was over Bob went outside the house to shut the shutters, which had, as was often the case, been left open some time after lights were kindled within. John still sat at the table when his brother approached the window, though the others had risen and retired. Bob was struck by seeing through the pane how John's face had changed. Throughout the supper-time he had been talking to Anne in the gay tone habitual with him now, which gave greater strangeness to the gloom of his present appearance. He remained in thought for a moment, took a letter from his breast-pocket, opened it, and, with a tender smile at his weakness, kissed the writing before restoring it to its place. The letter was one

that Anne had written to him at Exonbury.

Bob stood perplexed; and then a suspicion crossed his mind that John, from brotherly goodness, might be feigning a satisfaction with recent events which he did not feel. Bob now made a noise with the shutters, at which the trumpet-major rose and went out, Bob at once following him.

'Jack,' said the sailor ingenuously, 'I'm terribly sorry that I've done wrong.'

'How?' asked his brother.

'In courting our little Anne. Well, you see, John, she was in the same house with me, and somehow or other I made myself her beau. But I have been thinking that perhaps you had the first claim on her, and if so, Jack, I'll make way for 'ee. I--I don't care for her much, you know--not so very much, and can give her up very well. It is nothing serious between us at all. Yes, John, you try to get her; I can look elsewhere.'

Bob never knew how much he loved Anne till he found himself making this speech of renunciation.

'O Bob, you are mistaken!' said the trumpet-major, who was not deceived.

'When I first saw her I admired her, and I admire her now, and like her.

I like her so well that I shall be glad to see you marry her.'

'But,' replied Bob, with hesitation, 'I thought I saw you looking very

sad, as if you were in love; I saw you take out a letter, in short.  
That's what it was disturbed me and made me come to you.'

'O, I see your mistake!' said John, laughing forcedly.

At this minute Mrs. Loveday and the miller, who were taking a twilight walk in the garden, strolled round near to where the brothers stood. She talked volubly on events in Budmouth, as most people did at this time. 'And they tell me that the theatre has been painted up afresh,' she was saying, 'and that the actors have come for the season, with the most lovely actresses that ever were seen.'

When they had passed by John continued, 'I am in love, Bob; but--not with Anne.'

'Ah! who is it then?' said the mate hopefully.

'One of the actresses at the theatre,' John replied, with a concoctive look at the vanishing forms of Mr. and Mrs. Loveday. 'She is a very lovely woman, you know. But we won't say anything more about it--it dashes a man so.'

'O, one of the actresses!' said Bob, with open mouth.

'But don't you say anything about it!' continued the trumpet-major heartily. 'I don't want it known.'

'No, no--I won't, of course. May I not know her name?'

'No, not now, Bob. I cannot tell 'ee,' John answered, and with truth, for Loveday did not know the name of any actress in the world.

When his brother had gone, Captain Bob hastened off in a state of great animation to Anne, whom he found on the top of a neighbouring hillock which the daylight had scarcely as yet deserted.

'You have been a long time coming, sir,' said she, in sprightly tones of reproach.

'Yes, dearest; and you'll be glad to hear why. I've found out the whole mystery--yes--why he's queer, and everything.'

Anne looked startled.

'He's up to the gunnel in love! We must try to help him on in it, or I fear he'll go melancholy-mad like.'

'We help him?' she asked faintly.

'He's lost his heart to one of the play-actresses at Budmouth, and I think she slights him.'

'O, I am so glad!' she exclaimed.

'Glad that his venture don't prosper?'

'O no; glad he's so sensible. How long is it since that alarm of the French?'

'Six weeks, honey. Why do you ask?'

'Men can forget in six weeks, can't they, Bob?'

The impression that John had really kissed her still remained.

'Well, some men might,' observed Bob judicially. 'I couldn't. Perhaps John might. I couldn't forget you in twenty times as long. Do you know, Anne, I half thought it was you John cared about; and it was a weight off my heart when he said he didn't.'

'Did he say he didn't?'

'Yes. He assured me himself that the only person in the hold of his heart was this lovely play-actress, and nobody else.'

'How I should like to see her!'

'Yes. So should I.'

'I would rather it had been one of our own neighbours' girls, whose birth and breeding we know of; but still, if that is his taste, I hope it will end well for him. How very quick he has been! I certainly wish we could see her.'

'I don't know so much as her name. He is very close, and wouldn't tell a thing about her.'

'Couldn't we get him to go to the theatre with us? and then we could watch him, and easily find out the right one. Then we would learn if she is a good young woman; and if she is, could we not ask her here, and so make it smoother for him? He has been very gay lately; that means budding love: and sometimes between his gaieties he has had melancholy moments; that means there's difficulty.'

Bob thought her plan a good one, and resolved to put it in practice on the first available evening. Anne was very curious as to whether John did really cherish a new passion, the story having quite surprised her. Possibly it was true; six weeks had passed since John had shown a single symptom of the old attachment, and what could not that space of time effect in the heart of a soldier whose very profession it was to leave girls behind him?

After this John Loveday did not come to see them for nearly a month, a neglect which was set down by Bob as an additional proof that his

brother's affections were no longer exclusively centred in his old home. When at last he did arrive, and the theatre-going was mentioned to him, the flush of consciousness which Anne expected to see upon his face was unaccountably absent.

'Yes, Bob; I should very well like to go to the theatre,' he replied heartily. 'Who is going besides?'

'Only Anne,' Bob told him, and then it seemed to occur to the trumpet-major that something had been expected of him. He rose and said privately to Bob with some confusion, 'O yes, of course we'll go. As I am connected with one of the--in short I can get you in for nothing, you know. At least let me manage everything.'

'Yes, yes. I wonder you didn't propose to take us before, Jack, and let us have a good look at her.'

'I ought to have. You shall go on a King's night. You won't want me to point her out, Bob; I have my reasons at present for asking it?'

'We'll be content with guessing,' said his brother.

When the gallant John was gone, Anne observed, 'Bob, how he is changed! I watched him. He showed no feeling, even when you burst upon him suddenly with the subject nearest his heart.'

'It must be because his suit don't fay,' said Captain Bob.