XXXIII. A DISCOVERY TURNS THE SCALE

In four-and-twenty hours Bob had recovered. But though physically himself again, he was not at all sure of his position as a patriot. He had that practical knowledge of seamanship of which the country stood much in need, and it was humiliating to find that impressment seemed to be necessary to teach him to use it for her advantage. Many neighbouring young men, less fortunate than himself, had been pressed and taken; and their absence seemed a reproach to him. He went away by himself into the mill-roof, and, surrounded by the corn-heaps, gave vent to self-condemnation.

'Certainly, I am no man to lie here so long for the pleasure of sighting that young girl forty times a day, and letting her sight me--bless her eyes!--till I must needs want a press-gang to teach me what I've forgot. And is it then all over with me as a British sailor? We'll see.'

When he was thrown under the influence of Anne's eyes again, which were more tantalizingly beautiful than ever just now (so it seemed to him), his intention of offering his services to the Government would wax weaker, and he would put off his final decision till the next day. Anne saw these fluctuations of his mind between love and patriotism, and being terrified by what she had heard of sea-fights, used the utmost art of which she was capable to seduce him from his forming purpose. She came to him in the mill, wearing the very prettiest of her morning jackets--the

one that only just passed the waist, and was laced so tastefully round the collar and bosom. Then she would appear in her new hat, with a bouquet of primroses on one side; and on the following Sunday she walked before him in lemon-coloured boots, so that her feet looked like a pair of yellow-hammers flitting under her dress.

But dress was the least of the means she adopted for chaining him down. She talked more tenderly than ever; asked him to begin small undertakings in the garden on her account; she sang about the house, that the place might seem cheerful when he came in. This singing for a purpose required great effort on her part, leaving her afterwards very sad. When Bob asked her what was the matter, she would say, 'Nothing; only I am thinking how you will grieve your father, and cross his purposes, if you carry out your unkind notion of going to sea, and forsaking your place in the mill.'

'Yes,' Bob would say uneasily. 'It will trouble him, I know.'

Being also quite aware how it would trouble her, he would again postpone, and thus another week passed away.

All this time John had not come once to the mill. It appeared as if Miss Johnson absorbed all his time and thoughts. Bob was often seen chuckling over the circumstance. 'A sly rascal!' he said. 'Pretending on the day she came to be married that she was not good enough for me, when it was only that he wanted her for himself. How he could have persuaded her to

go away is beyond me to say!'

Anne could not contest this belief of her lover's, and remained silent; but there had more than once occurred to her mind a doubt of its probability. Yet she had only abandoned her opinion that John had schemed for Matilda, to embrace the opposite error; that, finding he had wronged the young lady, he had pitied and grown to love her.

'And yet Jack, when he was a boy, was the simplest fellow alive,' resumed Bob. 'By George, though, I should have been hot against him for such a trick, if in losing her I hadn't found a better! But she'll never come down to him in the world: she has high notions now. I am afraid he's doomed to sigh in vain!'

Though Bob regretted this possibility, the feeling was not reciprocated by Anne. It was true that she knew nothing of Matilda's temporary treachery, and that she disbelieved the story of her lack of virtue; but she did not like the woman. 'Perhaps it will not matter if he is doomed to sigh in vain,' she said. 'But I owe him no ill-will. I have profited by his doings, incomprehensible as they are.' And she bent her fair eyes on Bob and smiled.

Bob looked dubious. 'He thinks he has affronted me, now I have seen through him, and that I shall be against meeting him. But, of course, I am not so touchy. I can stand a practical joke, as can any man who has been afloat. I'll call and see him, and tell him so.'

Before he started, Bob bethought him of something which would still further prove to the misapprehending John that he was entirely forgiven. He went to his room, and took from his chest a packet containing a lock of Miss Johnson's hair, which she had given him during their brief acquaintance, and which till now he had quite forgotten. When, at starting, he wished Anne goodbye, it was accompanied by such a beaming face, that she knew he was full of an idea, and asked what it might be that pleased him so.

'Why, this,' he said, smacking his breast-pocket. 'A lock of hair that Matilda gave me.'

Anne sank back with parted lips.

'I am going to give it to Jack--he'll jump for joy to get it! And it will show him how willing I am to give her up to him, fine piece as she is.'

'Will you see her to-day, Bob?' Anne asked with an uncertain smile.

'O no--unless it is by accident.'

On reaching the outskirts of the town he went straight to the barracks, and was lucky enough to find John in his room, at the left-hand corner of the quadrangle. John was glad to see him; but to Bob's surprise he

showed no immediate contrition, and thus afforded no room for the brotherly speech of forgiveness which Bob had been going to deliver. As the trumpet-major did not open the subject, Bob felt it desirable to begin himself.

'I have brought ye something that you will value, Jack,' he said, as they sat at the window, overlooking the large square barrack-yard. 'I have got no further use for it, and you should have had it before if it had entered my head.'

'Thank you, Bob; what is it?' said John, looking absently at an awkward squad of young men who were drilling in the enclosure.

''Tis a young woman's lock of hair.'

'Ah!' said John, quite recovering from his abstraction, and slightly flushing. Could Bob and Anne have quarrelled? Bob drew the paper from his pocket, and opened it.

'Black!' said John.

'Yes--black enough.'

'Whose?'

'Why, Matilda's.'

'O, Matilda's!'

'Whose did you think then?'

Instead of replying, the trumpet-major's face became as red as sunset, and he turned to the window to hide his confusion.

Bob was silent, and then he, too, looked into the court. At length he arose, walked to his brother, and laid his hand upon his shoulder. 'Jack,' he said, in an altered voice, 'you are a good fellow. Now I see it all.'

'O no--that's nothing,' said John hastily.

'You've been pretending that you care for this woman that I mightn't blame myself for heaving you out from the other--which is what I've done without knowing it.'

'What does it matter?'

'But it does matter! I've been making you unhappy all these weeks and weeks through my thoughtlessness. They seemed to think at home, you know, John, that you had grown not to care for her; or I wouldn't have done it for all the world!'

'You stick to her, Bob, and never mind me. She belongs to you. She loves you. I have no claim upon her, and she thinks nothing about me.'

'She likes you, John, thoroughly well; so does everybody; and if I hadn't come home, putting my foot in it-- That coming home of mine has been a regular blight upon the family! I ought never to have stayed. The sea is my home, and why couldn't I bide there?'

The trumpet-major drew Bob's discourse off the subject as soon as he could, and Bob, after some unconsidered replies and remarks, seemed willing to avoid it for the present. He did not ask John to accompany him home, as he had intended; and on leaving the barracks turned southward and entered the town to wander about till he could decide what to do.

It was the 3rd of September, but the King's watering-place still retained its summer aspect. The royal bathing-machine had been drawn out just as Bob reached Gloucester Buildings, and he waited a minute, in the lack of other distraction, to look on. Immediately that the King's machine had entered the water a group of florid men with fiddles, violoncellos, a trombone, and a drum, came forward, packed themselves into another machine that was in waiting, and were drawn out into the waves in the King's rear. All that was to be heard for a few minutes were the slow pulsations of the sea; and then a deafening noise burst from the interior of the second machine with power enough to split the boards asunder; it was the condensed mass of musicians inside, striking up the strains of

'God save the King,' as his Majesty's head rose from the water. Bob took off his hat and waited till the end of the performance, which, intended as a pleasant surprise to George III. by the loyal burghers, was possibly in the watery circumstances tolerated rather than desired by that dripping monarch. {303}

Loveday then passed on to the harbour, where he remained awhile, looking at the busy scene of loading and unloading craft and swabbing the decks of yachts; at the boats and barges rubbing against the quay wall, and at the houses of the merchants, some ancient structures of solid stone, others green-shuttered with heavy wooden bow-windows which appeared as if about to drop into the harbour by their own weight. All these things he gazed upon, and thought of one thing--that he had caused great misery to his brother John.

The town clock struck, and Bob retraced his steps till he again approached the Esplanade and Gloucester Lodge, where the morning sun blazed in upon the house fronts, and not a spot of shade seemed to be attainable. A huzzaing attracted his attention, and he observed that a number of people had gathered before the King's residence, where a brown curricle had stopped, out of which stepped a hale man in the prime of life, wearing a blue uniform, gilt epaulettes, cocked hat, and sword, who crossed the pavement and went in. Bob went up and joined the group. 'What's going on?' he said.

'Captain Hardy,' replied a bystander.

'What of him?'

'Just gone in--waiting to see the King.'

'But the captain is in the West Indies?'

'No. The fleet is come home; they can't find the French anywhere.'

'Will they go and look for them again?' asked Bob.

'O yes. Nelson is determined to find 'em. As soon as he's refitted he'll put to sea again. Ah, here's the King coming in.'

Bob was so interested in what he had just heard that he scarcely noticed the arrival of the King, and a body of attendant gentlemen. He went on thinking of his new knowledge; Captain Hardy was come. He was doubtless staying with his family at their small manor-house at Pos'ham, a few miles from Overcombe, where he usually spent the intervals between his different cruises.

Loveday returned to the mill without further delay; and shortly explaining that John was very well, and would come soon, went on to talk of the arrival of Nelson's captain.

'And is he come at last?' said the miller, throwing his thoughts years backward. 'Well can I mind when he first left home to go on board the Helena as midshipman!'

'That's not much to remember. I can remember it too,' said Mrs. Loveday.

''Tis more than twenty years ago anyhow. And more than that, I can mind when he was born; I was a lad, serving my 'prenticeship at the time. He has been in this house often and often when 'a was young. When he came home after his first voyage he stayed about here a long time, and used to look in at the mill whenever he went past. "What will you be next, sir?" said mother to him one day as he stood with his back to the doorpost. "A lieutenant, Dame Loveday," says he. "And what next?" says she. "A commander." "And next?" "Next, post-captain." "And then?" "Then it will be almost time to die." I'd warrant that he'd mind it to this very day if you were to ask him.'

Bob heard all this with a manner of preoccupation, and soon retired to the mill. Thence he went to his room by the back passage, and taking his old seafaring garments from a dark closet in the wall conveyed them to the loft at the top of the mill, where he occupied the remaining spare moments of the day in brushing the mildew from their folds, and hanging each article by the window to get aired. In the evening he returned to the loft, and dressing himself in the old salt suit, went out of the house unobserved by anybody, and ascended the road towards Captain Hardy's native village and present temporary home.

The shadeless downs were now brown with the droughts of the passing summer, and few living things met his view, the natural rotundity of the elevation being only occasionally disturbed by the presence of a barrow, a thorn-bush, or a piece of dry wall which remained from some attempted enclosure. By the time that he reached the village it was dark, and the larger stars had begun to shine when he walked up to the door of the old-fashioned house which was the family residence of this branch of the South-Wessex Hardys.

'Will the captain allow me to wait on him to-night?' inquired Loveday, explaining who and what he was.

The servant went away for a few minutes, and then told Bob that he might see the captain in the morning.

'If that's the case, I'll come again,' replied Bob, quite cheerful that failure was not absolute.

He had left the door but a few steps when he was called back and asked if he had walked all the way from Overcombe Mill on purpose.

Loveday replied modestly that he had done so.

'Then will you come in?' He followed the speaker into a small study or office, and in a minute or two Captain Hardy entered.

The captain at this time was a bachelor of thirty-five, rather stout in build, with light eyes, bushy eyebrows, a square broad face, plenty of chin, and a mouth whose corners played between humour and grimness. He surveyed Loveday from top to toe.

'Robert Loveday, sir, son of the miller at Overcombe,' said Bob, making a low bow.

'Ah! I remember your father, Loveday,' the gallant seaman replied. 'Well, what do you want to say to me?' Seeing that Bob found it rather difficult to begin, he leant leisurely against the mantelpiece, and went on, 'Is your father well and hearty? I have not seen him for many, many years.'

'Quite well, thank 'ee.'

'You used to have a brother in the army, I think? What was his name--John? A very fine fellow, if I recollect.'

'Yes, cap'n; he's there still.'

'And you are in the merchant-service?'

'Late first mate of the brig Pewit.'

'How is it you're not on board a man-of-war?'

'Ay, sir, that's the thing I've come about,' said Bob, recovering confidence. 'I should have been, but 'tis womankind has hampered me. I've waited and waited on at home because of a young woman--lady, I might have said, for she's sprung from a higher class of society than I. Her father was a landscape painter--maybe you've heard of him, sir? The name is Garland.'

'He painted that view of our village here,' said Captain Hardy, looking towards a dark little picture in the corner of the room.

Bob looked, and went on, as if to the picture, 'Well, sir, I have found that-- However, the press-gang came a week or two ago, and didn't get hold of me. I didn't care to go aboard as a pressed man.'

'There has been a severe impressment. It is of course a disagreeable necessity, but it can't be helped.'

'Since then, sir, something has happened that makes me wish they had found me, and I have come to-night to ask if I could enter on board your ship the Victory.'

The captain shook his head severely, and presently observed: 'I am glad to find that you think of entering the service, Loveday; smart men are

badly wanted. But it will not be in your power to choose your ship.'

'Well, well, sir; then I must take my chance elsewhere,' said Bob, his face indicating the disappointment he would not fully express. ''Twas only that I felt I would much rather serve under you than anybody else, my father and all of us being known to ye, Captain Hardy, and our families belonging to the same parts.'

Captain Hardy took Bob's altitude more carefully. 'Are you a good practical seaman?' he asked musingly.

'Ay, sir; I believe I am.'

'Active? Fond of skylarking?'

'Well, I don't know about the last. I think I can say I am active enough. I could walk the yard-arm, if required, cross from mast to mast by the stays, and do what most fellows do who call themselves spry.'

The captain then put some questions about the details of navigation, which Loveday, having luckily been used to square rigs, answered satisfactorily. 'As to reefing topsails,' he added, 'if I don't do it like a flash of lightning, I can do it so that they will stand blowing weather. The Pewit was not a dull vessel, and when we were convoyed home from Lisbon, she could keep well in sight of the frigate scudding at a distance, by putting on full sail. We had enough hands aboard to reef

topsails man-o'-war fashion, which is a rare thing in these days, sir, now that able seamen are so scarce on trading craft. And I hear that men from square-rigged vessels are liked much the best in the navy, as being more ready for use? So that I shouldn't be altogether so raw,' said Bob earnestly, 'if I could enter on your ship, sir. Still, if I can't, I can't.'

'I might ask for you, Loveday,' said the captain thoughtfully, 'and so get you there that way. In short, I think I may say I will ask for you. So consider it settled.'

'My thanks to you, sir,' said Loveday.

'You are aware that the Victory is a smart ship, and that cleanliness and order are, of necessity, more strictly insisted upon there than in some others?'

'Sir, I quite see it.'

'Well, I hope you will do your duty as well on a line-of-battle ship as you did when mate of the brig, for it is a duty that may be serious.'

Bob replied that it should be his one endeavour; and receiving a few instructions for getting on board the guard-ship, and being conveyed to Portsmouth, he turned to go away.

'You'll have a stiff walk before you fetch Overcombe Mill this dark night, Loveday,' concluded the captain, peering out of the window. 'I'll send you in a glass of grog to help 'ee on your way.'

The captain then left Bob to himself, and when he had drunk the grog that was brought in he started homeward, with a heart not exactly light, but large with a patriotic cheerfulness, which had not diminished when, after walking so fast in his excitement as to be beaded with perspiration, he entered his father's door.

They were all sitting up for him, and at his approach anxiously raised their sleepy eyes, for it was nearly eleven o'clock.

'There; I knew he'd not be much longer!' cried Anne, jumping up and laughing, in her relief. 'They have been thinking you were very strange and silent to-day, Bob; you were not, were you?'

'What's the matter, Bob?' said the miller; for Bob's countenance was sublimed by his recent interview, like that of a priest just come from the penetralia of the temple.

'He's in his mate's clothes, just as when he came home!' observed Mrs. Loveday.

They all saw now that he had something to tell. 'I am going away,' he said when he had sat down. 'I am going to enter on board a man-of-war,

and perhaps it will be the Victory.'

'Going?' said Anne faintly.

'Now, don't you mind it, there's a dear,' he went on solemnly, taking her hand in his own. 'And you, father, don't you begin to take it to heart' (the miller was looking grave). 'The press-gang has been here, and though I showed them that I was a free man, I am going to show everybody that I can do my duty.'

Neither of the other three answered, Anne and the miller having their eyes bent upon the ground, and the former trying to repress her tears.

'Now don't you grieve, either of you,' he continued; 'nor vex yourselves that this has happened. Please not to be angry with me, father, for deserting you and the mill, where you want me, for I must go. For these three years we and the rest of the country have been in fear of the enemy; trade has been hindered; poor folk made hungry; and many rich folk made poor. There must be a deliverance, and it must be done by sea. I have seen Captain Hardy, and I shall serve under him if so be I can.'

'Captain Hardy?'

'Yes. I have been to his house at Pos'ham, where he's staying with his sisters; walked there and back, and I wouldn't have missed it for fifty guineas. I hardly thought he would see me; but he did see me. And he

hasn't forgot you.'

Bob then opened his tale in order, relating graphically the conversation to which he had been a party, and they listened with breathless attention.

'Well, if you must go, you must,' said the miller with emotion; 'but I think it somewhat hard that, of my two sons, neither one of 'em can be got to stay and help me in my business as I get old.'

'Don't trouble and vex about it,' said Mrs. Loveday soothingly. 'They are both instruments in the hands of Providence, chosen to chastise that Corsican ogre, and do what they can for the country in these trying years.'

'That's just the shape of it, Mrs. Loveday,' said Bob.

'And he'll come back soon,' she continued, turning to Anne. 'And then he'll tell us all he has seen, and the glory that he's won, and how he has helped to sweep that scourge Buonaparty off the earth.'

'When be you going, Bob?' his father inquired.

'To-morrow, if I can. I shall call at the barracks and tell John as I go by. When I get to Portsmouth--'

A burst of sobs in quick succession interrupted his words; they came from Anne, who till that moment had been sitting as before with her hand in that of Bob, and apparently quite calm. Mrs. Loveday jumped up, but before she could say anything to soothe the agitated girl she had calmed herself with the same singular suddenness that had marked her giving way. 'I don't mind Bob's going,' she said. 'I think he ought to go. Don't suppose, Bob, that I want you to stay!'

After this she left the apartment, and went into the little side room where she and her mother usually worked. In a few moments Bob followed her. When he came back he was in a very sad and emotional mood. Anybody could see that there had been a parting of profound anguish to both.

'She is not coming back to-night,' he said.

'You will see her to-morrow before you go?' said her mother.

'I may or I may not,' he replied. 'Father and Mrs. Loveday, do you go to bed now. I have got to look over my things and get ready; and it will take me some little time. If you should hear noises you will know it is only myself moving about.'

When Bob was left alone he suddenly became brisk, and set himself to overhaul his clothes and other possessions in a business-like manner. By the time that his chest was packed, such things as he meant to leave at

home folded into cupboards, and what was useless destroyed, it was past two o'clock. Then he went to bed, so softly that only the creak of one weak stair revealed his passage upward. At the moment that he passed Anne's chamber-door her mother was bending over her as she lay in bed, and saying to her, 'Won't you see him in the morning?'

'No, no,' said Anne. 'I would rather not see him! I have said that I may. But I shall not. I cannot see him again!'

When the family got up next day Bob had vanished. It was his way to disappear like this, to avoid affecting scenes at parting. By the time that they had sat down to a gloomy breakfast, Bob was in the boat of a Budmouth waterman, who pulled him alongside the guardship in the roads, where he laid hold of the man-rope, mounted, and disappeared from external view. In the course of the day the ship moved off, set her royals, and made sail for Portsmouth, with five hundred new hands for the service on board, consisting partly of pressed men and partly of volunteers, among the latter being Robert Loveday.