

XXXIV. A SPECK ON THE SEA

In parting from John, who accompanied him to the quay, Bob had said: 'Now, Jack, these be my last words to you: I give her up. I go away on purpose, and I shall be away a long time. If in that time she should list over towards ye ever so little, mind you take her. You have more right to her than I. You chose her when my mind was elsewhere, and you best deserve her; for I have never known you forget one woman, while I've forgot a dozen. Take her then, if she will come, and God bless both of ye.'

Another person besides John saw Bob go. That was Derriman, who was standing by a bollard a little further up the quay. He did not repress his satisfaction at the sight. John looked towards him with an open gaze of contempt; for the cuffs administered to the yeoman at the inn had not, so far as the trumpet-major was aware, produced any desire to avenge that insult, John being, of course, quite ignorant that Festus had erroneously retaliated upon Bob, in his peculiar though scarcely soldierly way. Finding that he did not even now approach him, John went on his way, and thought over his intention of preserving intact the love between Anne and his brother.

He was surprised when he next went to the mill to find how glad they all were to see him. From the moment of Bob's return to the bosom of the deep Anne had had no existence on land; people might have looked at her

human body and said she had flitted thence. The sea and all that belonged to the sea was her daily thought and her nightly dream. She had the whole two-and-thirty winds under her eye, each passing gale that ushered in returning autumn being mentally registered; and she acquired a precise knowledge of the direction in which Portsmouth, Brest, Ferrol, Cadiz, and other such likely places lay. Instead of saying her own familiar prayers at night she substituted, with some confusion of thought, the Forms of Prayer to be used at sea. John at once noticed her lorn, abstracted looks, pitied her,--how much he pitied her!--and asked when they were alone if there was anything he could do.

'There are two things,' she said, with almost childish eagerness in her tired eyes.

'They shall be done.'

'The first is to find out if Captain Hardy has gone back to his ship; and the other is--O if you will do it, John!--to get me newspapers whenever possible.'

After this duologue John was absent for a space of three hours, and they thought he had gone back to barracks. He entered, however, at the end of that time, took off his forage-cap, and wiped his forehead.

'You look tired, John,' said his father.

'O no.' He went through the house till he had found Anne Garland.

'I have only done one of those things,' he said to her.

'What, already! I didn't hope for or mean to-day.'

'Captain Hardy is gone from Pos'ham. He left some days ago. We shall soon hear that the fleet has sailed.'

'You have been all the way to Pos'ham on purpose? How good of you!'

'Well, I was anxious to know myself when Bob is likely to leave. I expect now that we shall soon hear from him.'

Two days later he came again. He brought a newspaper, and what was better, a letter for Anne, franked by the first lieutenant of the Victory.

'Then he's aboard her,' said Anne, as she eagerly took the letter.

It was short, but as much as she could expect in the circumstances, and informed them that the captain had been as good as his word, and had gratified Bob's earnest wish to serve under him. The ship, with Admiral Lord Nelson on board, and accompanied by the frigate Euryalus, was to sail in two days for Plymouth, where they would be joined by others, and thence proceed to the coast of Spain.

Anne lay awake that night thinking of the Victory, and of those who floated in her. To the best of Anne's calculation that ship of war would, during the next twenty-four hours, pass within a few miles of where she herself then lay. Next to seeing Bob, the thing that would give her more pleasure than any other in the world was to see the vessel that contained him--his floating city, his sole dependence in battle and storm--upon whose safety from winds and enemies hung all her hope.

The morrow was market-day at the seaport, and in this she saw her opportunity. A carrier went from Overcombe at six o'clock thither, and having to do a little shopping for herself she gave it as a reason for her intended day's absence, and took a place in the van. When she reached the town it was still early morning, but the borough was already in the zenith of its daily bustle and show. The King was always out-of-doors by six o'clock, and such cock-crow hours at Gloucester Lodge produced an equally forward stir among the population. She alighted, and passed down the esplanade, as fully thronged by persons of fashion at this time of mist and level sunlight as a watering-place in the present day is at four in the afternoon. Dashing bucks and beaux in cocked hats, black feathers, ruffles, and frills, stared at her as she hurried along; the beach was swarming with bathing women, wearing waistbands that bore the national refrain, 'God save the King,' in gilt letters; the shops were all open, and Sergeant Stanner, with his sword-stuck bank-notes and heroic gaze, was beating up at two guineas and a crown, the crown to drink his Majesty's health.

She soon finished her shopping, and then, crossing over into the old town, pursued her way along the coast-road to Portland. At the end of an hour she had been rowed across the Fleet (which then lacked the convenience of a bridge), and reached the base of Portland Hill. The steep incline before her was dotted with houses, showing the pleasant peculiarity of one man's doorstep being behind his neighbour's chimney, and slabs of stone as the common material for walls, roof, floor, pigsty, stable-manger, door-scraper, and garden-stile. Anne gained the summit, and followed along the central track over the huge lump of freestone which forms the peninsula, the wide sea prospect extending as she went on. Weary with her journey, she approached the extreme southerly peak of rock, and gazed from the cliff at Portland Bill, or Beal, as it was in those days more correctly called.

The wild, herbless, weather-worn promontory was quite a solitude, and, saving the one old lighthouse about fifty yards up the slope, scarce a mark was visible to show that humanity had ever been near the spot. Anne found herself a seat on a stone, and swept with her eyes the tremulous expanse of water around her that seemed to utter a ceaseless unintelligible incantation. Out of the three hundred and sixty degrees of her complete horizon two hundred and fifty were covered by waves, the coup d'oeil including the area of troubled waters known as the Race, where two seas met to effect the destruction of such vessels as could not be mastered by one. She counted the craft within her view: there were five; no, there were only four; no, there were seven, some of the specks

having resolved themselves into two. They were all small coasters, and kept well within sight of land.

Anne sank into a reverie. Then she heard a slight noise on her left hand, and turning beheld an old sailor, who had approached with a glass. He was levelling it over the sea in a direction to the south-east, and somewhat removed from that in which her own eyes had been wandering. Anne

moved a few steps thitherward, so as to unclose to her view a deeper sweep on that side, and by this discovered a ship of far larger size than any which had yet dotted the main before her. Its sails were for the most part new and clean, and in comparison with its rapid progress before the wind the small brigs and ketches seemed standing still. Upon this striking object the old man's glass was bent.

'What do you see, sailor?' she asked.

'Almost nothing,' he answered. 'My sight is so gone off lately that things, one and all, be but a November mist to me. And yet I fain would see to-day. I am looking for the Victory.'

'Why,' she said quickly.

'I have a son aboard her. He's one of three from these parts. There's the captain, there's my son Ned, and there's young Loveday of Overcombe--he that lately joined.'

'Shall I look for you?' said Anne, after a pause.

'Certainly, mis'ess, if so be you please.'

Anne took the glass, and he supported it by his arm. 'It is a large ship,' she said, 'with three masts, three rows of guns along the side, and all her sails set.'

'I guessed as much.'

'There is a little flag in front--over her bowsprit.'

'The jack.'

'And there's a large one flying at her stern.'

'The ensign.'

'And a white one on her fore-topmast.'

'That's the admiral's flag, the flag of my Lord Nelson. What is her figure-head, my dear?'

'A coat-of-arms, supported on this side by a sailor.'

Her companion nodded with satisfaction. 'On the other side of that figure-head is a marine.'

'She is twisting round in a curious way, and her sails sink in like old cheeks, and she shivers like a leaf upon a tree.'

'She is in stays, for the larboard tack. I can see what she's been doing. She's been re'ching close in to avoid the flood tide, as the wind is to the sou'-west, and she's bound down; but as soon as the ebb made, d'ye see, they made sail to the west'ard. Captain Hardy may be depended upon for that; he knows every current about here, being a native.'

'And now I can see the other side; it is a soldier where a sailor was before. You are sure it is the Victory?'

'I am sure.'

After this a frigate came into view--the Euryalus--sailing in the same direction. Anne sat down, and her eyes never left the ships. 'Tell me more about the Victory,' she said.

'She is the best sailer in the service, and she carries a hundred guns. The heaviest be on the lower deck, the next size on the middle deck, the next on the main and upper decks. My son Ned's place is on the lower deck, because he's short, and they put the short men below.'

Bob, though not tall, was not likely to be specially selected for shortness. She pictured him on the upper deck, in his snow-white trousers and jacket of navy blue, looking perhaps towards the very point of land where she then was.

The great silent ship, with her population of blue-jackets, marines, officers, captain, and the admiral who was not to return alive, passed like a phantom the meridian of the Bill. Sometimes her aspect was that of a large white bat, sometimes that of a grey one. In the course of time the watching girl saw that the ship had passed her nearest point; the breadth of her sails diminished by foreshortening, till she assumed the form of an egg on end. After this something seemed to twinkle, and Anne, who had previously withdrawn from the old sailor, went back to him, and looked again through the glass. The twinkling was the light falling upon the cabin windows of the ship's stern. She explained it to the old man.

'Then we see now what the enemy have seen but once. That was in seventy-nine, when she sighted the French and Spanish fleet off Scilly, and she retreated because she feared a landing. Well, 'tis a brave ship and she carries brave men!'

Anne's tender bosom heaved, but she said nothing, and again became absorbed in contemplation.

The Victory was fast dropping away. She was on the horizon, and soon

appeared hull down. That seemed to be like the beginning of a greater end than her present vanishing. Anne Garland could not stay by the sailor any longer, and went about a stone's-throw off, where she was hidden by the inequality of the cliff from his view. The vessel was now exactly end on, and stood out in the direction of the Start, her width having contracted to the proportion of a feather. She sat down again, and mechanically took out some biscuits that she had brought, foreseeing that her waiting might be long. But she could not eat one of them; eating seemed to jar with the mental tenseness of the moment; and her undeviating gaze continued to follow the lessened ship with the fidelity of a balanced needle to a magnetic stone, all else in her being motionless.

The courses of the Victory were absorbed into the main, then her topsails went, and then her top-gallants. She was now no more than a dead fly's wing on a sheet of spider's web; and even this fragment diminished. Anne could hardly bear to see the end, and yet she resolved not to flinch. The admiral's flag sank behind the watery line, and in a minute the very truck of the last topmast stole away. The Victory was gone.

Anne's lip quivered as she murmured, without removing her wet eyes from the vacant and solemn horizon, "They that go down to the sea in ships, that do business in great waters--"

"These see the works of the Lord, and His wonders in the deep," was returned by a man's voice from behind her.

Looking round quickly, she saw a soldier standing there; and the grave eyes of John Loveday bent on her.

"'Tis what I was thinking,' she said, trying to be composed.

'You were saying it,' he answered gently.

'Was I?--I did not know it. . . . How came you here?' she presently added.

'I have been behind you a good while; but you never turned round.'

'I was deeply occupied,' she said in an undertone.

'Yes--I too came to see him pass. I heard this morning that Lord Nelson had embarked, and I knew at once that they would sail immediately. The Victory and Euryalus are to join the rest of the fleet at Plymouth. There was a great crowd of people assembled to see the admiral off; they cheered him and the ship as she dropped down. He took his coffin on board with him, they say.'

'His coffin!' said Anne, turning deadly pale. 'Something terrible, then, is meant by that! O, why would Bob go in that ship? doomed to destruction from the very beginning like this!'

'It was his determination to sail under Captain Hardy, and under no one else,' said John. 'There may be hot work; but we must hope for the best.' And observing how wretched she looked, he added, 'But won't you let me help you back? If you can walk as far as Hope Cove it will be enough. A lerret is going from there across the bay homeward to the harbour in the course of an hour; it belongs to a man I know, and they can take one passenger, I am sure.'

She turned her back upon the Channel, and by his help soon reached the place indicated. The boat was lying there as he had said. She found it to belong to the old man who had been with her at the Bill, and was in charge of his two younger sons. The trumpet-major helped her into it over the slippery blocks of stone, one of the young men spread his jacket for her to sit on, and as soon as they pulled from shore John climbed up the blue-grey cliff, and disappeared over the top, to return to the mainland by road.

Anne was in the town by three o'clock. The trip in the stern of the lerret had quite refreshed her, with the help of the biscuits, which she had at last been able to eat. The van from the port to Overcombe did not start till four o'clock, and feeling no further interest in the gaieties of the place, she strolled on past the King's house to the outskirts, her mind settling down again upon the possibly sad fate of the Victory when she found herself alone. She did not hurry on; and finding that even now there wanted another half-hour to the carrier's time, she turned into a little lane to escape the inspection of the numerous passers-by. Here

all was quite lonely and still, and she sat down under a willow-tree, absently regarding the landscape, which had begun to put on the rich tones of declining summer, but which to her was as hollow and faded as a theatre by day. She could hold out no longer; burying her face in her hands, she wept without restraint.

Some yards behind her was a little spring of water, having a stone margin round it to prevent the cattle from treading in the sides and filling it up with dirt. While she wept, two elderly gentlemen entered unperceived upon the scene, and walked on to the spring's brink. Here they paused and looked in, afterwards moving round it, and then stooping as if to smell or taste its waters. The spring was, in fact, a sulphurous one, then recently discovered by a physician who lived in the neighbourhood; and it was beginning to attract some attention, having by common report contributed to effect such wonderful cures as almost passed belief. After a considerable discussion, apparently on how the pool might be improved for better use, one of the two elderly gentlemen turned away, leaving the other still probing the spring with his cane. The first stranger, who wore a blue coat with gilt buttons, came on in the direction of Anne Garland, and seeing her sad posture went quickly up to her, and said abruptly, 'What is the matter?'

Anne, who in her grief had observed nothing of the gentlemen's presence, withdrew her handkerchief from her eyes and started to her feet. She instantly recognised her interrogator as the King.

'What, what, crying?' his Majesty inquired kindly. 'How is this!'

'I--have seen a dear friend go away, sir,' she faltered, with downcast eyes.

'Ah--partings are sad--very sad--for us all. You must hope your friend will return soon. Where is he or she gone?'

'I don't know, your Majesty.'

'Don't know--how is that?'

'He is a sailor on board the Victory.'

'Then he has reason to be proud,' said the King with interest. 'He is your brother?'

Anne tried to explain what he was, but could not, and blushed with painful heat.

'Well, well, well; what is his name?'

In spite of Anne's confusion and low spirits, her womanly shrewdness told her at once that no harm could be done by revealing Bob's name; and she answered, 'His name is Robert Loveday, sir.'

'Loveday--a good name. I shall not forget it. Now dry your cheeks, and don't cry any more. Loveday--Robert Loveday.'

Anne curtsyed, the King smiled good-humouredly, and turned to rejoin his companion, who was afterwards heard to be Dr. ---, the physician in attendance at Gloucester Lodge. This gentleman had in the meantime filled a small phial with the medicinal water, which he carefully placed in his pocket; and on the King coming up they retired together and disappeared. Thereupon Anne, now thoroughly aroused, followed the same way with a gingerly tread, just in time to see them get into a carriage which was in waiting at the turning of the lane.

She quite forgot the carrier, and everything else in connexion with riding home. Flying along the road rapidly and unconsciously, when she awoke to a sense of her whereabouts she was so near to Overcombe as to make the carrier not worth waiting for. She had been borne up in this hasty spurt at the end of a weary day by visions of Bob promoted to the rank of admiral, or something equally wonderful, by the King's special command, the chief result of the promotion being, in her arrangement of the piece, that he would stay at home and go to sea no more. But she was not a girl who indulged in extravagant fancies long, and before she reached home she thought that the King had probably forgotten her by that time, and her troubles, and her lover's name.