

XXXV. A SAILOR ENTERS

The remaining fortnight of the month of September passed away, with a general decline from the summer's excitements. The royal family left the watering-place the first week in October, the German Legion with their artillery about the same time. The dragoons still remained at the barracks just out of the town, and John Loveday brought to Anne every newspaper that he could lay hands on, especially such as contained any fragment of shipping news. This threw them much together; and at these times John was often awkward and confused, on account of the unwonted stress of concealing his great love for her.

Her interests had grandly developed from the limits of Overcombe and the town life hard by, to an extensiveness truly European. During the whole month of October, however, not a single grain of information reached her, or anybody else, concerning Nelson and his blockading squadron off Cadiz. There were the customary bad jokes about Buonaparte, especially when it was found that the whole French army had turned its back upon Boulogne and set out for the Rhine. Then came accounts of his march through Germany and into Austria; but not a word about the Victory.

At the beginning of autumn John brought news which fearfully depressed her. The Austrian General Mack had capitulated with his whole army. Then

were revived the old misgivings as to invasion. 'Instead of having to cope with him weary with waiting, we shall have to encounter This Man fresh from the fields of victory,' ran the newspaper article.

But the week which had led off with such a dreary piping was to end in another key. On the very day when Mack's army was piling arms at the feet of its conqueror, a blow had been struck by Bob Loveday and his comrades which eternally shattered the enemy's force by sea. Four days after the receipt of the Austrian news Corporal Tullidge ran into the miller's house to inform him that on the previous Monday, at eleven in the morning, the Pickle schooner, Lieutenant Lapenotiere, had arrived at Falmouth with despatches from the fleet; that the stage-coaches on the highway through Wessex to London were chalked with the words 'Great Victory!' 'Glorious Triumph!' and so on; and that all the country people were wild to know particulars.

On Friday afternoon John arrived with authentic news of the battle off Cape Trafalgar, and the death of Nelson. Captain Hardy was alive, though his escape had been narrow enough, his shoe-buckle having been carried away by a shot. It was feared that the Victory had been the scene of the heaviest slaughter among all the ships engaged, but as yet no returns of killed and wounded had been issued, beyond a rough list of the numbers in some of the ships.

The suspense of the little household in Overcombe Mill was great in the extreme. John came thither daily for more than a week; but no further

particulars reached England till the end of that time, and then only the meagre intelligence that there had been a gale immediately after the battle, and that many of the prizes had been lost. Anne said little to all these things, and preserved a superstratum of calmness on her countenance; but some inner voice seemed to whisper to her that Bob was no more. Miller Loveday drove to Pos'ham several times to learn if the Captain's sisters had received any more definite tidings than these flying reports; but that family had heard nothing which could in any way relieve the miller's anxiety. When at last, at the end of November, there appeared a final and revised list of killed and wounded as issued by Admiral Collingwood, it was a useless sheet to the Lovedays. To their great pain it contained no names but those of officers, the friends of ordinary seamen and marines being in those good old days left to discover their losses as best they might.

Anne's conviction of her loss increased with the darkening of the early winter time. Bob was not a cautious man who would avoid needless exposure, and a hundred and fifty of the Victory's crew had been disabled or slain. Anybody who had looked into her room at this time would have seen that her favourite reading was the office for the Burial of the Dead at Sea, beginning 'We therefore commit his body to the deep.' In these first days of December several of the victorious fleet came into port; but not the Victory. Many supposed that that noble ship, disabled by the battle, had gone to the bottom in the subsequent tempestuous weather; and the belief was persevered in till it was told in the town and port that she had been seen passing up the Channel. Two days later the Victory

arrived at Portsmouth.

Then letters from survivors began to appear in the public prints which John so regularly brought to Anne; but though he watched the mails with unceasing vigilance there was never a letter from Bob. It sometimes crossed John's mind that his brother might still be alive and well, and that in his wish to abide by his expressed intention of giving up Anne and home life he was deliberately lax in writing. If so, Bob was carrying out the idea too thoughtlessly by half, as could be seen by watching the effects of suspense upon the fair face of the victim, and the anxiety of the rest of the family.

It was a clear day in December. The first slight snow of the season had been sifted over the earth, and one side of the apple-tree branches in the miller's garden was touched with white, though a few leaves were still lingering on the tops of the younger trees. A short sailor of the Royal Navy, who was not Bob, nor anything like him, crossed the mill court and came to the door. The miller hastened out and brought him into the room, where John, Mrs. Loveday, and Anne Garland were all present.

'I'm from aboard the Victory,' said the sailor. 'My name's Jim Cornick. And your lad is alive and well.'

They breathed rather than spoke their thankfulness and relief, the miller's eyes being moist as he turned aside to calm himself; while Anne, having first jumped up wildly from her seat, sank back again under the

almost insupportable joy that trembled through her limbs to her utmost finger.

'I've come from Spithead to Pos'ham,' the sailor continued, 'and now I am going on to father at Budmouth.'

'Ah!--I know your father,' cried the trumpet-major, 'old James Cornick.'

It was the man who had brought Anne in his lerret from Portland Bill.

'And Bob hasn't got a scratch?' said the miller.

'Not a scratch,' said Cornick.

Loveday then bustled off to draw the visitor something to drink. Anne Garland, with a glowing blush on her face, had gone to the back part of the room, where she was the very embodiment of sweet content as she slightly swayed herself without speaking. A little tide of happiness seemed to ebb and flow through her in listening to the sailor's words, moving her figure with it. The seaman and John went on conversing.

'Bob had a good deal to do with barricading the hawse-holes afore we were in action, and the Adm'l and Cap'n both were very much pleased at how 'twas done. When the Adm'l went up the quarter-deck ladder, Cap'n Hardy said a word or two to Bob, but what it was I don't know, for I was quartered at a gun some ways off. However, Bob saw the Adm'l stagger

when 'a was wounded, and was one of the men who carried him to the cockpit. After that he and some other lads jumped aboard the French ship, and I believe they was in her when she struck her flag. What 'a did next I can't say, for the wind had dropped, and the smoke was like a cloud. But 'a got a good deal talked about; and they say there's promotion in store for'n.'

At this point in the story Jim Cornick stopped to drink, and a low unconscious humming came from Anne in her distant corner; the faint melody continued more or less when the conversation between the sailor and the Lovedays was renewed.

'We heard afore that the Victory was near knocked to pieces,' said the miller.

'Knocked to pieces? You'd say so if so be you could see her! Gad, her sides be battered like an old penny piece; the shot be still sticking in her wales, and her sails be like so many clap-nets: we have run all the way home under jury topmasts; and as for her decks, you may swab wi' hot water, and you may swab wi' cold, but there's the blood-stains, and there they'll bide. . . . The Cap'n had a narrow escape, like many o' the rest--a shot shaved his ankle like a razor. You should have seen that man's face in the het o' battle, his features were as if they'd been cast in steel.'

'We rather expected a letter from Bob before this.'

'Well,' said Jim Cornick, with a smile of toleration, 'you must make allowances. The truth o't is, he's engaged just now at Portsmouth, like a good many of the rest from our ship. . . . 'Tis a very nice young woman that he's a courting of, and I make no doubt that she'll be an excellent wife for him.'

'Ah!' said Mrs. Loveday, in a warning tone.

'Courting--wife?' said the miller.

They instinctively looked towards Anne. Anne had started as if shaken by an invisible hand, and a thick mist of doubt seemed to obscure the intelligence of her eyes. This was but for two or three moments. Very pale, she arose and went right up to the seaman. John gently tried to intercept her, but she passed him by.

'Do you speak of Robert Loveday as courting a wife?' she asked, without the least betrayal of emotion.

'I didn't see you, miss,' replied Cornick, turning. 'Yes, your brother hev' his eye on a wife, and he deserves one. I hope you don't mind?'

'Not in the least,' she said, with a stage laugh. 'I am interested, naturally. And what is she?'

'A very nice young master-baker's daughter, honey. A very wise choice of the young man's.'

'Is she fair or dark?'

'Her hair is rather light.'

'I like light hair; and her name?'

'Her name is Caroline. But can it be that my story hurts ye? If so--'

'Yes, yes,' said John, interposing anxiously. 'We don't care for more just at this moment.'

'We do care for more!' said Anne vehemently. 'Tell it all, sailor.'

That is a very pretty name, Caroline. When are they going to be married?'

'I don't know as how the day is settled,' answered Jim, even now scarcely conscious of the devastation he was causing in one fair breast. 'But from the rate the courting is scudding along at, I should say it won't be long first.'

'If you see him when you go back, give him my best wishes,' she lightly said, as she moved away. 'And,' she added, with solemn bitterness, 'say that I am glad to hear he is making such good use of the first days of

his escape from the Valley of the Shadow of Death!' She went away, expressing indifference by audibly singing in the distance--

'Shall we go dance the round, the round, the round,
Shall we go dance the round?'

'Your sister is lively at the news,' observed Jim Cornick.

'Yes,' murmured John gloomily, as he gnawed his lower lip and kept his eyes fixed on the fire.

'Well,' continued the man from the Victory, 'I won't say that your brother's intended ha'n't got some ballast, which is very lucky for'n, as he might have picked up with a girl without a single copper nail. To be sure there was a time we had when we got into port! It was open house for us all!' And after mentally regarding the scene for a few seconds Jim emptied his cup and rose to go.

The miller was saying some last words to him outside the house, Anne's voice had hardly ceased singing upstairs, John was standing by the fireplace, and Mrs. Loveday was crossing the room to join her daughter, whose manner had given her some uneasiness, when a noise came from above

the ceiling, as of some heavy body falling. Mrs. Loveday rushed to the staircase, saying, 'Ah, I feared something!' and she was followed by John.

When they entered Anne's room, which they both did almost at one moment, they found her lying insensible upon the floor. The trumpet-major, his lips tightly closed, lifted her in his arms, and laid her upon the bed; after which he went back to the door to give room to her mother, who was bending over the girl with some hartshorn.

Presently Mrs. Loveday looked up and said to him, 'She is only in a faint, John, and her colour is coming back. Now leave her to me; I will be downstairs in a few minutes, and tell you how she is.'

John left the room. When he gained the lower apartment his father was standing by the chimney-piece, the sailor having gone. The trumpet-major went up to the fire, and, grasping the edge of the high chimney-shelf, stood silent.

'Did I hear a noise when I went out?' asked the elder, in a tone of misgiving.

'Yes, you did,' said John. 'It was she, but her mother says she is better now. Father,' he added impetuously, 'Bob is a worthless blockhead! If there had been any good in him he would have been drowned years ago!'

'John, John--not too fast,' said the miller. 'That's a hard thing to say of your brother, and you ought to be ashamed of it.'

'Well, he tries me more than I can bear. Good God! what can a man be made of to go on as he does? Why didn't he come home; or if he couldn't get leave why didn't he write? 'Tis scandalous of him to serve a woman like that!'

'Gently, gently. The chap hev done his duty as a sailor; and though there might have been something between him and Anne, her mother, in talking it over with me, has said many times that she couldn't think of their marrying till Bob had settled down in business with me. Folks that gain victories must have a little liberty allowed 'em. Look at the Admiral himself, for that matter.'

John continued looking at the red coals, till hearing Mrs. Loveday's foot on the staircase, he went to meet her.

'She is better,' said Mrs. Loveday; 'but she won't come down again to-day.'

Could John have heard what the poor girl was moaning to herself at that moment as she lay writhing on the bed, he would have doubted her mother's assurance. 'If he had been dead I could have borne it, but this I cannot bear!'