

XXXVI. DERRIMAN SEES CHANCES

Meanwhile Sailor Cornick had gone on his way as far as the forking roads, where he met Festus Derriman on foot. The latter, attracted by the seaman's dress, and by seeing him come from the mill, at once accosted him. Jim, with the greatest readiness, fell into conversation, and told the same story as that he had related at the mill.

'Bob Loveday going to be married?' repeated Festus.

'You all seem struck of a heap wi' that.'

'No; I never heard news that pleased me more.'

When Cornick was gone, Festus, instead of passing straight on, halted on the little bridge and meditated. Bob, being now interested elsewhere, would probably not resent the siege of Anne's heart by another; there could, at any rate, be no further possibility of that looming duel which had troubled the yeoman's mind ever since his horse-play on Anne at the house on the down. To march into the mill and propose to Mrs. Loveday for Anne before John's interest could revive in her was, to this hero's thinking, excellent discretion.

The day had already begun to darken when he entered, and the cheerful

fire shone red upon the floor and walls. Mrs. Loveday received him alone, and asked him to take a seat by the chimney-corner, a little of the old hankering for him as a son-in-law having permanently remained with her.

'Your servant, Mrs. Loveday,' he said, 'and I will tell you at once what I come for. You will say that I take time by the forelock when I inform you that it is to push on my long-wished-for alliance wi' your daughter, as I believe she is now a free woman again.'

'Thank you, Mr. Derriman,' said the mother placably. 'But she is ill at present. I'll mention it to her when she is better.'

'Ask her to alter her cruel, cruel resolves against me, on the score of--of my consuming passion for her. In short,' continued Festus, dropping his parlour language in his warmth, 'I'll tell thee what, Dame Loveday, I want the maid, and must have her.'

Mrs. Loveday replied that that was very plain speaking.

'Well, 'tis. But Bob has given her up. He never meant to marry her. I'll tell you, Mrs. Loveday, what I have never told a soul before. I was standing upon Budmouth Quay on that very day in last September that Bob set sail, and I heard him say to his brother John that he gave your daughter up.'

'Then it was very unmannerly of him to trifle with her so,' said Mrs. Loveday warmly. 'Who did he give her up to?'

Festus replied with hesitation, 'He gave her up to John.'

'To John? How could he give her up to a man already over head and ears in love with that actress woman?'

'O? You surprise me. Which actress is it?'

'That Miss Johnson. Anne tells me that he loves her hopelessly.'

Festus arose. Miss Johnson seemed suddenly to acquire high value as a sweetheart at this announcement. He had himself felt a nameless attractiveness in her, and John had done likewise. John crossed his path in all possible ways.

Before the yeoman had replied somebody opened the door, and the firelight shone upon the uniform of the person they discussed. Festus nodded on recognizing him, wished Mrs. Loveday good evening, and went out precipitately.

'So Bob told you he meant to break off with my Anne when he went away?' Mrs. Loveday remarked to the trumpet-major. 'I wish I had known of it before.'

John appeared disturbed at the sudden charge. He murmured that he could not deny it, and then hastily turned from her and followed Derriman, whom he saw before him on the bridge.

'Derriman!' he shouted.

Festus started and looked round. 'Well, trumpet-major,' he said blandly.

'When will you have sense enough to mind your own business, and not come

here telling things you have heard by sneaking behind people's backs?'

demanded John hotly. 'If you can't learn in any other way, I shall have to pull your ears again, as I did the other day!'

'You pull my ears? How can you tell that lie, when you know 'twas somebody else pulled 'em?'

'O no, no. I pulled your ears, and thrashed you in a mild way.'

'You'll swear to it? Surely 'twas another man?'

'It was in the parlour at the public-house; you were almost in the dark.'

And John added a few details as to the particular blows, which amounted to proof itself.

'Then I heartily ask your pardon for saying 'twas a lie!' cried Festus,

advancing with extended hand and a genial smile. 'Sure, if I had known 'twas you, I wouldn't have insulted you by denying it.'

'That was why you didn't challenge me, then?'

'That was it! I wouldn't for the world have hurt your nice sense of honour by letting 'ee go unchallenged, if I had known! And now, you see, unfortunately I can't mend the mistake. So long a time has passed since it happened that the heat of my temper is gone off. I couldn't oblige 'ee, try how I might, for I am not a man, trumpet-major, that can butcher in cold blood--no, not I, nor you neither, from what I know of 'ee. So, willy-nilly, we must fain let it pass, eh?'

'We must, I suppose,' said John, smiling grimly. 'Who did you think I was, then, that night when I boxed you all round?'

'No, don't press me,' replied the yeoman. 'I can't reveal; it would be disgracing myself to show how very wide of the truth the mockery of wine was able to lead my senses. We will let it be buried in eternal mixens of forgetfulness.'

'As you wish,' said the trumpet-major loftily. 'But if you ever should think you knew it was me, why, you know where to find me?' And Loveday walked away.

The instant that he was gone Festus shook his fist at the evening star,

which happened to lie in the same direction as that taken by the dragoon.

'Now for my revenge! Duels? Lifelong disgrace to me if ever I fight with a man of blood below my own! There are other remedies for upper-class souls!. . . Matilda--that's my way.'

Festus strode along till he reached the Hall, where Cripplestraw appeared gazing at him from under the arch of the porter's lodge. Derriman dashed open the entrance-hurdle with such violence that the whole row of them fell flat in the mud.

'Mercy, Maister Festus!' said Cripplestraw. "'Surely," I says to myself when I see ye a-coming, "surely Maister Festus is fuming like that because there's no chance of the enemy coming this year after all."

'Cr-r-ripplestraw! I have been wounded to the heart,' replied Derriman, with a lurid brow.

'And the man yet lives, and you wants yer horse-pistols instantly? Certainly, Maister F---'

'No, Cripplestraw, not my pistols, but my new-cut clothes, my heavy gold seals, my silver-topped cane, and my buckles that cost more money than he ever saw! Yes, I must tell somebody, and I'll tell you, because there's no other fool near. He loves her heart and soul. He's poor; she's tip-top genteel, and not rich. I am rich, by comparison. I'll court the

pretty play-actress, and win her before his eyes.'

'Play-actress, Maister Derriman?'

'Yes. I saw her this very day, met her by accident, and spoke to her. She's still in the town--perhaps because of him. I can meet her at any hour of the day-- But I don't mean to marry her; not I. I will court her for my pastime, and to annoy him. It will be all the more death to him that I don't want her. Then perhaps he will say to me, "You have taken my one ewe lamb"--meaning that I am the king, and he's the poor man, as in the church verse; and he'll beg for mercy when 'tis too late--unless, meanwhile, I shall have tired of my new toy. Saddle the horse, Cripplestraw, to-morrow at ten.'

Full of this resolve to scourge John Loveday to the quick through his passion for Miss Johnson, Festus came out booted and spurred at the time appointed, and set off on his morning ride.

Miss Johnson's theatrical engagement having long ago terminated, she would have left the Royal watering-place with the rest of the visitors had not matrimonial hopes detained her there. These had nothing whatever to do with John Loveday, as may be imagined, but with a stout, staid boat-builder in Cove Row by the quay, who had shown much interest in her impersonations. Unfortunately this substantial man had not been quite so attentive since the end of the season as his previous manner led her to expect; and it was a great pleasure to the lady to see Mr. Derriman

leaning over the harbour bridge with his eyes fixed upon her as she came towards it after a stroll past her elderly wooer's house.

'Od take it, ma'am, you didn't tell me when I saw you last that the tooting man with the blue jacket and lace was yours devoted?' began Festus.

'Who do you mean?' In Matilda's ever-changing emotional interests, John Loveday was a stale and unprofitable personality.

'Why, that trumpet-major man.'

'O! What of him?'

'Come; he loves you, and you know it, ma'am.'

She knew, at any rate, how to take the current when it served. So she glanced at Festus, folded her lips meaningly, and nodded.

'I've come to cut him out.'

She shook her head, it being unsafe to speak till she knew a little more of the subject.

'What!' said Festus, reddening, 'do you mean to say that you think of him seriously--you, who might look so much higher?'

'Constant dropping will wear away a stone; and you should only hear his pleading! His handsome face is impressive, and his manners are--O, so genteel! I am not rich; I am, in short, a poor lady of decayed family, who has nothing to boast of but my blood and ancestors, and they won't find a body in food and clothing!--I hold the world but as the world, Derrimano--a stage where every man must play a part, and mine a sad one!' She dropped her eyes thoughtfully and sighed.

'We will talk of this,' said Festus, much affected. 'Let us walk to the Look-out.'

She made no objection, and said, as they turned that way, 'Mr. Derriman, a long time ago I found something belonging to you; but I have never yet remembered to return it.' And she drew from her bosom the paper which Anne had dropped in the meadow when eluding the grasp of Festus on that summer day.

'Zounds, I smell fresh meat!' cried Festus when he had looked it over.

'Tis in my uncle's writing, and 'tis what I heard him singing on the day the French didn't come, and afterwards saw him marking in the road. 'Tis something he's got hid away. Give me the paper, there's a dear; 'tis worth sterling gold!

'Halves, then?' said Matilda tenderly.

'Gad, yes--anything!' replied Festus, blazing into a smile, for she had looked up in her best new manner at the possibility that he might be worth the winning. They went up the steps to the summit of the cliff, and dwindled over it against the sky.