XXXVII. REACTION

There was no letter from Bob, though December had passed, and the new year was two weeks old. His movements were, however, pretty accurately registered in the papers, which John still brought, but which Anne no longer read. During the second week in December the Victory sailed for Sheerness, and on the 9th of the following January the public funeral of Lord Nelson took place in St. Paul's.

Then there came a meagre line addressed to the family in general. Bob's new Portsmouth attachment was not mentioned, but he told them he had been one of the eight-and-forty seamen who walked two-and-two in the funeral procession, and that Captain Hardy had borne the banner of emblems on the same occasion. The crew was soon to be paid off at Chatham, when he thought of returning to Portsmouth for a few days to see a valued friend. After that he should come home.

But the spring advanced without bringing him, and John watched Anne Garland's desolation with augmenting desire to do something towards consoling her. The old feelings, so religiously held in check, were stimulated to rebelliousness, though they did not show themselves in any direct manner as yet.

The miller, in the meantime, who seldom interfered in such matters, was

observed to look meaningly at Anne and the trumpet-major from day to day; and by-and-by he spoke privately to John.

His words were short and to the point: Anne was very melancholy; she had thought too much of Bob. Now 'twas plain that they had lost him for many years to come. Well; he had always felt that of the two he would rather John married her. Now John might settle down there, and succeed where Bob had failed. 'So if you could get her, my sonny, to think less of him and more of thyself, it would be a good thing for all.'

An inward excitement had risen in John; but he suppressed it and said firmly--

'Fairness to Bob before everything!'

'He hev forgot her, and there's an end on't.'

'She's not forgot him.'

'Well, well; think it over.'

This discourse was the cause of his penning a letter to his brother. He begged for a distinct statement whether, as John at first supposed, Bob's verbal renunciation of Anne on the quay had been only a momentary ebullition of friendship, which it would be cruel to take literally; or whether, as seemed now, it had passed from a hasty resolve to a standing

purpose, persevered in for his own pleasure, with not a care for the result on poor Anne.

John waited anxiously for the answer, but no answer came; and the silence seemed even more significant than a letter of assurance could have been of his absolution from further support to a claim which Bob himself had so clearly renounced. Thus it happened that paternal pressure, brotherly indifference, and his own released impulse operated in one delightful direction, and the trumpet-major once more approached Anne as in the old time.

But it was not till she had been left to herself for a full five months, and the blue-bells and ragged-robins of the following year were again making themselves common to the rambling eye, that he directly addressed her. She was tying up a group of tall flowering plants in the garden: she knew that he was behind her, but she did not turn. She had subsided into a placid dignity which enabled her when watched to perform any little action with seeming composure--very different from the flutter of her inexperienced days.

'Are you never going to turn round?' he at length asked good-humouredly.

She then did turn, and looked at him for a moment without speaking; a certain suspicion looming in her eyes, as if suggested by his perceptible want of ease.

'How like summer it is getting to feel, is it not?' she said.

John admitted that it was getting to feel like summer: and, bending his gaze upon her with an earnestness which no longer left any doubt of his subject, went on to ask--

'Have you ever in these last weeks thought of how it used to be between us?'

She replied quickly, 'O, John, you shouldn't begin that again. I am almost another woman now!'

'Well, that's all the more reason why I should, isn't it?'

Anne looked thoughtfully to the other end of the garden, faintly shaking her head; 'I don't quite see it like that,' she returned.

'You feel yourself quite free, don't you?'

'Quite free!' she said instantly, and with proud distinctness; her eyes fell, and she repeated more slowly, 'Quite free.' Then her thoughts seemed to fly from herself to him. 'But you are not?'

'I am not?'

'Miss Johnson!'

'O--that woman! You know as well as I that was all make-up, and that I never for a moment thought of her.'

'I had an idea you were acting; but I wasn't sure.'

'Well, that's nothing now. Anne, I want to relieve your life; to cheer you in some way; to make some amends for my brother's bad conduct. If you cannot love me, liking will be well enough. I have thought over every side of it so many times--for months have I been thinking it over--and I am at last sure that I do right to put it to you in this way. That I don't wrong Bob I am quite convinced. As far as he is concerned we be both free. Had I not been sure of that I would never have spoken. Father wants me to take on the mill, and it will please him if you can give me one little hope; it will make the house go on altogether better if you can think o' me.'

'You are generous and good, John,' she said, as a big round tear bowled helter-skelter down her face and hat-strings.

'I am not that; I fear I am quite the opposite,' he said, without looking at her. 'It would be all gain to me-- But you have not answered my question.'

She lifted her eyes. 'John, I cannot!' she said, with a cheerless smile. 'Positively I cannot. Will you make me a promise?'

'What is it?'

'I want you to promise first-- Yes, it is dreadfully unreasonable,' she added, in a mild distress. 'But do promise!'

John by this time seemed to have a feeling that it was all up with him for the present. 'I promise,' he said listlessly.

'It is that you won't speak to me about this for ever so long,' she returned, with emphatic kindliness.

'Very good,' he replied; 'very good. Dear Anne, you don't think I have been unmanly or unfair in starting this anew?'

Anne looked into his face without a smile. 'You have been perfectly natural,' she murmured. 'And so I think have I.'

John, mournfully: 'You will not avoid me for this, or be afraid of me? I will not break my word. I will not worry you any more.'

'Thank you, John. You need not have said worry; it isn't that.'

'Well, I am very blind and stupid. I have been hurting your heart all the time without knowing it. It is my fate, I suppose. Men who love women the very best always blunder and give more pain than those who love

them less.'

Anne laid one of her hands on the other as she softly replied, looking down at them, 'No one loves me as well as you, John; nobody in the world is so worthy to be loved; and yet I cannot anyhow love you rightly.' And lifting her eyes, 'But I do so feel for you that I will try as hard as I can to think about you.'

'Well, that is something,' he said, smiling. 'You say I must not speak about it again for ever so long; how long?'

'Now that's not fair,' Anne retorted, going down the garden, and leaving him alone.

About a week passed. Then one afternoon the miller walked up to Anne indoors, a weighty topic being expressed in his tread.

'I was so glad, my honey,' he began, with a knowing smile, 'to see that from the mill-window last week.' He flung a nod in the direction of the garden.

Anne innocently inquired what it could be.

'Jack and you in the garden together,' he continued laying his hand gently on her shoulder and stroking it. 'It would so please me, my dear little girl, if you could get to like him better than that weathercock,

Master Bob.'

Anne shook her head; not in forcible negation, but to imply a kind of neutrality.

'Can't you? Come now,' said the miller.

She threw back her head with a little laugh of grievance. 'How you all beset me!' she expostulated. 'It makes me feel very wicked in not obeying you, and being faithful--faithful to--' But she could not trust that side of the subject to words. 'Why would it please you so much?' she asked.

'John is as steady and staunch a fellow as ever blowed a trumpet. I've always thought you might do better with him than with Bob. Now I've a plan for taking him into the mill, and letting him have a comfortable time o't after his long knocking about; but so much depends upon you that I must bide a bit till I see what your pleasure is about the poor fellow. Mind, my dear, I don't want to force ye; I only just ask ye.'

Anne meditatively regarded the miller from under her shady eyelids, the fingers of one hand playing a silent tattoo on her bosom. 'I don't know what to say to you,' she answered brusquely, and went away.

But these discourses were not without their effect upon the extremely conscientious mind of Anne. They were, moreover, much helped by an

incident which took place one evening in the autumn of this year, when John came to tea. Anne was sitting on a low stool in front of the fire, her hands clasped across her knee. John Loveday had just seated himself on a chair close behind her, and Mrs. Loveday was in the act of filling the teapot from the kettle which hung in the chimney exactly above Anne. The kettle slipped forward suddenly, whereupon John jumped from the chair
and put his own two hands over Anne's just in time to shield them, and the precious knee she clasped, from the jet of scalding water which had directed itself upon that point. The accidental overflow was instantly checked by Mrs. Loveday; but what had come was received by the devoted trumpet-major on the back of his hands.

Anne, who had hardly been aware that he was behind her, started up like a person awakened from a trance. 'What have you done to yourself, poor John, to keep it off me!' she cried, looking at his hands.

John reddened emotionally at her words, 'It is a bit of a scald, that's all,' he replied, drawing a finger across the back of one hand, and bringing off the skin by the touch.

'You are scalded painfully, and I not at all!' She gazed into his kind face as she had never gazed there before, and when Mrs. Loveday came back with oil and other liniments for the wound Anne would let nobody dress it but herself. It seemed as if her coyness had all gone, and when she had done all that lay in her power she still sat by him. At his departure

she said what she had never said to him in her life before: 'Come again soon!'

In short, that impulsive act of devotion, the last of a series of the same tenor, had been the added drop which finally turned the wheel. John's character deeply impressed her. His determined steadfastness to his lode star won her admiration, the more especially as that star was herself. She began to wonder more and more how she could have so persistently held out against his advances before Bob came home to renew girlish memories which had by that time got considerably weakened. Could she not, after all, please the miller, and try to listen to John? By so doing she would make a worthy man happy, the only sacrifice being at worst that of her unworthy self, whose future was no longer valuable. 'As for Bob, the woman is to be pitied who loves him,' she reflected indignantly, and persuaded herself that, whoever the woman might be, she was not Anne Garland.

After this there was something of recklessness and something of pleasantry in the young girl's manner of making herself an example of the triumph of pride and common sense over memory and sentiment. Her attitude had been epitomized in her defiant singing at the time she learnt that Bob was not leal and true. John, as was inevitable, came again almost immediately, drawn thither by the sun of her first smile on him, and the words which had accompanied it. And now instead of going off to her little pursuits upstairs, downstairs, across the room, in the corner, or to any place except where he happened to be, as had been her

custom hitherto, she remained seated near him, returning interesting answers to his general remarks, and at every opportunity letting him know that at last he had found favour in her eyes.

The day was fine, and they went out of doors, where Anne endeavoured to seat herself on the sloping stone of the window-sill.

'How good you have become lately,' said John, standing over her and smiling in the sunlight which blazed against the wall. 'I fancy you have stayed at home this afternoon on my account.'

'Perhaps I have,' she said gaily--

'"Do whatever we may for him, dame, we cannot do too much!
For he's one that has guarded our land."

'And he has done more than that: he has saved me from a dreadful scalding. The back of your hand will not be well for a long time, John, will it?'

He held out his hand to regard its condition, and the next natural thing was to take hers. There was a glow upon his face when he did it: his star was at last on a fair way towards the zenith after its long and weary declination. The least penetrating eye could have perceived that Anne had resolved to let him woo, possibly in her temerity to let him win. Whatever silent sorrow might be locked up in her, it was by this

time thrust a long way down from the light.

'I want you to go somewhere with me if you will,' he said, still holding her hand.

'Yes? Where is it?'

He pointed to a distant hill-side which, hitherto green, had within the last few days begun to show scratches of white on its face. 'Up there,' he said.

'I see little figures of men moving about. What are they doing?'

'Cutting out a huge picture of the king on horseback in the earth of the hill. The king's head is to be as big as our mill-pond and his body as big as this garden; he and the horse will cover more than an acre. When shall we go?'

'Whenever you please,' said she.

'John!' cried Mrs. Loveday from the front door. 'Here's a friend come for you.'

John went round, and found his trusty lieutenant, Trumpeter Buck, waiting for him. A letter had come to the barracks for John in his absence, and the trumpeter, who was going for a walk, had brought it along with him.

Buck then entered the mill to discuss, if possible, a mug of last year's mead with the miller; and John proceeded to read his letter, Anne being still round the corner where he had left her. When he had read a few words he turned as pale as a sheet, but he did not move, and perused the writing to the end.

Afterwards he laid his elbow against the wall, and put his palm to his head, thinking with painful intentness. Then he took himself vigorously in hand, as it were, and gradually became natural again. When he parted from Anne to go home with Buck she noticed nothing different in him.

In barracks that evening he read the letter again. It was from Bob; and the agitating contents were these:--

'DEAR JOHN,--I have drifted off from writing till the present time because I have not been clear about my feelings; but I have discovered them at last, and can say beyond doubt that I mean to be faithful to my dearest Anne after all. The fact is, John, I've got into a bit of a scrape, and I've a secret to tell you about it (which must go no further on any account). On landing last autumn I fell in with a young woman, and we got rather warm as folks do; in short, we liked one another well enough for a while. But I have got into shoal water with her, and have found her to be a terrible take-in. Nothing in her at all--no sense, no niceness, all tantrums and empty noise, John, though she seemed monstrous clever at first. So my heart comes back to its old anchorage. I hope my return to faithfulness will make no

difference to you. But as you showed by your looks at our parting that you should not accept my offer to give her up--made in too much haste, as I have since found--I feel that you won't mind that I have returned to the path of honour. I dare not write to Anne as yet, and please do not let her know a word about the other young woman, or there will be the devil to pay. I shall come home and make all things right, please God. In the meantime I should take it as a kindness, John, if you would keep a brotherly eye upon Anne, and guide her mind back to me. I shall die of sorrow if anybody sets her against me, for my hopes are getting bound up in her again quite strong. Hoping you are jovial, as times go, I am,--Your affectionate brother,

ROBERT.'

When the cold daylight fell upon John's face, as he dressed himself next morning, the incipient yesterday's wrinkle in his forehead had become permanently graven there. He had resolved, for the sake of that only brother whom he had nursed as a baby, instructed as a child, and protected and loved always, to pause in his procedure for the present, and at least do nothing to hinder Bob's restoration to favour, if a genuine, even though temporarily smothered, love for Anne should still hold possession of him. But having arranged to take her to see the excavated figure of the king, he started for Overcombe during the day, as if nothing had occurred to check the smooth course of his love.