

XXXIX. BOB LOVEDAY STRUTS UP AND DOWN

One night, about a week later, two men were walking in the dark along the turnpike road towards Overcombe, one of them with a bag in his hand.

'Now,' said the taller of the two, the squareness of whose shoulders signified that he wore epaulettes, 'now you must do the best you can for yourself, Bob. I have done all I can; but th'hast thy work cut out, I can tell thee.'

'I wouldn't have run such a risk for the world,' said the other, in a tone of ingenuous contrition. 'But thou'st see, Jack, I didn't think there was any danger, knowing you was taking care of her, and keeping my place warm for me. I didn't hurry myself, that's true; but, thinks I, if I get this promotion I am promised I shall naturally have leave, and then I'll go and see 'em all. Gad, I shouldn't have been here now but for your letter!'

'You little think what risks you've run,' said his brother. 'However, try to make up for lost time.'

'All right. And whatever you do, Jack, don't say a word about this other girl. Hang the girl!--I was a great fool, I know; still, it is over now, and I am come to my senses. I suppose Anne never caught a capful of wind from that quarter?'

'She knows all about it,' said John seriously.

'Knows? By George, then, I'm ruined!' said Bob, standing stock-still in the road as if he meant to remain there all night.

'That's what I meant by saying it would be a hard battle for 'ee,' returned John, with the same quietness as before.

Bob sighed and moved on. 'I don't deserve that woman!' he cried passionately, thumping his three upper ribs with his fist.

'I've thought as much myself,' observed John, with a dryness which was almost bitter. 'But it depends on how thou'st behave in future.'

'John,' said Bob, taking his brother's hand, 'I'll be a new man. I solemnly swear by that eternal milestone staring at me there that I'll never look at another woman with the thought of marrying her whilst that darling is free--no, not if she be a mermaid of light! It's a lucky thing that I'm slipped in on the quarterdeck! it may help me with her--hey?'

'It may with her mother; I don't think it will make much difference with Anne. Still, it is a good thing; and I hope that some day you'll command a big ship.'

Bob shook his head. 'Officers are scarce; but I'm afraid my luck won't carry me so far as that.'

'Did she ever tell you that she mentioned your name to the King?'

The seaman stood still again. 'Never!' he said. 'How did such a thing as that happen, in Heaven's name?'

John described in detail, and they walked on, lost in conjecture.

As soon as they entered the house the returned officer of the navy was welcomed with acclamation by his father and David, with mild approval by Mrs. Loveday, and by Anne not at all--that discreet maiden having carefully retired to her own room some time earlier in the evening. Bob did not dare to ask for her in any positive manner; he just inquired about her health, and that was all.

'Why, what's the matter with thy face, my son?' said the miller, staring. 'David, show a light here.' And a candle was thrust against Bob's cheek, where there appeared a jagged streak like the geological remains of a lobster.

'O--that's where that rascally Frenchman's grenade busted and hit me from the Redoubtable, you know, as I told 'ee in my letter.'

'Not a word!'

'What, didn't I tell 'ee? Ah, no; I meant to, but I forgot it.'

'And here's a sort of dint in yer forehead too; what do that mean, my dear boy?' said the miller, putting his finger in a chasm in Bob's skull.

'That was done in the Indies. Yes, that was rather a troublesome chop--a cutlass did it. I should have told 'ee, but I found 'twould make my letter so long that I put it off, and put it off; and at last thought it wasn't worth while.'

John soon rose to take his departure.

'It's all up with me and her, you see,' said Bob to him outside the door.

'She's not even going to see me.'

'Wait a little,' said the trumpet-major. It was easy enough on the night of the arrival, in the midst of excitement, when blood was warm, for Anne to be resolute in her avoidance of Bob Loveday. But in the morning determination is apt to grow invertebrate; rules of pugnacity are less easily acted up to, and a feeling of live and let live takes possession of the gentle soul. Anne had not meant even to sit down to the same breakfast-table with Bob; but when the rest were assembled, and had got some way through the substantial repast which was served at this hour in the miller's house, Anne entered. She came silently as a phantom, her eyes cast down, her cheeks pale. It was a good long walk from the door

to the table, and Bob made a full inspection of her as she came up to a chair at the remotest corner, in the direct rays of the morning light, where she dumbly sat herself down.

It was altogether different from how she had expected. Here was she, who had done nothing, feeling all the embarrassment; and Bob, who had done the wrong, feeling apparently quite at ease.

'You'll speak to Bob, won't you, honey?' said the miller after a silence. To meet Bob like this after an absence seemed irregular in his eyes.

'If he wish me to,' she replied, so addressing the miller that no part, scrap, or outlying beam whatever of her glance passed near the subject of her remark.

'He's a lieutenant, you know, dear,' said her mother on the same side; 'and he's been dreadfully wounded.'

'Oh?' said Anne, turning a little towards the false one; at which Bob felt it to be time for him to put in a spoke for himself.

'I am glad to see you,' he said contritely; 'and how do you do?'

'Very well, thank you.'

He extended his hand. She allowed him to take hers, but only to the

extent of a niggardly inch or so. At the same moment she glanced up at him, when their eyes met, and hers were again withdrawn.

The hitch between the two younger members of the household tended to make the breakfast a dull one. Bob was so depressed by her unforgiving manner that he could not throw that sparkle into his stories which their substance naturally required; and when the meal was over, and they went about their different businesses, the pair resembled the two Dromios in seldom or never being, thanks to Anne's subtle contrivances, both in the same room at the same time.

This kind of performance repeated itself during several days. At last, after dogging her hither and thither, leaning with a wrinkled forehead against doorposts, taking an oblique view into the room where she happened to be, picking up worsted balls and getting no thanks, placing a splinter from the Victory, several bullets from the Redoubtable, a strip of the flag, and other interesting relics, carefully labelled, upon her table, and hearing no more about them than if they had been pebbles from the nearest brook, he hit upon a new plan. To avoid him she frequently sat upstairs in a window overlooking the garden. Lieutenant Loveday carefully dressed himself in a new uniform, which he had caused to be sent some days before, to dazzle admiring friends, but which he had never as yet put on in public or mentioned to a soul. When arrayed he entered the sunny garden, and there walked slowly up and down as he had seen Nelson and Captain Hardy do on the quarter-deck; but keeping his right

shoulder, on which his one epaulette was fixed, as much towards Anne's window as possible.

But she made no sign, though there was not the least question that she saw him. At the end of half-an-hour he went in, took off his clothes, and gave himself up to doubt and the best tobacco.

He repeated the programme on the next afternoon, and on the next, never saying a word within doors about his doings or his notice.

Meanwhile the results in Anne's chamber were not uninteresting. She had been looking out on the first day, and was duly amazed to see a naval officer in full uniform promenading in the path. Finding it to be Bob, she left the window with a sense that the scene was not for her; then, from mere curiosity, peeped out from behind the curtain. Well, he was a pretty spectacle, she admitted, relieved as his figure was by a dense mass of sunny, close-trimmed hedge, over which nasturtiums climbed in wild luxuriance; and if she could care for him one bit, which she couldn't, his form would have been a delightful study, surpassing in interest even its splendour on the memorable day of their visit to the town theatre. She called her mother; Mrs. Loveday came promptly.

'O, it is nothing,' said Anne indifferently; 'only that Bob has got his uniform.'

Mrs. Loveday peeped out, and raised her hands with delight. 'And he has

not said a word to us about it! What a lovely epaulette! I must call his father.'

'No, indeed. As I take no interest in him I shall not let people come into my room to admire him.'

'Well, you called me,' said her mother.

'It was because I thought you liked fine clothes. It is what I don't care for.'

Notwithstanding this assertion she again looked out at Bob the next afternoon when his footsteps rustled on the gravel, and studied his appearance under all the varying angles of the sunlight, as if fine clothes and uniforms were not altogether a matter of indifference. He certainly was a splendid, gentlemanly, and gallant sailor from end to end of him; but then, what were a dashing presentment, a naval rank, and telling scars, if a man was fickle-hearted? However, she peeped on till the fourth day, and then she did not peep. The window was open, she looked right out, and Bob knew that he had got a rise to his bait at last. He touched his hat to her, keeping his right shoulder forwards, and said, 'Good-day, Miss Garland,' with a smile.

Anne replied, 'Good-day,' with funereal seriousness; and the acquaintance thus revived led to the interchange of a few words at supper-time, at which Mrs. Loveday nodded with satisfaction. But Anne took especial care

that he should never meet her alone, and to insure this her ingenuity was in constant exercise. There were so many nooks and windings on the miller's rambling premises that she could never be sure he would not turn up within a foot of her, particularly as his thin shoes were almost noiseless.

One fine afternoon she accompanied Molly in search of elderberries for making the family wine which was drunk by Mrs. Loveday, Anne, and anybody who could not stand the rougher and stronger liquors provided by the miller. After walking rather a long distance over the down they came to a grassy hollow, where elder-bushes in knots of twos and threes rose from an uneven bank and hung their heads towards the south, black and heavy with bunches of fruit. The charm of fruit-gathering to girls is enhanced in the case of elderberries by the inoffensive softness of the leaves, boughs, and bark, which makes getting into the branches easy and pleasant to the most indifferent climbers. Anne and Molly had soon gathered a basketful, and sending the servant home with it, Anne remained in the bush picking and throwing down bunch by bunch upon the grass. She was so absorbed in her occupation of pulling the twigs towards her, and the rustling of their leaves so filled her ears, that it was a great surprise when, on turning her head, she perceived a similar movement to her own among the boughs of the adjoining bush.

At first she thought they were disturbed by being partly in contact with the boughs of her bush; but in a moment Robert Loveday's face peered from

them, at a distance of about a yard from her own. Anne uttered a little indignant 'Well!' recovered herself, and went on plucking. Bob thereupon went on plucking likewise.

'I am picking elderberries for your mother,' said the lieutenant at last, humbly.

'So I see.'

'And I happen to have come to the next bush to yours.'

'So I see; but not the reason why.'

Anne was now in the westernmost branches of the bush, and Bob had leant across into the eastern branches of his. In gathering he swayed towards her, back again, forward again.

'I beg pardon,' he said, when a further swing than usual had taken him almost in contact with her.

'Then why do you do it?'

'The wind rocks the bough, and the bough rocks me.' She expressed by a look her opinion of this statement in the face of the gentlest breeze; and Bob pursued: 'I am afraid the berries will stain your pretty hands.'

'I wear gloves.'

'Ah, that's a plan I should never have thought of. Can I help you?'

'Not at all.'

'You are offended: that's what that means.'

'No,' she said.

'Then will you shake hands?'

Anne hesitated; then slowly stretched out her hand, which he took at once. 'That will do,' she said, finding that he did not relinquish it immediately. But as he still held it, she pulled, the effect of which was to draw Bob's swaying person, bough and all, towards her, and herself towards him.

'I am afraid to let go your hand,' said that officer, 'for if I do your spar will fly back, and you will be thrown upon the deck with great violence.'

'I wish you to let me go!'

He accordingly did, and she flew back, but did not by any means fall.

'It reminds me of the times when I used to be aloft clinging to a yard not much bigger than this tree-stem, in the mid-Atlantic, and thinking about you. I could see you in my fancy as plain as I see you now.'

'Me, or some other woman!' retorted Anne haughtily.

'No!' declared Bob, shaking the bush for emphasis, 'I'll protest that I did not think of anybody but you all the time we were dropping down channel, all the time we were off Cadiz, all the time through battles and bombardments. I seemed to see you in the smoke, and, thinks I, if I go to Davy's locker, what will she do?'

'You didn't think that when you landed after Trafalgar.'

'Well, now,' said the lieutenant in a reasoning tone; 'that was a curious thing. You'll hardly believe it, maybe; but when a man is away from the woman he loves best in the port--world, I mean--he can have a sort of temporary feeling for another without disturbing the old one, which flows along under the same as ever.'

'I can't believe it, and won't,' said Anne firmly.

Molly now appeared with the empty basket, and when it had been filled from the heap on the grass, Anne went home with her, bidding Loveday a frigid adieu.

The same evening, when Bob was absent, the miller proposed that they should all three go to an upper window of the house, to get a distant view of some rockets and illuminations which were to be exhibited in the town and harbour in honour of the King, who had returned this year as usual. They accordingly went upstairs to an empty attic, placed chairs against the window, and put out the light; Anne sitting in the middle, her mother close by, and the miller behind, smoking. No sign of any pyrotechnic display was visible over the port as yet, and Mrs. Loveday passed the time by talking to the miller, who replied in monosyllables. While this was going on Anne fancied that she heard some one approach, and presently felt sure that Bob was drawing near her in the surrounding darkness; but as the other two had noticed nothing she said not a word.

All at once the swarthy expanse of southward sky was broken by the blaze of several rockets simultaneously ascending from different ships in the roads. At the very same moment a warm mysterious hand slipped round her own, and gave it a gentle squeeze.

'O dear!' said Anne, with a sudden start away.

'How nervous you are, child, to be startled by fireworks so far off,' said Mrs. Loveday.

'I never saw rockets before,' murmured Anne, recovering from her surprise.

Mrs. Loveday presently spoke again. 'I wonder what has become of Bob?'

Anne did not reply, being much exercised in trying to get her hand away from the one that imprisoned it; and whatever the miller thought he kept to himself, because it disturbed his smoking to speak.

Another batch of rockets went up. 'O I never!' said Anne, in a half-suppressed tone, springing in her chair. A second hand had with the rise of the rockets leapt round her waist.

'Poor girl, you certainly must have change of scene at this rate,' said Mrs. Loveday.

'I suppose I must,' murmured the dutiful daughter.

For some minutes nothing further occurred to disturb Anne's serenity. Then a slow, quiet 'a-hem' came from the obscurity of the apartment.

'What, Bob? How long have you been there?' inquired Mrs. Loveday.

'Not long,' said the lieutenant coolly. 'I heard you were all here, and crept up quietly, not to disturb ye.'

'Why don't you wear heels to your shoes like Christian people, and not creep about so like a cat?'

'Well, it keeps your floors clean to go slip-shod.'

'That's true.'

Meanwhile Anne was gently but firmly trying to pull Bob's arm from her waist, her distressful difficulty being that in freeing her waist she enslaved her hand, and in getting her hand free she enslaved her waist. Finding the struggle a futile one, owing to the invisibility of her antagonist, and her wish to keep its nature secret from the other two, she arose, and saying that she did not care to see any more, felt her way downstairs. Bob followed, leaving Loveday and his wife to themselves.

'Dear Anne,' he began, when he had got down, and saw her in the candle-light of the large room. But she adroitly passed out at the other door, at which he took a candle and followed her to the small room. 'Dear Anne, do let me speak,' he repeated, as soon as the rays revealed her figure. But she passed into the bakehouse before he could say more; whereupon he perseveringly did the same. Looking round for her here he perceived her at the end of the room, where there were no means of exit whatever.

'Dear Anne,' he began again, setting down the candle, 'you must try to forgive me; really you must. I love you the best of anybody in the wide, wide world. Try to forgive me; come!' And he imploringly took her hand.

Anne's bosom began to surge and fall like a small tide, her eyes remaining fixed upon the floor; till, when Loveday ventured to draw her slightly towards him, she burst out crying. 'I don't like you, Bob; I don't!' she suddenly exclaimed between her sobs. 'I did once, but I don't now--I can't, I can't; you have been very cruel to me!' She violently turned away, weeping.

'I have, I have been terribly bad, I know,' answered Bob, conscience-stricken by her grief. 'But--if you could only forgive me--I promise that I'll never do anything to grieve 'ee again. Do you forgive me, Anne?'

Anne's only reply was crying and shaking her head.

'Let's make it up. Come, say we have made it up, dear.'

She withdrew her hand, and still keeping her eyes buried in her handkerchief, said 'No.'

'Very well, then!' exclaimed Bob, with sudden determination. 'Now I know my doom! And whatever you hear of as happening to me, mind this, you cruel girl, that it is all your causing!' Saying this he strode with a hasty tread across the room into the passage and out at the door, slamming it loudly behind him.

Anne suddenly looked up from her handkerchief, and stared with round wet

eyes and parted lips at the door by which he had gone. Having remained with suspended breath in this attitude for a few seconds she turned round, bent her head upon the table, and burst out weeping anew with thrice the violence of the former time. It really seemed now as if her grief would overwhelm her, all the emotions which had been suppressed, bottled up, and concealed since Bob's return having made themselves a sluice at last.

But such things have their end; and left to herself in the large, vacant, old apartment, she grew quieter, and at last calm. At length she took the candle and ascended to her bedroom, where she bathed her eyes and looked in the glass to see if she had made herself a dreadful object. It was not so bad as she had expected, and she went downstairs again.

Nobody was there, and, sitting down, she wondered what Bob had really meant by his words. It was too dreadful to think that he intended to go straight away to sea without seeing her again, and frightened at what she had done she waited anxiously for his return.

XL. A CALL ON BUSINESS

Her suspense was interrupted by a very gentle tapping at the door, and