

#### 43. THE RAILWAY--THE SEA--THE SHORE BEYOND

By this time Sol and the Honourable Edgar Mountclere had gone far on their journey into Wessex. Enckworth Court, Mountclere's destination, though several miles from Knollsea, was most easily accessible by the same route as that to the village, the latter being the place for which Sol was bound.

From the few words that passed between them on the way, Mountclere became more stubborn than ever in a belief that this was a carefully laid trap of the fair Ethelberta's to ensnare his brother without revealing to him her family ties, which it therefore behoved him to make clear, with the utmost force of representation, before the fatal union had been contracted. Being himself the viscount's only remaining brother and near relative, the disinterestedness of his motives may be left to imagination; that there was much real excuse for his conduct must, however, be borne in mind. Whether his attempt would prevent the union was another question: he believed that, conjoined with his personal influence over the viscount, and the importation of Sol as a firebrand to throw between the betrothed pair, it might do so.

About half-an-hour before sunset the two individuals, linked by their differences, reached the point of railway at which the branch to Sandbourne left the main line. They had taken tickets for Sandbourne,

intending to go thence to Knollsea by the steamer that plied between the two places during the summer months--making this a short and direct route. But it occurred to Mountclere on the way that, summer being over, the steamer might possibly have left off running, the wind might be too high for a small boat, and no large one might be at hand for hire: therefore it would be safer to go by train to Anglebury, and the remaining sixteen miles by driving over the hills, even at a great loss of time.

Accident, however, determined otherwise. They were in the station at the junction, inquiring of an official if the Speedwell had ceased to sail, when a countryman who had just come up from Sandbourne stated that, though the Speedwell had left off for the year, there was that day another steamer at Sandbourne. This steamer would of necessity return to Knollsea that evening, partly because several people from that place had been on board, and also because the Knollsea folk were waiting for groceries and draperies from London: there was not an ounce of tea or a hundredweight of coal in the village, owing to the recent winds, which had detained the provision parcels at Sandbourne, and kept the colliers up-channel until the change of weather this day. To introduce necessaries by a roundabout land journey was not easy when they had been ordered by the other and habitual route. The boat returned at six o'clock.

So on they went to Sandbourne, driving off to the pier directly they reached that place, for it was getting towards night. The steamer was

there, as the man had told them, much to the relief of Sol, who, being extremely anxious to enter Knollsea before a late hour, had known that this was the only way in which it could be done.

Some unforeseen incident delayed the boat, and they walked up and down the pier to wait. The prospect was gloomy enough. The wind was north-east; the sea along shore was a chalky-green, though comparatively calm, this part of the coast forming a shelter from wind in its present quarter. The clouds had different velocities, and some of them shone with a coppery glare, produced by rays from the west which did not enter the inferior atmosphere at all. It was reflected on the distant waves in patches, with an effect as if the waters were at those particular spots stained with blood. This departed, and what daylight was left to the earth came from strange and unusual quarters of the heavens. The zenith would be bright, as if that were the place of the sun; then all overhead would close, and a whiteness in the east would give the appearance of morning; while a bank as thick as a wall barricaded the west, which looked as if it had no acquaintance with sunsets, and would blush red no more.

'Any other passengers?' shouted the master of the steamboat. 'We must be off: it may be a dirty night.'

Sol and Mountclere went on board, and the pier receded in the dusk.

'Shall we have any difficulty in getting into Knollsea Bay?' said

Mountclere.

'Not if the wind keeps where it is for another hour or two.'

'I fancy it is shifting to the east'ard,' said Sol.

The captain looked as if he had thought the same thing.

'I hope I shall be able to get home to-night,' said a Knollsea woman. 'My little children be left alone. Your mis'ess is in a bad way, too--isn't she, skipper?'

'Yes.'

'And you've got the doctor from Sandbourne aboard, to tend her?'

'Yes.'

'Then you'll be sure to put into Knollsea, if you can?'

'Yes. Don't be alarmed, ma'am. We'll do what we can. But no one must boast.'

The skipper's remark was the result of an observation that the wind had at last flown to the east, the single point of the compass whence it could affect Knollsea Bay. The result of this change was soon

perceptible. About midway in their transit the land elbowed out to a bold chalk promontory; beyond this stretched a vertical wall of the same cliff, in a line parallel with their course. In fair weather it was possible and customary to steer close along under this hoary facade for the distance of a mile, there being six fathoms of water within a few boats' lengths of the precipice. But it was an ugly spot at the best of times, landward no less than seaward, the cliff rounding off at the top in vegetation, like a forehead with low-grown hair, no defined edge being provided as a warning to unwary pedestrians on the downs above.

As the wind sprung up stronger, white clots could be discerned at the water level of the cliff, rising and falling against the black band of shaggy weed that formed a sort of skirting to the base of the wall. They were the first-fruits of the new east blast, which shaved the face of the cliff like a razor--gatherings of foam in the shape of heads, shoulders, and arms of snowy whiteness, apparently struggling to rise from the deeps, and ever sinking back to their old levels again. They reminded an observer of a drowning scene in a picture of the Deluge. At some points the face of rock was hollowed into gaping caverns, and the water began to thunder into these with a leap that was only topped by the rebound seaward again. The vessel's head was kept a little further to sea, but beyond that everything went on as usual.

The precipice was still in view, and before it several huge columns of rock appeared, detached from the mass behind. Two of these were particularly noticeable in the grey air--one vertical, stout and square;

the other slender and tapering. They were individualized as husband and wife by the coast men. The waves leapt up their sides like a pack of hounds; this, however, though fearful in its boisterousness, was nothing to the terrible games that sometimes went on round the knees of those giants in stone. Yet it was sufficient to cause the course of the frail steamboat to be altered yet a little more--from south-west-by-south to south-by-west--to give the breakers a still wider berth.

'I wish we had gone by land, sir; 'twould have been surer play,' said Sol to Mountclere, a cat-and-dog friendship having arisen between them.

'Yes,' said Mountclere. 'Knollsea is an abominable place to get into with an east wind blowing, they say.'

Another circumstance conspired to make their landing more difficult, which Mountclere knew nothing of. With the wind easterly, the highest sea prevailed in Knollsea Bay from the slackening of flood-tide to the first hour of ebb. At that time the water outside stood without a current, and ridges and hollows chased each other towards the beach unchecked. When the tide was setting strong up or down Channel its flow across the mouth of the bay thrust aside, to some extent, the landward plunge of the waves.

We glance for a moment at the state of affairs on the land they were nearing.

This was the time of year to know the truth about the inner nature and character of Knollsea; for to see Knollsea smiling to the summer sun was to see a courtier before a king; Knollsea was not to be known by such simple means. The half-dozen detached villas used as lodging-houses in the summer, standing aloof from the cots of the permanent race, rose in the dusk of this gusty evening, empty, silent, damp, and dark as tombs. The gravel walks leading to them were invaded by leaves and tufts of grass. As the darkness thickened the wind increased, and each blast raked the iron railings before the houses till they hummed as if in a song of derision. Certainly it seemed absurd at this time of year that human beings should expect comfort in a spot capable of such moods as these.

However, one of the houses looked cheerful, and that was the dwelling to which Ethelberta had gone. Its gay external colours might as well have been black for anything that could be seen of them now, but an unblinded window revealed inside it a room bright and warm. It was illuminated by firelight only. Within, Ethelberta appeared against the curtains, close to the glass. She was watching through a binocular a faint light which had become visible in the direction of the bluff far away over the bay.

'Here is the Spruce at last, I think,' she said to her sister, who was by the fire. 'I hope they will be able to land the things I have ordered. They are on board I know.'

The wind continued to rise till at length something from the lungs of the

gale alighted like a feather upon the pane, and remained there sticking. Seeing the substance, Ethelberta opened the window to secure it. The fire roared and the pictures kicked the walls; she closed the sash, and brought to the light a crisp fragment of foam.

'How suddenly the sea must have risen,' said Picotee.

The servant entered the room. 'Please, mis'ess says she is afraid you won't have your things to-night, 'm. They say the steamer can't land, and mis'ess wants to know if she can do anything?'

'It is of no consequence,' said Ethelberta. 'They will come some time, unless they go to the bottom.'

The girl left the room. 'Shall we go down to the shore and see what the night is like?' said Ethelberta. 'This is the last opportunity I shall have.'

'Is it right for us to go, considering you are to be married to-morrow?' said Picotee, who had small affection for nature in this mood.

Her sister laughed. 'Let us put on our cloaks--nobody will know us. I am sorry to leave this grim and primitive place, even for Enckworth Court.'

They wrapped themselves up, and descended the hill.



On drawing near the battling line of breakers which marked the meeting of sea and land they could perceive within the nearly invisible horizon an equilateral triangle of lights. It was formed of three stars, a red on the one side, a green on the other, and a white on the summit. This, composed of mast-head and side lamps, was all that was visible of the Spruce, which now faced end-on about half-a-mile distant, and was still nearing the pier. The girls went further, and stood on the foreshore, listening to the din. Seaward appeared nothing distinct save a black horizontal band embodying itself out of the grey water, strengthening its blackness, and enlarging till it looked like a nearing wall. It was the concave face of a coming wave. On its summit a white edging arose with the aspect of a lace frill; it broadened, and fell over the front with a terrible concussion. Then all before them was a sheet of whiteness, which spread with amazing rapidity, till they found themselves standing in the midst of it, as in a field of snow. Both felt an insidious chill encircling their ankles, and they rapidly ran up the beach.

'You girls, come away there, or you'll be washed off: what need have ye for going so near?'

Ethelberta recognized the stentorian voice as that of Captain Flower, who, with a party of boatmen, was discovered to be standing near, under the shelter of a wall. He did not know them in the gloom, and they took care that he should not. They retreated further up the beach, when the hissing fleece of froth slid again down the shingle, dragging the pebbles

under it with a rattle as of a beast gnawing bones.

The spot whereon the men stood was called 'Down-under-wall;' it was a nook commanding a full view of the bay, and hither the nautical portion of the village unconsciously gravitated on windy afternoons and nights, to discuss past disasters in the reticent spirit induced by a sense that they might at any moment be repeated. The stranger who should walk the shore on roaring and sobbing November eves when there was not light sufficient to guide his footsteps, and muse on the absoluteness of the solitude, would be surprised by a smart 'Good-night' being returned from this corner in company with the echo of his tread. In summer the six or eight perennial figures stood on the breezy side of the wall--in winter and in rain to leeward; but no weather was known to dislodge them.

'I had no sooner come ashore than the wind began to fly round,' said the previous speaker; 'and it must have been about the time they were off Old-Harry Point. "She'll put back for certain," I said; and I had no more thought o' seeing her than John's set-net that was carried round the point o' Monday.'

'Poor feller: his wife being in such a state makes him anxious to land if 'a can: that's what 'tis, plain enough.'

'Why that?' said Flower.

'The doctor's aboard, 'a believe: "I'll have the most understanding man

in Sandbourne, cost me little or much," he said.'

"'Tis all over and she's better,' said the other. 'I called half-an-hour afore dark.'

Flower, being an experienced man, knew how the judgment of a ship's master was liable to be warped by family anxieties, many instances of the same having occurred in the history of navigation. He felt uneasy, for he knew the deceit and guile of this bay far better than did the master of the Spruce, who, till within a few recent months, had been a stranger to the place. Indeed, it was the bay which had made Flower what he was, instead of a man in thriving retirement. The two great ventures of his life had been blown ashore and broken up within that very semicircle. The sturdy sailor now stood with his eyes fixed on the triangle of lights which showed that the steamer had not relinquished her intention of bringing up inside the pier if possible; his right hand was in his pocket, where it played with a large key which lay there. It was the key of the lifeboat shed, and Flower was coxswain. His musing was on the possibility of a use for it this night.

It appeared that the captain of the Spruce was aiming to pass in under the lee of the pier; but a strong current of four or five knots was running between the piles, drifting the steamer away at every attempt as soon as she slowed. To come in on the other side was dangerous, the hull of the vessel being likely to crash against and overthrow the fragile erection, with damage to herself also. Flower, who had disappeared for a

few minutes, now came back.

'It is just possible I can make 'em hear with the trumpet, now they be to leeward,' he said, and proceeded with two or three others to grope his way out upon the pier, which consisted simply of a row of rotten piles covered with rotten planking, no balustrade of any kind existing to keep the unwary from tumbling off. At the water level the piles were eaten away by the action of the sea to about the size of a man's wrist, and at every fresh influx the whole structure trembled like a spider's web. In this lay the danger of making fast, for a strong pull from a headfast rope might drag the erection completely over. Flower arrived at the end, where a lantern hung.

'Spruce ahoy!' he blared through the speaking trumpet two or three times.

There seemed to be a reply of some sort from the steamer.

'Tuesday's gale hev loosened the pier, Cap'n Ounce; the bollards be too weak to make fast to: must land in boats if ye will land, but dangerous; yer wife is out of danger, and 'tis a boy-y-y-y!'

Ethelberta and Picotee were at this time standing on the beach a hundred and fifty yards off. Whether or not the master of the steamer received the information volunteered by Flower, the two girls saw the triangle of lamps get narrow at its base, reduce themselves to two in a vertical line, then to one, then to darkness. The Spruce had turned her head from

Knollsea.

'They have gone back, and I shall not have my wedding things after all!' said Ethelberta. 'Well, I must do without them.'

'You see, 'twas best to play sure,' said Flower to his comrades, in a tone of complacency. 'They might have been able to do it, but 'twas risky. The shop-folk be out of stock, I hear, and the visiting lady up the hill is terribly in want of clothes, so 'tis said. But what's that? Ounce ought to have put back afore.'

Then the lantern which hung at the end of the jetty was taken down, and the darkness enfolded all around from view. The bay became nothing but a voice, the foam an occasional touch upon the face, the Spruce an imagination, the pier a memory. Everything lessened upon the senses but one; that was the wind. It mauled their persons like a hand, and caused every scrap of their raiment to tug westward. To stand with the face to sea brought semi-suffocation, from the intense pressure of air.

The boatmen retired to their position under the wall, to lounge again in silence. Conversation was not considered necessary: their sense of each other's presence formed a kind of conversation. Meanwhile Picotee and Ethelberta went up the hill.

'If your wedding were going to be a public one, what a misfortune this delay of the packages would be,' said Picotee.

'Yes,' replied the elder.

'I think the bracelet the prettiest of all the presents he brought to-day--do you?'

'It is the most valuable.'

'Lord Mountclere is very kind, is he not? I like him a great deal better than I did--do you, Berta?'

'Yes, very much better,' said Ethelberta, warming a little. 'If he were not so suspicious at odd moments I should like him exceedingly. But I must cure him of that by a regular course of treatment, and then he'll be very nice.'

'For an old man. He likes you better than any young man would take the trouble to do. I wish somebody else were old too.'

'He will be some day.'

'Yes, but--'

'Never mind: time will straighten many crooked things.'

'Do you think Lord Mountclere has reached home by this time?'

'I should think so: though I believe he had to call at the parsonage before leaving Knollsea.'

'Had he? What for?'

'Why, of course somebody must--'

'O yes. Do you think anybody in Knollsea knows it is going to be except us and the parson?'

'I suppose the clerk knows.'

'I wonder if a lord has ever been married so privately before.'

'Frequently: when he marries far beneath him, as in this case. But even if I could have had it, I should not have liked a showy wedding. I have had no experience as a bride except in the private form of the ceremony.'

'Berta, I am sometimes uneasy about you even now and I want to ask you one thing, if I may. Are you doing this for my sake? Would you have married Mr. Julian if it had not been for me?'

'It is difficult to say exactly. It is possible that if I had had no relations at all, I might have married him. And I might not.'

'I don't intend to marry.'

'In that case you will live with me at Enckworth. However, we will leave such details till the ground-work is confirmed. When we get indoors will you see if the boxes have been properly corded, and are quite ready to be sent for? Then come in and sit by the fire, and I'll sing some songs to you.'

'Sad ones, you mean.'

'No, they shall not be sad.'

'Perhaps they may be the last you will ever sing to me.'

'They may be. Such a thing has occurred.'

'But we will not think so. We'll suppose you are to sing many to me yet.'

'Yes. There's good sense in that, Picotee. In a world where the blind only are cheerful we should all do well to put out our eyes. There, I did not mean to get into this state: forgive me, Picotee. It is because I have had a thought--why I cannot tell--that as much as this man brings to me in rank and gifts he may take out of me in tears.'

'Berta!'



'But there's no reason in it--not any; for not in a single matter does what has been supply us with any certain ground for knowing what will be in the world. I have seen marriages where happiness might have been said to be ensured, and they have been all sadness afterwards; and I have seen those in which the prospect was black as night, and they have led on to a time of sweetness and comfort. And I have seen marriages neither joyful nor sorry, that have become either as accident forced them to become, the persons having no voice in it at all. Well, then, why should I be afraid to make a plunge when chance is as trustworthy as calculation?'

'If you don't like him well enough, don't have him, Berta. There's time enough to put it off even now.'

'O no. I would not upset a well-considered course on the haste of an impulse. Our will should withstand our misgivings. Now let us see if all has been packed, and then we'll sing.'

That evening, while the wind was wheeling round and round the dwelling, and the calm eye of the lighthouse afar was the single speck perceptible of the outside world from the door of Ethelberta's temporary home, the music of songs mingled with the stroke of the wind across the iron railings, and was swept on in the general tide of the gale, and the noise of the rolling sea, till not the echo of a tone remained.

An hour before this singing, an old gentleman might have been seen to

alight from a little one-horse brougham, and enter the door of Knollsea parsonage. He was bent upon obtaining an entrance to the vicar's study without giving his name.

But it happened that the vicar's wife was sitting in the front room, making a pillow-case for the children's bed out of an old surplice which had been excommunicated the previous Easter; she heard the newcomer's voice through the partition, started, and went quickly to her husband, who was where he ought to have been, in his study. At her entry he looked up with an abstracted gaze, having been lost in meditation over a little schooner which he was attempting to rig for their youngest boy. At a word from his wife on the suspected name of the visitor, he resumed his earlier occupation of inserting a few strong sentences, full of the observation of maturer life, between the lines of a sermon written during his first years of ordination, in order to make it available for the coming Sunday. His wife then vanished with the little ship in her hand, and the visitor appeared. A talk went on in low tones.

After a ten minutes' stay he departed as secretly as he had come. His errand was the cause of much whispered discussion between the vicar and his wife during the evening, but nothing was said concerning it to the outside world.