



SATURDAY, DECEMBER 12, '08.

HIS VOICE.

By HAROLD HARMER.

CORNWALL, England, and Wales are very similar in one respect—the inhabitants of both are very fond and very proud of their singing. In Cornwall they call it a "gift," and a gift is supposed to run in families. That was really how the idea that he could sing got so firmly implanted in Bob's head.

He took his place in the choir of the little Wesleyan chapel, and to one liked to hurt his feelings or blinded till Hilda Trevena, who had been away teaching in London, came home to look after her widowed father. Quite naturally she took command of the whole fish fishing village as well as her father and incidentally became organist of the unpretentious choir.

Now, Hilda Trevena was a very fine, lovable maid of twenty-two, and Bob Pengelly was a fine youth of much the same age. It was only to be expected, therefore, that on summer evenings they should fall into a habit of strolling along the cliffs. It was only to be expected also that one night Bob should find himself tongue tied and yet madly anxious to speak and should finally blurt out:

"Hilda, I love 'ee!" Two nights later, as they sat silent for a minute or two after a couple of hours of lover talk, Hilda, from the best of motives, blundered.

"Hilda," she said, "now we are engaged we can speak plainly to each other. Would you mind not singing in the choir any more?"

"Why, what do 'ee mean?" he exclaimed in astonishment. "Not sing in the choir when I've sung there since I were ten?"

"You see, dear, I want to make our choir a special one. I don't want any but really good voices in it."

"Every one 'll tell 'ee as I've always had as fine a voice as any hereabouts," he protested.

"It may have been good once, Bob," she said gently, "but it's certainly not good now."

He took his arm from around her waist and sat up stiffly.

"I certainly never expected to hear from you, Hilda, that I can't sing!" he said.

"Don't be angry," she pleaded. The end of it was a quarrel—a real, hot Cornish quarrel, in which each said twice as much as either meant, in as nasty a way as possible.

Hilda's father was undoubtedly the leading man of Polpenny, since he was the owner of the fish factory.

The news that his daughter's engagement to Bob Pengelly had been suddenly broken off came at a time when he was too much perturbed to give it much attention. A certain fishing company, owning a large steam fleet, having a glut of pilchards, had telegraphed him an offer of a cargo at an extremely low price. He had wired back his acceptance, and the steamer was due to arrive from Plymouth about half past 10. And during breakfast, while Hilda was telling her news and trying to pretend to him and herself that she did not care, his thoughts were mainly occupied with wondering what the fishermen of Polpenny would say and do when the steamer appeared.

They were all drift net fishermen at Polpenny, and the pilchard catch was their principal means of livelihood. A bad season meant a hard winter—pinched cheeks for the mothers, tightened belts for the fathers and no boots for the children. The fish factory was their only market. All their fish were sold for cash to John Trevena. If he bought the fish he needed for his customers elsewhere at a lower price, what was to become of the Polpenny fishermen?

As John Trevena drank his coffee that morning he regretted that he had accepted the steam company's offer. When the steamer hove in sight, a group of highly indignant fishermen were waiting on the quay of the little harbor to welcome it.

"What's to do, lads?" asked one. "Will 'ee stand quiet and see the bread taken out o' our children's mouths?"

"Remember the winter that's coming," said another, "and let's pitch his fish over the side dreckly he comes into harbor!"

"Nay; let's prevent him landin' at all," suggested a third. "Let's out w' the boom, so's he can't get in!"

The entrance to Polpenny harbor was a passage between two rocky cliffs, and the boom was a heavy beam which was placed across this entrance on stormy nights to serve the double purpose of breaking the force of the waves and preventing any of the boats being washed out to sea.

The village policeman, who had been listening with interest, entered an official protest.

"Look here, mates," he said. "I don't say as I don't sympathize w' 'ee, but the law's the law, and I've got to do my duty. Any one as illegally prevents a ship from entering will have to be arrested."

"All right, Ned!" exclaimed Bob Pengelly. "Us won't do anything illegal!"

"Illegal or not, us have got to keep that chap hanging about outside with his cargo till it's gone bad!" said an old fisherman surlily.

"He's took up w' Trevena's daughter," jeered another, "so o' course he stands up for the old skinflint!"

"It's all off with Trevena's daughter," declared Bob hotly. "and I be going to teach Trevena a legal lesson all by myself!"

He jumped into a big, clumsy, leaky old rowing boat, such as you may see rotting in any harbor. She was already half full, and he made no attempt to bail her out, but pushed off, standing in water up to his knees. By the time he had poled the boat across the basin she was in imminent danger of sinking, but he managed to keep her afloat till the fairway was reached and then let her sink as nearly as possible in the middle and swim back to his mates on the quay.

"There!" he laughed to the constable. "I couldn't help having an accident and getting stuck right in the harbor mouth, could I?"

With her deeper draft no steamer could enter that shallow little harbor now, however high the tide, but the light, handy little fisher boats could go in and out as usual.

"He's done me," said John Trevena to his daughter. "By sundown they'll have to throw the lot overboard, and I shall have to pay just the same."

"It was too bad of you, father, to buy them at all," Hilda answered. "You ought to have thought of the fishermen."

"Hold your tongue!" he said angrily. "Can't I make a bargain when it's offered me?"

He stood there thinking.

"That fish could be landed in the steamer's boats as sure as my name's John!" he announced. He took down his fowling piece and deliberately loaded it.

"On, father!" Hilda exclaimed, aghast. "Be quiet!" he snapped and stalked out to the group on the quay.

"Those pilchards are coming ashore now, my lads," he said determinedly.

Cowed, each afraid that if John Trevena fired he would be hit, they stayed and watched in sullen silence till the last boat load had been carried into the factory.

Fearing that the factory would be broken into in the night and the fish destroyed, John Trevena insisted upon keeping watch there with his fowling piece.

Hilda, alone in the house, tossed unhappily in her bed. She was utterly miserable and could not sleep.

Suddenly she jumped out of bed and ran to the window, frightened by an unnatural glare in the sky. The fish factory was on fire. Some ungovernable spirits among the fishermen had chosen that way of revenging themselves.

Hastily throwing on some clothes, she rushed out, making her way through the crowd of onlookers straight to Bob Pengelly, their quarrel forgotten, her instinct urging her to turn to the man she loved.

"What's my father?" she cried, laying a trembling hand upon his arm.

"Isn't he at home in bed?" Bob queried anxiously.

"No," she moaned. "He would spend the night in the factory on guard. Oh, save him, Bob!" she pleaded. "He didn't really mean any harm! Don't let him be burned to death!"

"I'll save him, dear," Bob answered shortly. "Th's be none o' my work!"

And without more ado he plunged into the flames.

The acrid smoke which arose from the coarse pilchard oil as it burned and the hot air he had perforce to breathe scorched his lungs, but he groped about until he found the body of John Trevena lying on the floor. Each breath was like a stab with his eyes, blindly, desperately, he dragged the unconscious man along until his head swam and his legs gave way beneath him. Struggling up again by a superhuman effort, he managed to regain the open air with his burden and fell in a dead faint at Hilda's feet.

An hour later he lay in a bed in John Trevena's house, with Hilda and the doctor standing over him.

"Now I am allowed to speak again," said Bob Pengelly in a thin, husky whisper, "I should like to tell you how grateful I am and how much I love you!"

"It is I who should be grateful to you for saving my father's life," said Hilda, leaning down so that her face was close to his.

He raised his head and kissed her full upon the lips.

"There, dear!" he whispered in the same wheezy, asthmatical voice. "Us'll never quarrel again. And you'll try, sweetheart, to learn to like my singing, won't you?"

"Your—your voice will always be like this now," she faltered. "You'll never be able to sing any more!"

"Never be able to sing any more!" he echoed, his face falling at the thought of being thus forced to give up the only hobby of his life.

"Don't look so unhappy," Hilda begged. "You lost your voice doing a brave deed, and—and you'll have me, you know?"

"Yes," he responded more cheerfully. "I shall have you, and I shall also have the memory of how I could sing once to look back upon!"

Why She Could Not Tell.

"What was the text, Jane?" asked Mr. Tribbles as his wife came home from church.

Mrs. Tribbles had to confess that she had forgotten it. "Or, rather," she added, "I lost it. In fact, I didn't get it."

"When I fail to remember the text you always want to know why. What was the reason that you didn't get it?"

"Something happened that drove it from my mind."

"What was it that happened?"

"Well, if you must know," said his wife, rubbing her nose, "just as the preacher was about to give out the text a moth flew along right in front of me. You know well enough what a woman does when she sees a moth of course I couldn't clap my hands there in church and crush it between them, but I spread out my handkerchief, made a quick motion and folded it together. Then I pressed it tightly. I got the moth, but I lost the text."—Youth's Companion.

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