

Billy Budd -- Excerpts of Two Scenes

Captain Vere and Lieutenant Seymour - Conversation before the Court Martial

Lt. Seymour: Why the drumhead court martial? Could the prisoner be kept under guard and the whole matter referred to the Admiralty board when we reach port?

Captain Vere: When we reach port? We do not go to port; we sail into battle and battle makes a mockery of justice. We must cling to what vestiges of order we can and it must be done quickly.

Lt. Seymour: Since when is justice compatible with speed?

Captain Vere: You realize as well as I do that we were spared mutiny aboard this ship simply because we were not in port. But the men know. Oh they know. Rumors fly over the empty sea and with them the temper of the times we live in.

Lt. Seymour: And so we're afraid. Justice must be not only quick but also expedient.

Captain Vere: What did you say?

Lt. Seymour: I apologize, Sir, for the manner but not for the matter. Claggart would have hung from the yardarm for false witness if Billy hadn't killed him.

Captain Vere: Yes, he would have done but by fair process of law. Budd has prevented that and he's turned the law against himself. You can't condemn the boy for answering with his arm for lack of words. He was tempted beyond endurance.

Lt. Seymour: The motive was clearly justified.

Captain Vere: Ay, but was the act?

Lt. Seymour: This master at arms you know him for a liar, a vicious dog.

Captain Vere: A dog's obeyed in office. Claggart was authority. Seymour, trial there must be and you cannot make the dead stand trial.

Lt. Seymour: So the living must stand trial for him, for a dead man's crimes. It's more than any man can have to answer for Captain, to his god and even to his king.

The Drumhead Court Martial

Mr. Ratcliffe: . . . Claggart was killed because Budd couldn't speak. In that sense, that he stammers, he's a cripple. You don't hang a man for that, for speaking the only way he could.

Mr. Wyatt: If you condemn him it's the same thing as condoning the lie the Master at Arms clearly told. I'd have struck him myself. The boy is clearly innocent, he struck in self-defense.

[The court is ready to acquit. Vere stops them and refers to his duty which he must perform.]

Captain Vere: Budd killed a man, his superior officer. . . . Your verdict sets him free, and so would I wish to do. But are we free to choose as we would do if we were private citizens? The Admiralty has its code. Do you think it cares who Budd is; who you and I are?

Lt. Seymour: We don't forget that Sir. Surely even within that code, each crime is different. We can't ignore the facts.

Captain Vere: The facts, come. You know the facts which are the Mutiny Act provisions. At sea in time of war an impressed man strikes a superior officer and the blow is fatal. Now, according to the Act, the mere fact of the blow would be enough to hang him, be it fatal or no. Now, the men know this as well as you and I. They know the penalty for Budd's action.

Lt. Seymour: But they know Budd, Sir, Claggart, too, I dare say; as well as any dry letter of the law. They would applaud the decision that frees Budd. They'd thank us for it and fight the better when the time comes.

Mr. Wyatt: String him to a yard and they'll turn around and rescue him and string us up instead.

Mr. Ratcliffe: Aye, that's the point. It's twice as dangerous to hang the boy as it is to let him go.

Captain Vere: That's possible Ratcliffe. Whatever step we take the risk is great. But it is ours. That's what makes us officers. If out of lawful rigor mutiny comes, there is no blame for us. But if in fear miscalled a kind of mercy, we pardon Budd against specific order and then the men revolt, how culpable and weak our verdict will appear.

Mr. Ratcliffe: I concede that, Sir, but this case is exceptional and pity, if we are men, must move us Captain.

Captain Vere: So I am moved, Ratcliffe, but we cannot have warm hearts betraying heads that should be cool.

Mr. Ratcliffe: Officers are only men in uniform. We have our standards, ethics, scruples.

Captain Vere: Challenge your scruples. Come, do they mean something like this? Can we adjudge to summary and shameful death a fellow creature who we believe to be innocent before God? Does that state your case rightly? Acquit him then you say, as innocent.

Mr. Ratcliffe: Yes, Oh, I know the articles prescribe death for what Budd has done

Mr. Wyatt: Oh, stow the Articles, they don't account for such a case as this. You said yourself, sir, Budd is innocent.

Captain Vere: In a court more merciful than a martial one I'd use my conscience. I'd even set him free.

Lt. Seymour: When Claggart told his lies, the case went beyond the scope of military justice.

Captain Vere: There Seymour you reveal the weakness of your argument. Here nothing is beyond the scope of military justice. When we first put this on we resigned our freedom. The gold we wear shows that we serve the King, the law. For the term of my active life I am bound by an oath that I took when I was half the age of any of you here. And now for the first time in my life I feel the full weight of those words I spoke so solemnly as a midshipman, ignorant of their meaning, with nothing more than dreams of glory in my mind. Yes, but gentlemen, you took that oath as well. There's no escape.

Mr. Wyatt: All I know is that I can't sit by and see an innocent man hanged.

Mr. Ratcliffe: Who would gain by Budd's death? The admiralty?

Mr. Wyatt: You want to make us murderers.

Captain Vere: What is this ship you serve on, an arc of peace? Go count her guns and then tell your conscience to lie quiet, if you can.

Mr. Ratcliffe: But that is war; this would be downright killing.

Lt. Seymour: But what is war? It's all war. War to the death for all of us.

Captain Vere: So you see that Seymour. That this war began before our time . . .

Lt. Seymour: . . . and will end long after it.

Captain Vere: If ever men deserved to be at peace. . . .

Mr. Ratcliffe: Couldn't we mitigate the penalty if we find him guilty?

Lt. Seymour: No, Ratcliffe, the penalty is prescribed.

Mr. Ratcliffe: I'd like to think about it Captain. I'm not sure.

Captain Vere: The French are not far off. Soon the men will know what happened. Our consciences are private matters Ratcliffe but we are public men. Dare we give our consciences precedence over the code that made us officers and which called this case to trial? Dare we?

Mr. Ratcliffe: No, sir. [Ratcliffe tears up his not guilty verdict.]

Mr. Wyatt: Can you stand Budd's murder on your conscience. . . . I say let him go. . . . I won't bear a hand to hang a man I know is innocent. My blood's not cold for that. I cannot give the kind of judgment that you wish to force upon us. I beg to be excused from sitting on this court martial.

Lt. Seymour: . . . We do not deal with justice here but the law.

Mr. Wyatt: Was not the one conceived to serve the other?

Captain Vere: . . . Can't you see that you must strip off the uniform you wear and then your flesh before you can escape the case at issue here? Decide you must . . . or else reason with us. Show us how to save the boy without setting aside our function. Do you think that Seymour or Ratcliffe here and I wouldn't save the boy if we could find a way consistent with our duty? Perhaps you can do this. Can you do this? Speak, man, speak. Show us how. Save him . . . and you save us all.

[Mr. Wyatt in agony tears up the sheet with his not guilty written on it.]

Captain Vere: Do not think me pitiless in thus demanding sentence on a luckless boy? I feel as you do for him. And for myself, revulsion, shame and rage.