

IV. WHO WERE PRESENT AT THE MILLER'S LITTLE ENTERTAINMENT

When the group entered the presence of the company a lull in the conversation was caused by the sight of new visitors, and (of course) by the charm of Anne's appearance; until the old men, who had daughters of their own, perceiving that she was only a half-formed girl, resumed their tales and toss-potting with unconcern.

Miller Loveday had fraternized with half the soldiers in the camp since their arrival, and the effect of this upon his party was striking--both chromatically and otherwise. Those among the guests who first attracted the eye were the sergeants and sergeant-majors of Loveday's regiment, fine hearty men, who sat facing the candles, entirely resigned to physical comfort. Then there were other non-commissioned officers, a German, two Hungarians, and a Swede, from the foreign hussars--young men with a look of sadness on their faces, as if they did not much like serving so far from home. All of them spoke English fairly well. Old age was represented by Simon Burden the pensioner, and the shady side of fifty by Corporal Tullidge, his friend and neighbour, who was hard of hearing, and sat with his hat on over a red cotton handkerchief that was wound several times round his head. These two veterans were employed as watchers at the neighbouring beacon, which had lately been erected by the Lord-Lieutenant for firing whenever the descent on the coast should be made. They lived in a little hut on the hill, close by the heap of

faggots; but to-night they had found deputies to watch in their stead.

On a lower plane of experience and qualifications came neighbour James Comfort, of the Volunteers, a soldier by courtesy, but a blacksmith by rights; also William Tremlett and Anthony Cripplestraw, of the local forces. The two latter men of war were dressed merely as villagers, and looked upon the regulars from a humble position in the background. The remainder of the party was made up of a neighbouring dairyman or two, and their wives, invited by the miller, as Anne was glad to see, that she and her mother should not be the only women there.

The elder Loveday apologized in a whisper to Mrs. Garland for the presence of the inferior villagers. 'But as they are learning to be brave defenders of their home and country, ma'am, as fast as they can master the drill, and have worked for me off and on these many years, I've asked 'em in, and thought you'd excuse it.'

'Certainly, Miller Loveday,' said the widow.

'And the same of old Burden and Tullidge. They have served well and long in the Foot, and even now have a hard time of it up at the beacon in wet weather. So after giving them a meal in the kitchen I just asked 'em in to hear the singing. They faithfully promise that as soon as ever the gunboats appear in view, and they have fired the beacon, to run down here first, in case we shouldn't see it. 'Tis worth while to be friendly with 'em, you see, though their tempers be queer.'

'Quite worth while, miller,' said she.

Anne was rather embarrassed by the presence of the regular military in such force, and at first confined her words to the dairymen's wives she was acquainted with, and to the two old soldiers of the parish.

'Why didn't ye speak to me afore, chiel?' said one of these, Corporal Tullidge, the elderly man with the hat, while she was talking to old Simon Burden. 'I met ye in the lane yesterday,' he added reproachfully, 'but ye didn't notice me at all.'

'I am very sorry for it,' she said; but, being afraid to shout in such a company, the effect of her remark upon the corporal was as if she had not spoken at all.

'You was coming along with yer head full of some high notions or other no doubt,' continued the uncompromising corporal in the same loud voice. 'Ah, 'tis the young bucks that get all the notice nowadays, and old folks are quite forgot! I can mind well enough how young Bob Loveday used to lie in wait for ye.'

Anne blushed deeply, and stopped his too excursive discourse by hastily saying that she always respected old folks like him. The corporal thought she inquired why he always kept his hat on, and answered that it was because his head was injured at Valenciennes, in July, Ninety-three.

'We were trying to bomb down the tower, and a piece of the shell struck me. I was no more nor less than a dead man for two days. If it hadn't a been for that and my smashed arm I should have come home none the worse for my five-and-twenty years' service.'

'You have got a silver plate let into yer head, haven't ye, corpel?' said Anthony Cripplestraw, who had drawn near. 'I have heard that the way they morticed yer skull was a beautiful piece of workmanship. Perhaps the young woman would like to see the place? 'Tis a curious sight, Mis'ess Anne; you don't see such a wownd every day.'

'No, thank you,' said Anne hurriedly, dreading, as did all the young people of Overcombe, the spectacle of the corporal uncovered. He had never been seen in public without the hat and the handkerchief since his return in Ninety-four; and strange stories were told of the ghastliness of his appearance bare-headed, a little boy who had accidentally beheld him going to bed in that state having been frightened into fits.

'Well, if the young woman don't want to see yer head, maybe she'd like to hear yer arm?' continued Cripplestraw, earnest to please her.

'Hey?' said the corporal.

'Your arm hurt too?' cried Anne.

'Knocked to a pummy at the same time as my head,' said Tullidge dispassionately.

'Rattle yer arm, corpel, and show her,' said Cripplestraw.

'Yes, sure,' said the corporal, raising the limb slowly, as if the glory of exhibition had lost some of its novelty, though he was willing to oblige. Twisting it mercilessly about with his right hand he produced a crunching among the bones at every motion, Cripplestraw seeming to derive great satisfaction from the ghastly sound.

'How very shocking!' said Anne, painfully anxious for him to leave off.

'O, it don't hurt him, bless ye. Do it, corpel?' said Cripplestraw.

'Not a bit,' said the corporal, still working his arm with great energy.

'There's no life in the bones at all. No life in 'em, I tell her, corpel!'

'None at all.'

'They be as loose as a bag of ninepins,' explained Cripplestraw in continuation. 'You can feel 'em quite plain, Mis'ess Anne. If ye would like to, he'll undo his sleeve in a minute to oblege ye?'

'O no, no, please not! I quite understand,' said the young woman.

'Do she want to hear or see any more, or don't she?' the corporal inquired, with a sense that his time was getting wasted.

Anne explained that she did not on any account; and managed to escape from the corner.