

X. THE MATCH-MAKING VIRTUES OF A DOUBLE GARDEN

Anne was so flurried by the military incidents attending her return home that she was almost afraid to venture alone outside her mother's premises. Moreover, the numerous soldiers, regular and otherwise, that haunted Overcombe and its neighbourhood, were getting better acquainted with the villagers, and the result was that they were always standing at garden gates, walking in the orchards, or sitting gossiping just within cottage doors, with the bowls of their tobacco-pipes thrust outside for politeness' sake, that they might not defile the air of the household. Being gentlemen of a gallant and most affectionate nature, they naturally turned their heads and smiled if a pretty girl passed by, which was rather disconcerting to the latter if she were unused to society. Every belle in the village soon had a lover, and when the belles were all allotted those who scarcely deserved that title had their turn, many of the soldiers being not at all particular about half-an-inch of nose more or less, a trifling deficiency of teeth, or a larger crop of freckles than is customary in the Saxon race. Thus, with one and another, courtship began to be practised in Overcombe on rather a large scale, and the dispossessed young men who had been born in the place were left to take their walks alone, where, instead of studying the works of nature, they meditated gross outrages on the brave men who had been so good as to visit their village.

Anne watched these romantic proceedings from her window with much interest, and when she saw how triumphantly other handsome girls of the neighbourhood walked by on the gorgeous arms of Lieutenant Knockheelmann,

Cornet Flitzenhart, and Captain Klaspenkissen, of the thrilling York Hussars, who swore the most picturesque foreign oaths, and had a wonderful sort of estate or property called the Vaterland in their country across the sea, she was filled with a sense of her own loneliness. It made her think of things which she tried to forget, and to look into a little drawer at something soft and brown that lay in a curl there, wrapped in paper. At last she could bear it no longer, and went downstairs.

'Where are you going?' said Mrs. Garland.

'To see the folks, because I am so gloomy!'

'Certainly not at present, Anne.'

'Why not, mother?' said Anne, blushing with an indefinite sense of being very wicked.

'Because you must not. I have been going to tell you several times not to go into the street at this time of day. Why not walk in the morning? There's young Mr. Derriman would be glad to--'

'Don't mention him, mother, don't!'

'Well then, dear, walk in the garden.'

So poor Anne, who really had not the slightest wish to throw her heart away upon a soldier, but merely wanted to displace old thoughts by new, turned into the inner garden from day to day, and passed a good many hours there, the pleasant birds singing to her, and the delightful butterflies alighting on her hat, and the horrid ants running up her stockings.

This garden was undivided from Loveday's, the two having originally been the single garden of the whole house. It was a quaint old place, enclosed by a thorn hedge so shapely and dense from incessant clipping that the mill-boy could walk along the top without sinking in--a feat which he often performed as a means of filling out his day's work. The soil within was of that intense fat blackness which is only seen after a century of constant cultivation. The paths were grassed over, so that people came and went upon them without being heard. The grass harboured

slugs, and on this account the miller was going to replace it by gravel as soon as he had time; but as he had said this for thirty years without doing it, the grass and the slugs seemed likely to remain.

The miller's man attended to Mrs. Garland's piece of the garden as well

as to the larger portion, digging, planting, and weeding indifferently in both, the miller observing with reason that it was not worth while for a helpless widow lady to hire a man for her little plot when his man, working alongside, could tend it without much addition to his labour. The two households were on this account even more closely united in the garden than within the mill. Out there they were almost one family, and they talked from plot to plot with a zest and animation which Mrs. Garland could never have anticipated when she first removed thither after her husband's death.

The lower half of the garden, farthest from the road, was the most snug and sheltered part of this snug and sheltered enclosure, and it was well watered as the land of Lot. Three small brooks, about a yard wide, ran with a tinkling sound from side to side between the plots, crossing the path under wood slabs laid as bridges, and passing out of the garden through little tunnels in the hedge. The brooks were so far overhung at their brinks by grass and garden produce that, had it not been for their perpetual babbling, few would have noticed that they were there. This was where Anne liked best to linger when her excursions became restricted to her own premises; and in a spot of the garden not far removed the trumpet-major loved to linger also.

Having by virtue of his office no stable duty to perform, he came down from the camp to the mill almost every day; and Anne, finding that he adroitly walked and sat in his father's portion of the garden whenever she did so in the other half, could not help smiling and speaking to him.

So his epaulettes and blue jacket, and Anne's yellow gipsy hat, were often seen in different parts of the garden at the same time; but he never intruded into her part of the enclosure, nor did she into Loveday's. She always spoke to him when she saw him there, and he replied in deep, firm accents across the gooseberry bushes, or through the tall rows of flowering peas, as the case might be. He thus gave her accounts at fifteen paces of his experiences in camp, in quarters, in Flanders, and elsewhere; of the difference between line and column, of forced marches, billeting, and such-like, together with his hopes of promotion. Anne listened at first indifferently; but knowing no one else so good-natured and experienced, she grew interested in him as in a brother. By degrees his gold lace, buckles, and spurs lost all their strangeness and were as familiar to her as her own clothes.

At last Mrs. Garland noticed this growing friendship, and began to despair of her motherly scheme of uniting Anne to the moneyed Festus. Why she could not take prompt steps to check interference with her plans arose partly from her nature, which was the reverse of managing, and partly from a new emotional circumstance with which she found it difficult to reckon. The near neighbourhood that had produced the friendship of Anne for John Loveday was slowly effecting a warmer liking between her mother and his father.

Thus the month of July passed. The troop horses came with the regularity of clockwork twice a day down to drink under her window, and, as the

weather grew hotter, kicked up their heels and shook their heads furiously under the maddening sting of the dun-fly. The green leaves in the garden became of a darker dye, the gooseberries ripened, and the three brooks were reduced to half their winter volume.

At length the earnest trumpet-major obtained Mrs. Garland's consent to take her and her daughter to the camp, which they had not yet viewed from any closer point than their own windows. So one afternoon they went, the miller being one of the party. The villagers were by this time driving a roaring trade with the soldiers, who purchased of them every description of garden produce, milk, butter, and eggs at liberal prices. The figures of these rural sutlers could be seen creeping up the slopes, laden like bees, to a spot in the rear of the camp, where there was a kind of market-place on the greensward.

Mrs. Garland, Anne, and the miller were conducted from one place to another, and on to the quarter where the soldiers' wives lived who had not been able to get lodgings in the cottages near. The most sheltered place had been chosen for them, and snug huts had been built for their use by their husbands, of clods, hurdles, a little thatch, or whatever they could lay hands on. The trumpet-major conducted his friends thence to the large barn which had been appropriated as a hospital, and to the cottage with its windows bricked up, that was used as the magazine; then they inspected the lines of shining dark horses (each representing the then high figure of two-and-twenty guineas purchase money), standing patiently at the ropes which stretched from one picket-post to another, a

bank being thrown up in front of them as a protection at night.

They passed on to the tents of the German Legion, a well-grown and rather dandy set of men, with a poetical look about their faces which rendered them interesting to feminine eyes. Hanoverians, Saxons, Prussians, Swedes, Hungarians, and other foreigners were numbered in their ranks. They were cleaning arms, which they leant carefully against a rail when the work was complete.

On their return they passed the mess-house, a temporary wooden building with a brick chimney. As Anne and her companions went by, a group of three or four of the hussars were standing at the door talking to a dashing young man, who was expatiating on the qualities of a horse that one was inclined to buy. Anne recognized Festus Derriman in the seller, and Cripplestraw was trotting the animal up and down. As soon as she caught the yeoman's eye he came forward, making some friendly remark to the miller, and then turning to Miss Garland, who kept her eyes steadily fixed on the distant landscape till he got so near that it was impossible to do so longer. Festus looked from Anne to the trumpet-major, and from the trumpet-major back to Anne, with a dark expression of face, as if he suspected that there might be a tender understanding between them.

'Are you offended with me?' he said to her in a low voice of repressed resentment.

'No,' said Anne.

'When are you coming to the hall again?'

'Never, perhaps.'

'Nonsense, Anne,' said Mrs. Garland, who had come near, and smiled pleasantly on Festus. 'You can go at any time, as usual.'

'Let her come with me now, Mrs. Garland; I should be pleased to walk along with her. My man can lead home the horse.'

'Thank you, but I shall not come,' said Miss Anne coldly.

The widow looked unhappily in her daughter's face, distressed between her desire that Anne should encourage Festus, and her wish to consult Anne's own feelings.

'Leave her alone, leave her alone,' said Festus, his gaze blackening.

'Now I think of it I am glad she can't come with me, for I am engaged;' and he stalked away.

Anne moved on with her mother, young Loveday silently following, and they began to descend the hill.

'Well, where's Mr. Loveday?' asked Mrs. Garland.

'Father's behind,' said John.

Mrs. Garland looked behind her solicitously; and the miller, who had been waiting for the event, beckoned to her.

'I'll overtake you in a minute,' she said to the younger pair, and went back, her colour, for some unaccountable reason, rising as she did so. The miller and she then came on slowly together, conversing in very low tones, and when they got to the bottom they stood still. Loveday and Anne waited for them, saying but little to each other, for the rencounter with Festus had damped the spirits of both. At last the widow's private talk with Miller Loveday came to an end, and she hastened onward, the miller going in another direction to meet a man on business. When she reached the trumpet-major and Anne she was looking very bright and rather flurried, and seemed sorry when Loveday said that he must leave them and return to the camp. They parted in their usual friendly manner, and Anne and her mother were left to walk the few remaining yards alone.

'There, I've settled it,' said Mrs. Garland. 'Anne, what are you thinking about? I have settled in my mind that it is all right.'

'What's all right?' said Anne.

'That you do not care for Derriman, and mean to encourage John Loveday. What's all the world so long as folks are happy! Child, don't take any notice of what I have said about Festus, and don't meet him any more.'

'What a weathercock you are, mother! Why should you say that just now?'

'It is easy to call me a weathercock,' said the matron, putting on the look of a good woman; 'but I have reasoned it out, and at last, thank God, I have got over my ambition. The Lovedays are our true and only friends, and Mr. Festus Derriman, with all his money, is nothing to us at all.'

'But,' said Anne, 'what has made you change all of a sudden from what you have said before?'

'My feelings and my reason, which I am thankful for!'

Anne knew that her mother's sentiments were naturally so versatile that they could not be depended on for two days together; but it did not occur to her for the moment that a change had been helped on in the present case by a romantic talk between Mrs. Garland and the miller. But Mrs. Garland could not keep the secret long. She chatted gaily as she walked, and before they had entered the house she said, 'What do you think Mr Loveday has been saying to me, dear Anne?'

Anne did not know at all.

'Why, he has asked me to marry him.'