

XII. HOW EVERYBODY GREAT AND SMALL CLIMBED TO THE TOP OF THE DOWNS

As the days went on, echoes of the life and bustle of the town reached the ears of the quiet people in Overcombe hollow--exciting and moving those unimportant natives as a ground-swell moves the weeds in a cave. Travelling-carriages of all kinds and colours climbed and descended the road that led towards the seaside borough. Some contained those personages of the King's suite who had not kept pace with him in his journey from Windsor; others were the coaches of aristocracy, big and little, whom news of the King's arrival drew thither for their own pleasure: so that the highway, as seen from the hills about Overcombe, appeared like an ant-walk--a constant succession of dark spots creeping along its surface at nearly uniform rates of progress, and all in one direction.

The traffic and intelligence between camp and town passed in a measure over the villagers' heads. It being summer time the miller was much occupied with business, and the trumpet-major was too constantly engaged in marching between the camp and Gloucester Lodge with the rest of the dragoons to bring his friends any news for some days.

At last he sent a message that there was to be a review on the downs by the King, and that it was fixed for the day following. This information soon spread through the village and country round, and next morning the

whole population of Overcombe--except two or three very old men and women, a few babies and their nurses, a cripple, and Corporal Tullidge--ascended the slope with the crowds from afar, and awaited the events of the day.

The miller wore his best coat on this occasion, which meant a good deal. An Overcombe man in those days would have a best coat, and keep it as a best coat half his life. The miller's had seen five and twenty summers chiefly through the chinks of a clothes-box, and was not at all shabby as yet, though getting singular. But that could not be helped; common coats and best coats were distinct species, and never interchangeable. Living so near the scene of the review he walked up the hill, accompanied by Mrs. Garland and Anne as usual.

It was a clear day, with little wind stirring, and the view from the downs, one of the most extensive in the county, was unclouded. The eye of any observer who cared for such things swept over the wave-washed town, and the bay beyond, and the Isle, with its pebble bank, lying on the sea to the left of these, like a great crouching animal tethered to the mainland. On the extreme east of the marine horizon, St. Aldhelm's Head closed the scene, the sea to the southward of that point glaring like a mirror under the sun. Inland could be seen Badbury Rings, where a beacon had been recently erected; and nearer, Rainbarrow, on Egdon Heath, where another stood: farther to the left Bulbarrow, where there was yet another. Not far from this came Nettlecombe Tout; to the west, Dogberry Hill, and Black'on near to the foreground, the beacon thereon being built

of furze faggots thatched with straw, and standing on the spot where the monument now raises its head.

At nine o'clock the troops marched upon the ground--some from the camps in the vicinity, and some from quarters in the different towns round about. The approaches to the down were blocked with carriages of all descriptions, ages, and colours, and with pedestrians of every class. At ten the royal personages were said to be drawing near, and soon after the King, accompanied by the Dukes of Cambridge and Cumberland, and a couple

of generals, appeared on horseback, wearing a round hat turned up at the side, with a cockade and military feather. (Sensation among the crowd.)

Then the Queen and three of the princesses entered the field in a great coach drawn by six beautiful cream-coloured horses. Another coach, with four horses of the same sort, brought the two remaining princesses.

(Confused acclamations, 'There's King Jarge!' 'That's Queen Sharlett!' 'Princess 'Lizabeth!' 'Princesses Sophiar and Meelyer!' etc., from the surrounding spectators.)

Anne and her party were fortunate enough to secure a position on the top of one of the barrows which rose here and there on the down; and the miller having gallantly constructed a little cairn of flints, he placed the two women thereon, by which means they were enabled to see over the heads, horses, and coaches of the multitudes below and around. At the march-past the miller's eye, which had been wandering about for the purpose, discovered his son in his place by the trumpeters, who had moved

forwards in two ranks, and were sounding the march.

'That's John!' he cried to the widow. 'His trumpet-sling is of two colours, d'ye see; and the others be plain.'

Mrs. Garland too saw him now, and enthusiastically admired him from her hands upwards, and Anne silently did the same. But before the young woman's eyes had quite left the trumpet-major they fell upon the figure of Yeoman Festus riding with his troop, and keeping his face at a medium between haughtiness and mere bravery. He certainly looked as soldierly as any of his own corps, and felt more soldierly than half-a-dozen, as anybody could see by observing him. Anne got behind the miller, in case Festus should discover her, and, regardless of his monarch, rush upon her in a rage with, 'Why the devil did you run away from me that night--hey, madam?' But she resolved to think no more of him just now, and to stick to Loveday, who was her mother's friend. In this she was helped by the stirring tones which burst from the latter gentleman and his subordinates from time to time.

'Well,' said the miller complacently, 'there's few of more consequence in a regiment than a trumpeter. He's the chap that tells 'em what to do, after all. Hey, Mrs. Garland?'

'So he is, miller,' said she.

'They could no more do without Jack and his men than they could without

generals.'

'Indeed they could not,' said Mrs. Garland again, in a tone of pleasant agreement with any one in Great Britain or Ireland.

It was said that the line that day was three miles long, reaching from the high ground on the right of where the people stood to the turnpike road on the left. After the review came a sham fight, during which action the crowd dispersed more widely over the downs, enabling Widow Garland to get still clearer glimpses of the King, and his handsome charger, and the head of the Queen, and the elbows and shoulders of the princesses in the carriages, and fractional parts of General Garth and the Duke of Cumberland; which sights gave her great gratification. She tugged at her daughter at every opportunity, exclaiming, 'Now you can see his feather!' 'There's her hat!' 'There's her Majesty's India muslin shawl!' in a minor form of ecstasy, that made the miller think her more girlish and animated than her daughter Anne.

In those military manoeuvres the miller followed the fortunes of one man; Anne Garland of two. The spectators, who, unlike our party, had no personal interest in the soldiery, saw only troops and battalions in the concrete, straight lines of red, straight lines of blue, white lines formed of innumerable knee-breeches, black lines formed of many gaiters, coming and going in kaleidoscopic change. Who thought of every point in the line as an isolated man, each dwelling all to himself in the hermitage of his own mind? One person did, a young man far removed from

the barrow where the Garlands and Miller Loveday stood. The natural expression of his face was somewhat obscured by the bronzing effects of rough weather, but the lines of his mouth showed that affectionate impulses were strong within him--perhaps stronger than judgment well could regulate. He wore a blue jacket with little brass buttons, and was plainly a seafaring man.

Meanwhile, in the part of the plain where rose the tumulus on which the miller had established himself, a broad-brimmed tradesman was elbowing his way along. He saw Mr. Loveday from the base of the barrow, and beckoned to attract his attention. Loveday went halfway down, and the other came up as near as he could.

'Miller,' said the man, 'a letter has been lying at the post-office for you for the last three days. If I had known that I should see ye here I'd have brought it along with me.'

The miller thanked him for the news, and they parted, Loveday returning to the summit. 'What a very strange thing!' he said to Mrs. Garland, who had looked inquiringly at his face, now very grave. 'That was Budmouth postmaster, and he says there's a letter for me. Ah, I now call to mind that there was a letter in the candle three days ago this very night--a large red one; but foolish-like I thought nothing o't. Who can that letter be from?'

A letter at this time was such an event for hamleteers, even of the

miller's respectable standing, that Loveday thenceforward was thrown into a fit of abstraction which prevented his seeing any more of the sham fight, or the people, or the King. Mrs. Garland imbibed some of his concern, and suggested that the letter might come from his son Robert.

'I should naturally have thought that,' said Miller Loveday; 'but he wrote to me only two months ago, and his brother John heard from him within the last four weeks, when he was just about starting on another voyage. If you'll pardon me, Mrs. Garland, ma'am, I'll see if there's any Overcombe man here who is going to Budmouth to-day, so that I may get the letter by night-time. I cannot possibly go myself.'

So Mr. Loveday left them for awhile; and as they were so near home Mrs. Garland did not wait on the barrow for him to come back, but walked about with Anne a little time, until they should be disposed to trot down the slope to their own door. They listened to a man who was offering one guinea to receive ten in case Buonaparte should be killed in three months, and to other entertainments of that nature, which at this time were not rare. Once during their peregrination the eyes of the sailor before-mentioned fell upon Anne; but he glanced over her and passed her unheedingly by. Loveday the elder was at this time on the other side of the line, looking for a messenger to the town. At twelve o'clock the review was over, and the King and his family left the hill. The troops then cleared off the field, the spectators followed, and by one o'clock the downs were again bare.

They still spread their grassy surface to the sun as on that beautiful morning not, historically speaking, so very long ago; but the King and his fifteen thousand armed men, the horses, the bands of music, the princesses, the cream-coloured teams--the gorgeous centre-piece, in short, to which the downs were but the mere mount or margin--how entirely have they all passed and gone!--lying scattered about the world as military and other dust, some at Talavera, Albuera, Salamanca, Vittoria, Toulouse, and Waterloo; some in home churchyards; and a few small handfuls in royal vaults.

In the afternoon John Loveday, lightened of his trumpet and trappings, appeared at the old mill-house door, and beheld Anne standing at hers.

'I saw you, Miss Garland,' said the soldier gaily.

'Where was I?' said she, smiling.

'On the top of the big mound--to the right of the King.'

'And I saw you; lots of times,' she rejoined.

Loveday seemed pleased. 'Did you really take the trouble to find me? That was very good of you.'

'Her eyes followed you everywhere,' said Mrs. Garland from an upper

window.

'Of course I looked at the dragoons most,' said Anne, disconcerted. 'And when I looked at them my eyes naturally fell upon the trumpets. I looked at the dragoons generally, no more.'

She did not mean to show any vexation to the trumpet-major, but he fancied otherwise, and stood repressed. The situation was relieved by the arrival of the miller, still looking serious.

'I am very much concerned, John; I did not go to the review for nothing. There's a letter a-waiting for me at Budmouth, and I must get it before bedtime, or I shan't sleep a wink.'

'I'll go, of course,' said John; 'and perhaps Miss Garland would like to see what's doing there to-day? Everybody is gone or going; the road is like a fair.'

He spoke pleadingly, but Anne was not won to assent.

'You can drive in the gig; 'twill do Blossom good,' said the miller.

'Let David drive Miss Garland,' said the trumpet-major, not wishing to coerce her; 'I would just as soon walk.'

Anne joyfully welcomed this arrangement, and a time was fixed for the

start.