

XIII. THE CONVERSATION IN THE CROWD

In the afternoon they drove off, John Loveday being nowhere visible. All along the road they passed and were overtaken by vehicles of all descriptions going in the same direction; among them the extraordinary machines which had been invented for the conveyance of troops to any point of the coast on which the enemy should land; they consisted of four boards placed across a sort of trolley, thirty men of the volunteer companies riding on each.

The popular Georgian watering-place was in a paroxysm of gaiety. The town was quite overpowered by the country round, much to the town's delight and profit. The fear of invasion was such that six frigates lay in the roads to ensure the safety of the royal family, and from the regiments of horse and foot quartered at the barracks, or encamped on the hills round about, a picket of a thousand men mounted guard every day in front of Gloucester Lodge, where the King resided. When Anne and her attendant reached this point, which they did on foot, stabling the horse on the outskirts of the town, it was about six o'clock. The King was on the Esplanade, and the soldiers were just marching past to mount guard. The band formed in front of the King, and all the officers saluted as they went by.

Anne now felt herself close to and looking into the stream of recorded history, within whose banks the littlest things are great, and outside

which she and the general bulk of the human race were content to live on as an unreckoned, unheeded superfluity.

When she turned from her interested gaze at this scene, there stood John Loveday. She had had a presentiment that he would turn up in this mysterious way. It was marvellous that he could have got there so quickly; but there he was--not looking at the King, or at the crowd, but waiting for the turn of her head.

'Trumpet-major, I didn't see you,' said Anne demurely. 'How is it that your regiment is not marching past?'

'We take it by turns, and it is not our turn,' said Loveday.

She wanted to know then if they were afraid that the King would be carried off by the First Consul. Yes, Loveday told her; and his Majesty was rather venturesome. A day or two before he had gone so far to sea that he was nearly caught by some of the enemy's cruisers. 'He is anxious to fight Boney single-handed,' he said.

'What a good, brave King!' said Anne.

Loveday seemed anxious to come to more personal matters. 'Will you let me take you round to the other side, where you can see better?' he asked.

'The Queen and the princesses are at the window.'

Anne passively assented. 'David, wait here for me,' she said; 'I shall be back again in a few minutes.'

The trumpet-major then led her off triumphantly, and they skirted the crowd and came round on the side towards the sands. He told her everything he could think of, military and civil, to which Anne returned pretty syllables and parenthetic words about the colour of the sea and the curl of the foam--a way of speaking that moved the soldier's heart even more than long and direct speeches would have done.

'And that other thing I asked you?' he ventured to say at last.

'We won't speak of it.'

'You don't dislike me?'

'O no!' she said, gazing at the bathing-machines, digging children, and other common objects of the seashore, as if her interest lay there rather than with him.

'But I am not worthy of the daughter of a genteel professional man--that's what you mean?'

'There's something more than worthiness required in such cases, you know,' she said, still without calling her mind away from surrounding scenes. 'Ah, there are the Queen and princesses at the window!'

'Something more?'

'Well, since you will make me speak, I mean the woman ought to love the man.'

The trumpet-major seemed to be less concerned about this than about her supposed superiority. 'If it were all right on that point, would you mind the other?' he asked, like a man who knows he is too persistent, yet who cannot be still.

'How can I say, when I don't know? What a pretty chip hat the elder princess wears?'

Her companion's general disappointment extended over him almost to his lace and his plume. 'Your mother said, you know, Miss Anne--'

'Yes, that's the worst of it,' she said. 'Let us go back to David; I have seen all I want to see, Mr. Loveday.'

The mass of the people had by this time noticed the Queen and princesses at the window, and raised a cheer, to which the ladies waved their embroidered handkerchiefs. Anne went back towards the pavement with her

trumpet-major, whom all the girls envied her, so fine-looking a soldier was he; and not only for that, but because it was well known that he was

not a soldier from necessity, but from patriotism, his father having repeatedly offered to set him up in business: his artistic taste in preferring a horse and uniform to a dirty, rumbling flour-mill was admired by all. She, too, had a very nice appearance in her best clothes as she walked along--the saracen hat, muslin shawl, and tight-sleeved gown being of the newest Overcombe fashion, that was only about a year old in the adjoining town, and in London three or four. She could not be harsh to Loveday and dismiss him curtly, for his musical pursuits had refined him, educated him, and made him quite poetical. To-day he had been particularly well-mannered and tender; so, instead of answering, 'Never speak to me like this again,' she merely put him off with a 'Let us go back to David.'

When they reached the place where they had left him David was gone.

Anne was now positively vexed. 'What shall I do?' she said.

'He's only gone to drink the King's health,' said Loveday, who had privately given David the money for performing that operation. 'Depend upon it, he'll be back soon.'

'Will you go and find him?' said she, with intense propriety in her looks and tone.

'I will,' said Loveday reluctantly; and he went.

Anne stood still. She could now escape her gallant friend, for, although the distance was long, it was not impossible to walk home. On the other hand, Loveday was a good and sincere fellow, for whom she had almost a brotherly feeling, and she shrank from such a trick. While she stood and mused, scarcely heeding the music, the marching of the soldiers, the King, the dukes, the brilliant staff, the attendants, and the happy groups of people, her eyes fell upon the ground.

Before her she saw a flower lying--a crimson sweet-william--fresh and uninjured. An instinctive wish to save it from destruction by the passengers' feet led her to pick it up; and then, moved by a sudden self-consciousness, she looked around. She was standing before an inn, and from an upper window Festus Derriman was leaning with two or three kindred spirits of his cut and kind. He nodded eagerly, and signified to her that he had thrown the flower.

What should she do? To throw it away would seem stupid, and to keep it was awkward. She held it between her finger and thumb, twirled it round on its axis and twirled it back again, regarding and yet not examining it. Just then she saw the trumpet-major coming back.

'I can't find David anywhere,' he said; and his heart was not sorry as he said it.

Anne was still holding out the sweet-william as if about to drop it, and, scarcely knowing what she did under the distressing sense that she was

watched, she offered the flower to Loveday.

His face brightened with pleasure as he took it. 'Thank you, indeed,' he said.

Then Anne saw what a misleading blunder she had committed towards Loveday

in playing to the yeoman. Perhaps she had sown the seeds of a quarrel.

'It was not my sweet-william,' she said hastily; 'it was lying on the ground. I don't mean anything by giving it to you.'

'But I'll keep it all the same,' said the innocent soldier, as if he knew a good deal about womankind; and he put the flower carefully inside his jacket, between his white waistcoat and his heart.

Festus, seeing this, enlarged himself wrathfully, got hot in the face, rose to his feet, and glared down upon them like a turnip-lantern.

'Let us go away,' said Anne timorously.

'I'll see you safe to your own door, depend upon me,' said Loveday.

'But--I had near forgot--there's father's letter, that he's so anxiously waiting for! Will you come with me to the post-office? Then I'll take you straight home.'

Anne, expecting Festus to pounce down every minute, was glad to be off anywhere; so she accepted the suggestion, and they went along the parade together.

Loveday set this down as a proof of Anne's relenting. Thus in joyful spirits he entered the office, paid the postage, and received the letter.

'It is from Bob, after all!' he said. 'Father told me to read it at once, in case of bad news. Ask your pardon for keeping you a moment.' He broke the seal and read, Anne standing silently by.

'He is coming home to be married,' said the trumpet-major, without looking up.

Anne did not answer. The blood swept impetuously up her face at his words, and as suddenly went away again, leaving her rather paler than before. She disguised her agitation and then overcame it, Loveday observing nothing of this emotional performance.

'As far as I can understand he will be here Saturday,' he said.

'Indeed!' said Anne quite calmly. 'And who is he going to marry?'

'That I don't know,' said John, turning the letter about. 'The woman is a stranger.'

At this moment the miller entered the office hastily.

'Come, John,' he cried, 'I have been waiting and waiting for that there letter till I was nigh crazy!'

John briefly explained the news, and when his father had recovered from his astonishment, taken off his hat, and wiped the exact line where his forehead joined his hair, he walked with Anne up the street, leaving John to return alone. The miller was so absorbed in his mental perspective of Bob's marriage, that he saw nothing of the gaieties they passed through; and Anne seemed also so much impressed by the same intelligence, that she crossed before the inn occupied by Festus without showing a recollection of his presence there.

XIV. LATER IN THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY

When they reached home the sun was going down. It had already been noised abroad that miller Loveday had received a letter, and, his cart having been heard coming up the lane, the population of Overcombe drew down towards the mill as soon as he had gone indoors--a sudden flash of brightness from the window showing that he had struck such an early light as nothing but the immediate deciphering of literature could require.