

XXX. AT THE THEATRE ROYAL

In two or three days a message arrived asking them to attend at the theatre on the coming evening, with the added request that they would dress in their gayest clothes, to do justice to the places taken.

Accordingly, in the course of the afternoon they drove off, Bob having clothed himself in a splendid suit, recently purchased as an attempt to bring himself nearer to Anne's style when they appeared in public together. As finished off by this dashing and really fashionable attire, he was the perfection of a beau in the dog-days; pantaloons and boots of the newest make; yards and yards of muslin wound round his neck, forming a sort of asylum for the lower part of his face; two fancy waistcoats, and coat-buttons like circular shaving glasses. The absurd extreme of female fashion, which was to wear muslin dresses in January, was at this time equalled by that of the men, who wore clothes enough in August to melt them. Nobody would have guessed from Bob's presentation now that he had ever been aloft on a dark night in the Atlantic, or knew the hundred ingenuities that could be performed with a rope's end and a marline-spike as well as his mother tongue.

It was a day of days. Anne wore her celebrated celestial blue pelisse, her Leghorn hat, and her muslin dress with the waist under the arms; the latter being decorated with excellent Honiton lace bought of the woman who travelled from that place to Overcombe and its neighbourhood with a

basketful of her own manufacture, and a cushion on which she worked by the wayside. John met the lovers at the inn outside the town, and after stabling the horse they entered the town together, the trumpet-major informing them that the watering-place had never been so full before, that the Court, the Prince of Wales, and everybody of consequence was there, and that an attic could scarcely be got for money. The King had gone for a cruise in his yacht, and they would be in time to see him land.

Then drums and fifes were heard, and in a minute or two they saw Sergeant Stanner advancing along the street with a firm countenance, fiery poll, and rigid staring eyes, in front of his recruiting-party. The sergeant's sword was drawn, and at intervals of two or three inches along its shining blade were impaled fluttering one-pound notes, to express the lavish bounty that was offered. He gave a stern, suppressed nod of friendship to our people, and passed by. Next they came up to a waggon, bowered over with leaves and flowers, so that the men inside could hardly be seen.

'Come to see the King, hip-hip hurrah!' cried a voice within, and turning they saw through the leaves the nose and face of Cripplestraw. The waggon contained all Derriman's workpeople.

'Is your master here?' said John.

'No, trumpet-major, sir. But young maister is coming to fetch us at nine

o'clock, in case we should be too blind to drive home.'

'O! where is he now?'

'Never mind,' said Anne impatiently, at which the trumpet-major obediently moved on.

By the time they reached the pier it was six o'clock; the royal yacht was returning; a fact announced by the ships in the harbour firing a salute. The King came ashore with his hat in his hand, and returned the salutations of the well-dressed crowd in his old indiscriminate fashion. While this cheering and waving of handkerchiefs was going on Anne stood between the two brothers, who protectingly joined their hands behind her back, as if she were a delicate piece of statuary that a push might damage. Soon the King had passed, and receiving the military salutes of the piquet, joined the Queen and princesses at Gloucester Lodge, the homely house of red brick in which he unostentatiously resided.

As there was yet some little time before the theatre would open, they strayed upon the velvet sands, and listened to the songs of the sailors, one of whom extemporized for the occasion:--

'Portland Road the King aboard, the King aboard!

Portland Road the King aboard,

We weighed and sailed from Portland Road!' {272}

When they had looked on awhile at the combats at single-stick which were in progress hard by, and seen the sum of five guineas handed over to the modest gentleman who had broken most heads, they returned to Gloucester Lodge, whence the King and other members of his family now reappeared, and drove, at a slow trot, round to the theatre in carriages drawn by the Hanoverian white horses that were so well known in the town at this date.

When Anne and Bob entered the theatre they found that John had taken excellent places, and concluded that he had got them for nothing through the influence of the lady of his choice. As a matter of fact he had paid full prices for those two seats, like any other outsider, and even then had a difficulty in getting them, it being a King's night. When they were settled he himself retired to an obscure part of the pit, from which the stage was scarcely visible.

'We can see beautifully,' said Bob, in an aristocratic voice, as he took a delicate pinch of snuff, and drew out the magnificent pocket-handkerchief brought home from the East for such occasions. 'But I am afraid poor John can't see at all.'

'But we can see him,' replied Anne, 'and notice by his face which of them it is he is so charmed with. The light of that corner candle falls right upon his cheek.'

By this time the King had appeared in his place, which was overhung by a canopy of crimson satin fringed with gold. About twenty places were

occupied by the royal family and suite; and beyond them was a crowd of powdered and glittering personages of fashion, completely filling the centre of the little building; though the King so frequently patronized the local stage during these years that the crush was not inconvenient.

The curtain rose and the play began. To-night it was one of Colman's, who at this time enjoyed great popularity, and Mr. Bannister supported the leading character. Anne, with her hand privately clasped in Bob's, and looking as if she did not know it, partly watched the piece and partly the face of the impressionable John who had so soon transferred his affections elsewhere. She had not long to wait. When a certain one of the subordinate ladies of the comedy entered on the stage the trumpet-major in his corner not only looked conscious, but started and gazed with parted lips.

'This must be the one,' whispered Anne quickly. 'See, he is agitated!'

She turned to Bob, but at the same moment his hand convulsively closed upon hers as he, too, strangely fixed his eyes upon the newly-entered lady.

'What is it?'

Anne looked from one to the other without regarding the stage at all. Her answer came in the voice of the actress who now spoke for the first time. The accents were those of Miss Matilda Johnson.

One thought rushed into both their minds on the instant, and Bob was the first to utter it.

'What--is she the woman of his choice after all?'

'If so, it is a dreadful thing!' murmured Anne.

But, as may be imagined, the unfortunate John was as much surprised by this rencounter as the other two. Until this moment he had been in utter ignorance of the theatrical company and all that pertained to it.

Moreover, much as he knew of Miss Johnson, he was not aware that she had

ever been trained in her youth as an actress, and that after lapsing into straits and difficulties for a couple of years she had been so fortunate as to again procure an engagement here.

The trumpet-major, though not prominently seated, had been seen by Matilda already, who had observed still more plainly her old betrothed and Anne in the other part of the house. John was not concerned on his own account at being face to face with her, but at the extraordinary suspicion that this conjuncture must revive in the minds of his best beloved friends. After some moments of pained reflection he tapped his knee.

'Gad, I won't explain; it shall go as it is!' he said. 'Let them think

her mine. Better that than the truth, after all.'

Had personal prominence in the scene been at this moment proportioned to intentness of feeling, the whole audience, regal and otherwise, would have faded into an indistinct mist of background, leaving as the sole emergent and telling figures Bob and Anne at one point, the trumpet-major on the left hand, and Matilda at the opposite corner of the stage. But fortunately the deadlock of awkward suspense into which all four had fallen was terminated by an accident. A messenger entered the King's box with despatches. There was an instant pause in the performance. The despatch-box being opened the King read for a few moments with great interest, the eyes of the whole house, including those of Anne Garland, being anxiously fixed upon his face; for terrible events fell as unexpectedly as thunderbolts at this critical time of our history. The King at length beckoned to Lord ---, who was immediately behind him, the play was again stopped, and the contents of the despatch were publicly communicated to the audience.

Sir Robert Calder, cruising off Finisterre, had come in sight of Villeneuve, and made the signal for action, which, though checked by the weather, had resulted in the capture of two Spanish line-of-battle ships, and the retreat of Villeneuve into Ferrol.

The news was received with truly national feeling, if noise might be taken as an index of patriotism. 'Rule Britannia' was called for and sung by the whole house. But the importance of the event was far from

being recognized at this time; and Bob Loveday, as he sat there and heard it, had very little conception how it would bear upon his destiny.

This parenthetic excitement diverted for a few minutes the eyes of Bob and Anne from the trumpet-major; and when the play proceeded, and they looked back to his corner, he was gone.

'He's just slipped round to talk to her behind the scenes,' said Bob knowingly. 'Shall we go too, and tease him for a sly dog?'

'No, I would rather not.'

'Shall we go home, then?'

'Not unless her presence is too much for you?'

'O--not at all. We'll stay here. Ah, there she is again.'

They sat on, and listened to Matilda's speeches which she delivered with such delightful coolness that they soon began to considerably interest one of the party.

'Well, what a nerve the young woman has!' he said at last in tones of admiration, and gazing at Miss Johnson with all his might. 'After all, Jack's taste is not so bad. She's really deuced clever.'

'Bob, I'll go home if you wish to,' said Anne quickly.

'O no--let us see how she fleets herself off that bit of a scrape she's playing at now. Well, what a hand she is at it, to be sure!'

Anne said no more, but waited on, supremely uncomfortable, and almost tearful. She began to feel that she did not like life particularly well; it was too complicated: she saw nothing of the scene, and only longed to get away, and to get Bob away with her. At last the curtain fell on the final act, and then began the farce of 'No Song no Supper.' Matilda did not appear in this piece, and Anne again inquired if they should go home. This time Bob agreed, and taking her under his care with redoubled affection, to make up for the species of coma which had seized upon his heart for a time, he quietly accompanied her out of the house.

When they emerged upon the esplanade, the August moon was shining across the sea from the direction of St. Aldhelm's Head. Bob unconsciously loitered, and turned towards the pier. Reaching the end of the promenade they surveyed the quivering waters in silence for some time, until a long dark line shot from behind the promontory of the Nothe, and swept forward into the harbour.

'What boat is that?' said Anne.

'It seems to be some frigate lying in the Roads,' said Bob carelessly, as

he brought Anne round with a gentle pressure of his arm and bent his steps towards the homeward end of the town.

Meanwhile, Miss Johnson, having finished her duties for that evening, rapidly changed her dress, and went out likewise. The prominent position which Anne and Captain Bob had occupied side by side in the theatre, left her no alternative but to suppose that the situation was arranged by Bob as a species of defiance to herself; and her heart, such as it was, became proportionately embittered against him. In spite of the rise in her fortunes, Miss Johnson still remembered--and always would remember--her humiliating departure from Overcombe; and it had been to her even a more grievous thing that Bob had acquiesced in his brother's ruling than that John had determined it. At the time of setting out she was sustained by a firm faith that Bob would follow her, and nullify his brother's scheme; but though she waited Bob never came.

She passed along by the houses facing the sea, and scanned the shore, the footway, and the open road close to her, which, illuminated by the slanting moon to a great brightness, sparkled with minute facets of crystallized salts from the water sprinkled there during the day. The promenaders at the further edge appeared in dark profiles; and beyond them was the grey sea, parted into two masses by the tapering braid of moonlight across the waves.

Two forms crossed this line at a startling nearness to her; she marked them at once as Anne and Bob Loveday. They were walking slowly, and in

the earnestness of their discourse were oblivious of the presence of any human beings save themselves. Matilda stood motionless till they had passed.

'How I love them!' she said, treading the initial step of her walk onwards with a vehemence that walking did not demand.

'So do I--especially one,' said a voice at her elbow; and a man wheeled round her, and looked in her face, which had been fully exposed to the moon.

'You--who are you?' she asked.

'Don't you remember, ma'am? We walked some way together towards Overcombe earlier in the summer.' Matilda looked more closely, and perceived that the speaker was Derriman, in plain clothes. He continued, 'You are one of the ladies of the theatre, I know. May I ask why you said in such a queer way that you loved that couple?'

'In a queer way?'

'Well, as if you hated them.'

'I don't mind your knowing that I have good reason to hate them. You do too, it seems?'

'That man,' said Festus savagely, 'came to me one night about that very woman; insulted me before I could put myself on my guard, and ran away before I could come up with him and avenge myself. The woman tricks me at every turn! I want to part 'em.'

'Then why don't you? There's a splendid opportunity. Do you see that soldier walking along? He's a marine; he looks into the gallery of the theatre every night: and he's in connexion with the press-gang that came ashore just now from the frigate lying in Portland Roads. They are often here for men.'

'Yes. Our boatmen dread 'em.'

'Well, we have only to tell him that Loveday is a seaman to be clear of him this very night.'

'Done!' said Festus. 'Take my arm and come this way.' They walked across to the footway. 'Fine night, sergeant.'

'It is, sir.'

'Looking for hands, I suppose?'

'It is not to be known, sir. We don't begin till half past ten.'

'It is a pity you don't begin now. I could show 'ee excellent game.'

'What, that little nest of fellows at the "Old Rooms" in Cove Row? I have just heard of 'em.'

'No--come here.' Festus, with Miss Johnson on his arm, led the sergeant quickly along the parade, and by the time they reached the Narrows the lovers, who walked but slowly, were visible in front of them. 'There's your man,' he said.

'That buck in pantaloons and half-boots--a looking like a squire?'

'Twelve months ago he was mate of the brig Pewit; but his father has made money, and keeps him at home.'

'Faith, now you tell of it, there's a hint of sea legs about him. What's the young beau's name?'

'Don't tell!' whispered Matilda, impulsively clutching Festus's arm.

But Festus had already said, 'Robert Loveday, son of the miller at Overcombe. You may find several likely fellows in that neighbourhood.'

The marine said that he would bear it in mind, and they left him.

'I wish you had not told,' said Matilda tearfully. 'She's the worst!'

'Dash my eyes now; listen to that! Why, you chicken-hearted old stager, you was as well agreed as I. Come now; hasn't he used you badly?'

Matilda's acrimony returned. 'I was down on my luck, or he wouldn't have had the chance!' she said.

'Well, then, let things be.'