

XLI. JOHN MARCHES INTO THE NIGHT

During this exciting time John Loveday seldom or never appeared at the mill. With the recall of Bob, in which he had been sole agent, his mission seemed to be complete.

One mid-day, before Anne had made any change in her manner of living on account of her unexpected acquisition, Lieutenant Bob came in rather suddenly. He had been to Budmouth, and announced to the arrested senses of the family that the --th Dragoons were ordered to join Sir Arthur Wellesley in the Peninsula.

These tidings produced a great impression on the household. John had been so long in the neighbourhood, either at camp or in barracks, that they had almost forgotten the possibility of his being sent away; and they now began to reflect upon the singular infrequency of his calls since his brother's return. There was not much time, however, for reflection, if they wished to make the most of John's farewell visit, which was to be paid the same evening, the departure of the regiment being fixed for next day. A hurried valedictory supper was prepared during the afternoon, and shortly afterwards John arrived.

He seemed to be more thoughtful and a trifle paler than of old, but beyond these traces, which might have been due to the natural wear and

tear of time, he showed no signs of gloom. On his way through the town that morning a curious little incident had occurred to him. He was walking past one of the churches when a wedding-party came forth, the bride and bridegroom being Matilda and Festus Derriman. At sight of the trumpet-major the yeoman had glared triumphantly; Matilda, on her part, had winked at him slyly, as much as to say--. But what she meant heaven knows: the trumpet-major did not trouble himself to think, and passed on without returning the mark of confidence with which she had favoured him.

Soon after John's arrival at the mill several of his friends dropped in for the same purpose of bidding adieu. They were mostly the men who had been entertained there on the occasion of the regiment's advent on the down, when Anne and her mother were coaxed in to grace the party by their superior presence; and their well-trained, gallant manners were such as to make them interesting visitors now as at all times. For it was a period when romance had not so greatly faded out of military life as it has done in these days of short service, heterogeneous mixing, and transient campaigns; when the esprit de corps was strong, and long experience stamped noteworthy professional characteristics even on rank and file; while the miller's visitors had the additional advantage of being picked men.

They could not stay so long to-night as on that earlier and more cheerful occasion, and the final adieus were spoken at an early hour. It was no mere playing at departure, as when they had gone to Exonbury barracks, and there was a warm and prolonged shaking of hands all round.

'You'll wish the poor fellows good-bye?' said Bob to Anne, who had not come forward for that purpose like the rest. 'They are going away, and would like to have your good word.'

She then shyly advanced, and every man felt that he must make some pretty speech as he shook her by the hand.

'Good-bye! May you remember us as long as it makes ye happy, and forget us as soon as it makes ye sad,' said Sergeant Brett.

'Good-night! Health, wealth, and long life to ye!' said Sergeant-major Wills, taking her hand from Brett.

'I trust to meet ye again as the wife of a worthy man,' said Trumpeter Buck.

'We'll drink your health throughout the campaign, and so good-bye t'ye,' said Saddler-sergeant Jones, raising her hand to his lips.

Three others followed with similar remarks, to each of which Anne blushing replied as well as she could, wishing them a prosperous voyage, easy conquest, and a speedy return.

But, alas, for that! Battles and skirmishes, advances and retreats, fevers and fatigues, told hard on Anne's gallant friends in the coming

time. Of the seven upon whom these wishes were bestowed, five, including the trumpet-major, were dead men within the few following years, and their bones left to moulder in the land of their campaigns.

John lingered behind. When the others were outside, expressing a final farewell to his father, Bob, and Mrs. Loveday, he came to Anne, who remained within.

'But I thought you were going to look in again before leaving?' she said gently.

'No; I find I cannot. Good-bye!'

'John,' said Anne, holding his right hand in both hers, 'I must tell you something. You were wise in not taking me at my word that day. I was greatly mistaken about myself. Gratitude is not love, though I wanted to make it so for the time. You don't call me thoughtless for what I did?'

'My dear Anne,' cried John, with more gaiety than truthfulness, 'don't let yourself be troubled! What happens is for the best. Soldiers love here to-day and there to-morrow. Who knows that you won't hear of my attentions to some Spanish maid before a month is gone by? 'Tis the way of us, you know; a soldier's heart is not worth a week's purchase--ha, ha! Goodbye, good-bye!'

Anne felt the expediency of his manner, received the affectation as real,

and smiled her reply, not knowing that the adieu was for evermore. Then with a tear in his eye he went out of the door, where he bade farewell to the miller, Mrs. Loveday, and Bob, who said at parting, 'It's all right, Jack, my dear fellow. After a coaxing that would have been enough to win three ordinary Englishwomen, five French, and ten Mulotters, she has to-day agreed to bestow her hand upon me at the end of six months. Good-bye, Jack, good-bye!'

The candle held by his father shed its waving light upon John's face and uniform as with a farewell smile he turned on the doorstone, backed by the black night; and in another moment he had plunged into the darkness, the ring of his smart step dying away upon the bridge as he joined his companions-in-arms, and went off to blow his trumpet till silenced for ever upon one of the bloody battle-fields of Spain.