VI. OLD MR. DERRIMAN OF OXWELL HALL

At this time in the history of Overcombe one solitary newspaper occasionally found its way into the village. It was lent by the postmaster at Budmouth (who, in some mysterious way, got it for nothing through his connexion with the mail) to Mr. Derriman at the Hall, by whom it was handed on to Mrs. Garland when it was not more than a fortnight old. Whoever remembers anything about the old farmer-squire will, of course, know well enough that this delightful privilege of reading history in long columns was not accorded to the Widow Garland for nothing. It was by such ingenuous means that he paid her for her daughter's occasional services in reading aloud to him and making out his accounts, in which matters the farmer, whose guineas were reported to touch five figures--some said more--was not expert.

Mrs. Martha Garland, as a respectable widow, occupied a twilight rank between the benighted villagers and the well-informed gentry, and kindly made herself useful to the former as letter-writer and reader, and general translator from the printing tongue. It was not without satisfaction that she stood at her door of an evening, newspaper in hand, with three or four cottagers standing round, and poured down their open throats any paragraph that she might choose to select from the stirring ones of the period. When she had done with the sheet Mrs. Garland passed it on to the miller, the miller to the grinder, and the grinder to the grinder's boy, in whose hands it became subdivided into half pages,

quarter pages, and irregular triangles, and ended its career as a paper cap, a flagon bung, or a wrapper for his bread and cheese.

Notwithstanding his compact with Mrs. Garland, old Mr. Derriman kept the paper so long, and was so chary of wasting his man's time on a merely intellectual errand, that unless she sent for the journal it seldom reached her hands. Anne was always her messenger. The arrival of the soldiers led Mrs. Garland to despatch her daughter for it the day after the party; and away she went in her hat and pelisse, in a direction at right angles to that of the encampment on the hill.

Walking across the fields for the distance of a mile or two, she came out upon the high-road by a wicket-gate. On the other side of the way was the entrance to what at first sight looked like a neglected meadow, the gate being a rotten one, without a bottom rail, and broken-down palings lying on each side. The dry hard mud of the opening was marked with several horse and cow tracks, that had been half obliterated by fifty score sheep tracks, surcharged with the tracks of a man and a dog. Beyond this geological record appeared a carriage-road, nearly grown over with grass, which Anne followed. It descended by a gentle slope, dived under dark-rinded elm and chestnut trees, and conducted her on till the hiss of a waterfall and the sound of the sea became audible, when it took a bend round a swamp of fresh watercress and brooklime that had once been a fish pond. Here the grey, weather-worn front of a building edged from behind the trees. It was Oxwell Hall, once the seat of a family now extinct, and of late years used as a farmhouse.

Benjamin Derriman, who owned the crumbling place, had originally been only the occupier and tenant-farmer of the fields around. His wife had brought him a small fortune, and during the growth of their only son there had been a partition of the Oxwell estate, giving the farmer, now a widower, the opportunity of acquiring the building and a small portion of the land attached on exceptionally low terms. But two years after the purchase the boy died, and Derriman's existence was paralyzed forthwith. It was said that since that event he had devised the house and fields to a distant female relative, to keep them out of the hands of his detested nephew; but this was not certainly known.

The hall was as interesting as mansions in a state of declension usually are, as the excellent county history showed. That popular work in folio contained an old plate dedicated to the last scion of the original owners, from which drawing it appeared that in 1750, the date of publication, the windows were covered with little scratches like black flashes of lightning; that a horn of hard smoke came out of each of the twelve chimneys; that a lady and a lap-dog stood on the lawn in a strenuously walking position; and a substantial cloud and nine flying birds of no known species hung over the trees to the north-east.

The rambling and neglected dwelling had all the romantic excellencies and practical drawbacks which such mildewed places share in common with caves, mountains, wildernesses, glens, and other homes of poesy that people of taste wish to live and die in. Mustard and cress could have

been raised on the inner plaster of the dewy walls at any height not exceeding three feet from the floor; and mushrooms of the most refined and thin-stemmed kinds grew up through the chinks of the larder paving. As for the outside, Nature, in the ample time that had been given her, had so mingled her filings and effacements with the marks of human wear and tear upon the house, that it was often hard to say in which of the two or if in both, any particular obliteration had its origin. The keenness was gone from the mouldings of the doorways, but whether worn out by the rubbing past of innumerable people's shoulders, and the moving of their heavy furniture, or by Time in a grander and more abstract form, did not appear. The iron stanchions inside the window-panes were eaten away to the size of wires at the bottom where they entered the stone, the condensed breathings of generations having settled there in pools and rusted them. The panes themselves had either lost their shine altogether or become iridescent as a peacock's tail. In the middle of the porch was a vertical sun-dial, whose gnomon swayed loosely about when the wind blew, and cast its shadow hither and thither, as much as to say, 'Here's your fine model dial; here's any time for any man; I am an old dial; and shiftiness is the best policy.'

Anne passed under the arched gateway which screened the main front; over it was the porter's lodge, reached by a spiral staircase. Across the archway was fixed a row of wooden hurdles, one of which Anne opened and closed behind her. Their necessity was apparent as soon as she got inside. The quadrangle of the ancient pile was a bed of mud and manure, inhabited by calves, geese, ducks, and sow pigs surprisingly large, with

young ones surprisingly small. In the groined porch some heifers were amusing themselves by stretching up their necks and licking the carved stone capitals that supported the vaulting. Anne went on to a second and open door, across which was another hurdle to keep the live stock from absolute community with the inmates. There being no knocker, she knocked
by means of a short stick which was laid against the post for that purpose; but nobody attending, she entered the passage, and tried an inner door.

A slight noise was heard inside, the door opened about an inch, and a strip of decayed face, including the eye and some forehead wrinkles, appeared within the crevice.

'Please I have come for the paper,' said Anne.

'O, is it you, dear Anne?' whined the inmate, opening the door a little further. 'I could hardly get to the door to open it, I am so weak.'

The speaker was a wizened old gentleman, in a coat the colour of his farmyard, breeches of the same hue, unbuttoned at the knees, revealing a bit of leg above his stocking and a dazzlingly white shirt-frill to compensate for this untidiness below. The edge of his skull round his eye-sockets was visible through the skin, and he had a mouth whose corners made towards the back of his head on the slightest provocation. He walked with great apparent difficulty back into the room, Anne

following him.

'Well, you can have the paper if you want it; but you never give me much time to see what's in en! Here's the paper.' He held it out, but before she could take it he drew it back again, saying, 'I have not had my share o' the paper by a good deal, what with my weak sight, and people coming so soon for en. I am a poor put-upon soul; but my "Duty of Man" will be left to me when the newspaper is gone.' And he sank into his chair with an air of exhaustion.

Anne said that she did not wish to take the paper if he had not done with it, and that she was really later in the week than usual, owing to the soldiers.

'Soldiers, yes--rot the soldiers! And now hedges will be broke, and hens' nests robbed, and sucking-pigs stole, and I don't know what all. Who's to pay for't, sure? I reckon that because the soldiers be come you don't mean to be kind enough to read to me what I hadn't time to read myself.'

She would read if he wished, she said; she was in no hurry. And sitting herself down she unfolded the paper.

'"Dinner at Carlton House"?'

'No, faith. 'Tis nothing to I.'

'"Defence of the country"?'

'Ye may read that if ye will. I hope there will be no billeting in this parish, or any wild work of that sort; for what would a poor old lamiger like myself do with soldiers in his house, and nothing to feed 'em with?'

Anne began reading, and continued at her task nearly ten minutes, when she was interrupted by the appearance in the quadrangular slough without of a large figure in the uniform of the yeomanry cavalry.

'What do you see out there?' said the farmer with a start, as she paused and slowly blushed.

'A soldier--one of the yeomanry,' said Anne, not quite at her ease.

'Scrounch it all--'tis my nephew!' exclaimed the old man, his face turning to a phosphoric pallor, and his body twitching with innumerable alarms as he formed upon his face a gasping smile of joy, with which to welcome the new-coming relative. 'Read on, prithee, Miss Garland.'

Before she had read far the visitor straddled over the door-hurdle into the passage and entered the room.

'Well, nunc, how do you feel?' said the giant, shaking hands with the farmer in the manner of one violently ringing a hand-bell. 'Glad to see

you.'

'Bad and weakish, Festus,' replied the other, his person responding passively to the rapid vibrations imparted. 'O, be tender, please--a little softer, there's a dear nephew! My arm is no more than a cobweb.'

'Ah, poor soul!'

'Yes, I am not much more than a skeleton, and can't bear rough usage.'

'Sorry to hear that; but I'll bear your affliction in mind. Why, you are all in a tremble, Uncle Benjy!'

''Tis because I am so gratified,' said the old man. 'I always get all in a tremble when I am taken by surprise by a beloved relation.'

'Ah, that's it!' said the yeoman, bringing his hand down on the back of his uncle's chair with a loud smack, at which Uncle Benjy nervously sprang three inches from his seat and dropped into it again. 'Ask your pardon for frightening ye, uncle. 'Tis how we do in the army, and I forgot your nerves. You have scarcely expected to see me, I dare say, but here I am.'

'I am glad to see ye. You are not going to stay long, perhaps?'

'Quite the contrary. I am going to stay ever so long!'

'O I see! I am so glad, dear Festus. Ever so long, did ye say?'

'Yes, ever so long,' said the young gentleman, sitting on the slope of the bureau and stretching out his legs as props. 'I am going to make this quite my own home whenever I am off duty, as long as we stay out. And after that, when the campaign is over in the autumn, I shall come here, and live with you like your own son, and help manage your land and your farm, you know, and make you a comfortable old man.'

'Ah! How you do please me!' said the farmer, with a horrified smile, and grasping the arms of his chair to sustain himself.

'Yes; I have been meaning to come a long time, as I knew you'd like to have me, Uncle Benjy; and 'tisn't in my heart to refuse you.'

'You always was kind that way!'

'Yes; I always was. But I ought to tell you at once, not to disappoint you, that I shan't be here always--all day, that is, because of my military duties as a cavalry man.'

'O, not always? That's a pity!' exclaimed the farmer with a cheerful eye.

'I knew you'd say so. And I shan't be able to sleep here at night

sometimes, for the same reason.'

'Not sleep here o' nights?' said the old gentleman, still more relieved. 'You ought to sleep here--you certainly ought; in short, you must. But you can't!'

'Not while we are with the colours. But directly that's over--the very next day--I'll stay here all day, and all night too, to oblige you, since you ask me so very kindly.'

'Th-thank ye, that will be very nice!' said Uncle Benjy.

'Yes, I knew 'twould relieve ye.' And he kindly stroked his uncle's head, the old man expressing his enjoyment at the affectionate token by a death's-head grimace. 'I should have called to see you the other night when I passed through here,' Festus continued; 'but it was so late that I couldn't come so far out of my way. You won't think it unkind?'

'Not at all, if you couldn't. I never shall think it unkind if you really can't come, you know, Festy.' There was a few minutes' pause, and as the nephew said nothing Uncle Benjy went on: 'I wish I had a little present for ye. But as ill-luck would have it we have lost a deal of stock this year, and I have had to pay away so much.'

'Poor old man--I know you have. Shall I lend you a seven-shilling piece, Uncle Benjy?'

'Ha, ha!--you must have your joke; well, I'll think o' that. And so they expect Buonaparty to choose this very part of the coast for his landing, hey? And that the yeomanry be to stand in front as the forlorn hope?'

'Who says so?' asked the florid son of Mars, losing a little redness.

'The newspaper-man.'

'O, there's nothing in that,' said Festus bravely. 'The gover'ment thought it possible at one time; but they don't know.'

Festus turned himself as he talked, and now said abruptly: 'Ah, who's this? Why, 'tis our little Anne!' He had not noticed her till this moment, the young woman having at his entry kept her face over the newspaper, and then got away to the back part of the room. 'And are you and your mother always going to stay down there in the mill-house watching the little fishes, Miss Anne?'

She said that it was uncertain, in a tone of truthful precision which the question was hardly worth, looking forcedly at him as she spoke. But she blushed fitfully, in her arms and hands as much as in her face. Not that she was overpowered by the great boots, formidable spurs, and other fierce appliances of his person, as he imagined; simply she had not been prepared to meet him there.

'I hope you will, I am sure, for my own good,' said he, letting his eyes linger on the round of her cheek.

Anne became a little more dignified, and her look showed reserve. But the yeoman on perceiving this went on talking to her in so civil a way that he irresistibly amused her, though she tried to conceal all feeling. At a brighter remark of his than usual her mouth moved, her upper lip playing uncertainly over her white teeth; it would stay still--no, it would withdraw a little way in a smile; then it would flutter down again; and so it wavered like a butterfly in a tender desire to be pleased and smiling, and yet to be also sedate and composed; to show him that she did not want compliments, and yet that she was not so cold as to wish to repress any genuine feeling he might be anxious to utter.

'Shall you want any more reading, Mr. Derriman?' said she, interrupting the younger man in his remarks. 'If not, I'll go homeward.'

'Don't let me hinder you longer,' said Festus. 'I'm off in a minute or two, when your man has cleaned my boots.'

'Ye don't hinder us, nephew. She must have the paper: 'tis the day for her to have 'n. She might read a little more, as I have had so little profit out o' en hitherto. Well, why don't ye speak? Will ye, or won't ye, my dear?'

'Not to two,' she said.

'Ho, ho! damn it, I must go then, I suppose,' said Festus, laughing; and unable to get a further glance from her he left the room and clanked into the back yard, where he saw a man; holding up his hand he cried, 'Anthony Cripplestraw!'

Cripplestraw came up in a trot, moved a lock of his hair and replaced it, and said, 'Yes, Maister Derriman.' He was old Mr. Derriman's odd hand in the yard and garden, and like his employer had no great pretensions to manly beauty, owing to a limpness of backbone and speciality of mouth, which opened on one side only, giving him a triangular smile.

'Well, Cripplestraw, how is it to-day?' said Festus, with socially-superior heartiness.

'Middlin', considering, Maister Derriman. And how's yerself?'

'Fairish. Well, now, see and clean these military boots of mine. I'll cock my foot up on this bench. This pigsty of my uncle's is not fit for a soldier to come into.'

'Yes, Maister Derriman, I will. No, 'tis not fit, Maister Derriman.'

'What stock has uncle lost this year, Cripplestraw?'

'Well, let's see, sir. I can call to mind that we've lost three

chickens, a tom-pigeon, and a weakly sucking-pig, one of a fare of ten. I can't think of no more, Maister Derriman.'

'H'm, not a large quantity of cattle. The old rascal!'

'No, 'tis not a large quantity. Old what did you say, sir?'

'O nothing. He's within there.' Festus flung his forehead in the direction of a right line towards the inner apartment. 'He's a regular sniche one.'

'Hee, hee; fie, fie, Master Derriman!' said Cripplestraw, shaking his head in delighted censure. 'Gentlefolks shouldn't talk so. And an officer, Mr. Derriman! 'Tis the duty of all cavalry gentlemen to bear in mind that their blood is a knowed thing in the country, and not to speak ill o't.'

'He's close-fisted.'

'Well, maister, he is--I own he is a little. 'Tis the nater of some old venerable gentlemen to be so. We'll hope he'll treat ye well in yer fortune, sir.'

'Hope he will. Do people talk about me here, Cripplestraw?' asked the yeoman, as the other continued busy with his boots.

'Well, yes, sir; they do off and on, you know. They says you be as fine a piece of calvery flesh and bones as was ever growed on fallow-ground; in short, all owns that you be a fine fellow, sir. I wish I wasn't no more afraid of the French than you be; but being in the Locals, Maister Derriman, I assure ye I dream of having to defend my country every night; and I don't like the dream at all.'

'You should take it careless, Cripplestraw, as I do; and 'twould soon come natural to you not to mind it at all. Well, a fine fellow is not everything, you know. O no. There's as good as I in the army, and even better.'

'And they say that when you fall this summer, you'll die like a man.'

'When I fall?'

'Yes, sure, Maister Derriman. Poor soul o' thee! I shan't forget 'ee as you lie mouldering in yer soldier's grave.'

'Hey?' said the warrior uneasily. 'What makes 'em think I am going to fall?'

'Well, sir, by all accounts the yeomanry will be put in front.'

'Front! That's what my uncle has been saying.'

'Yes, and by all accounts 'tis true. And naterelly they'll be mowed down like grass; and you among 'em, poor young galliant officer!'

'Look here, Cripplestraw. This is a reg'lar foolish report. How can yeomanry be put in front? Nobody's put in front. We yeomanry have nothing to do with Buonaparte's landing. We shall be away in a safe place, guarding the possessions and jewels. Now, can you see, Cripplestraw, any way at all that the yeomanry can be put in front? Do you think they really can?'

'Well, maister, I am afraid I do,' said the cheering Cripplestraw. 'And I know a great warrior like you is only too glad o' the chance. 'Twill be a great thing for ye, death and glory! In short, I hope from my heart you will be, and I say so very often to folk--in fact, I pray at night for't.'

'O! cuss you! you needn't pray about it.'

'No, Maister Derriman, I won't.'

'Of course my sword will do its duty. That's enough. And now be off with ye.'

Festus gloomily returned to his uncle's room and found that Anne was just leaving. He was inclined to follow her at once, but as she gave him no opportunity for doing this he went to the window, and remained tapping

his fingers against the shutter while she crossed the yard.

'Well, nephy, you are not gone yet?' said the farmer, looking dubiously at Festus from under one eyelid. 'You see how I am. Not by any means better, you see; so I can't entertain 'ee as well as I would.'

'You can't, nunc, you can't. I don't think you are worse--if I do, dash my wig. But you'll have plenty of opportunities to make me welcome when you are better. If you are not so brisk inwardly as you was, why not try change of air? This is a dull, damp hole.'

''Tis, Festus; and I am thinking of moving.'

'Ah, where to?' said Festus, with surprise and interest.

'Up into the garret in the north corner. There is no fireplace in the room; but I shan't want that, poor soul o' me.'

''Tis not moving far.'

''Tis not. But I have not a soul belonging to me within ten mile; and you know very well that I couldn't afford to go to lodgings that I had to pay for.'

'I know it--I know it, Uncle Benjy! Well, don't be disturbed. I'll come and manage for you as soon as ever this Boney alarm is over; but when a

man's country calls he must obey, if he is a man.'

'A splendid spirit!' said Uncle Benjy, with much admiration on the surface of his countenance. 'I never had it. How could it have got into the boy?'

'From my mother's side, perhaps.'

'Perhaps so. Well, take care of yourself, nephy,' said the farmer, waving his hand impressively. 'Take care! In these warlike times your spirit may carry ye into the arms of the enemy; and you are the last of the family. You should think of this, and not let your bravery carry ye away.'

'Don't be disturbed, uncle; I'll control myself,' said Festus, betrayed into self-complacency against his will. 'At least I'll do what I can, but nature will out sometimes. Well, I'm off.' He began humming 'Brighton Camp,' and, promising to come again soon, retired with assurance, each yard of his retreat adding private joyousness to his uncle's form.

When the bulky young man had disappeared through the porter's lodge, Uncle Benjy showed preternatural activity for one in his invalid state, jumping up quickly without his stick, at the same time opening and shutting his mouth quite silently like a thirsty frog, which was his way of expressing mirth. He ran upstairs as quick as an old squirrel, and

went to a dormer window which commanded a view of the grounds beyond the

gate, and the footpath that stretched across them to the village.

'Yes, yes!' he said in a suppressed scream, dancing up and down, 'he's after her: she've hit en!' For there appeared upon the path the figure of Anne Garland, and, hastening on at some little distance behind her, the swaggering shape of Festus. She became conscious of his approach, and moved more quickly. He moved more quickly still, and overtook her. She turned as if in answer to a call from him, and he walked on beside her, till they were out of sight. The old man then played upon an imaginary fiddle for about half a minute; and, suddenly discontinuing these signs of pleasure, went downstairs again.