

VII. HOW THEY TALKED IN THE PASTURES

'You often come this way?' said Festus to Anne rather before he had overtaken her.

'I come for the newspaper and other things,' she said, perplexed by a doubt whether he were there by accident or design.

They moved on in silence, Festus beating the grass with his switch in a masterful way. 'Did you speak, Mis'ess Anne?' he asked.

'No,' said Anne.

'Ten thousand pardons. I thought you did. Now don't let me drive you out of the path. I can walk among the high grass and giltycups--they will not yellow my stockings as they will yours. Well, what do you think of a lot of soldiers coming to the neighbourhood in this way?'

'I think it is very lively, and a great change,' she said with demure seriousness.

'Perhaps you don't like us warriors as a body?'

Anne smiled without replying.

'Why, you are laughing!' said the yeoman, looking searchingly at her and blushing like a little fire. 'What do you see to laugh at?'

'Did I laugh?' said Anne, a little scared at his sudden mortification.

'Why, yes; you know you did, you young sneerer,' he said like a cross baby. 'You are laughing at me--that's who you are laughing at! I should like to know what you would do without such as me if the French were to drop in upon ye any night?'

'Would you help to beat them off?' said she.

'Can you ask such a question? What are we for? But you don't think anything of soldiers.'

O yes, she liked soldiers, she said, especially when they came home from the wars, covered with glory; though when she thought what doings had won

them that glory she did not like them quite so well. The gallant and appeased yeoman said he supposed her to mean chopping off heads, blowing

out brains, and that kind of business, and thought it quite right that a tender-hearted thing like her should feel a little horrified. But as for

him, he should not mind such another Blenheim this summer as the army had

fought a hundred years ago, or whenever it was--dash his wig if he should mind it at all. 'Hullo! now you are laughing again; yes, I saw you!' And

the choleric Festus turned his blue eyes and flushed face upon her as though he would read her through. Anne strove valiantly to look calmly back; but her eyes could not face his, and they fell. 'You did laugh!' he repeated.

'It was only a tiny little one,' she murmured.

'Ah--I knew you did!' thundered he. 'Now what was it you laughed at?'

'I only--thought that you were--merely in the yeomanry,' she murmured slyly.

'And what of that?'

'And the yeomanry only seem farmers that have lost their senses.'

'Yes, yes! I knew you meant some jeering o' that sort, Mistress Anne. But I suppose 'tis the way of women, and I take no notice. I'll confess that some of us are no great things: but I know how to draw a sword, don't I?--say I don't just to provoke me.'

'I am sure you do,' said Anne sweetly. 'If a Frenchman came up to you, Mr. Derriman, would you take him on the hip, or on the thigh?'

'Now you are flattering!' he said, his white teeth uncovering themselves in a smile. 'Well, of course I should draw my sword--no, I mean my sword

would be already drawn; and I should put spurs to my horse--charger, as we call it in the army; and I should ride up to him and say--no, I shouldn't say anything, of course--men never waste words in battle; I should take him with the third guard, low point, and then coming back to the second guard--'

'But that would be taking care of yourself--not hitting at him.'

'How can you say that!' he cried, the beams upon his face turning to a lurid cloud in a moment. 'How can you understand military terms who've never had a sword in your life? I shouldn't take him with the sword at all.' He went on with eager sulkiness, 'I should take him with my pistol. I should pull off my right glove, and throw back my goat-skin; then I should open my priming-pan, prime, and cast about--no, I shouldn't, that's wrong; I should draw my right pistol, and as soon as loaded, seize the weapon by the butt; then at the word "Cock your pistol" I should--'

'Then there is plenty of time to give such words of command in the heat of battle?' said Anne innocently.

'No!' said the yeoman, his face again in flames. 'Why, of course I am only telling you what would be the word of command if--there now! you la--'

'I didn't; 'pon my word I didn't!'

'No, I don't think you did; it was my mistake. Well, then I come smartly to Present, looking well along the barrel--along the barrel--and fire. Of course I know well enough how to engage the enemy! But I expect my old uncle has been setting you against me.'

'He has not said a word,' replied Anne; 'though I have heard of you, of course.'

'What have you heard? Nothing good, I dare say. It makes my blood boil within me!'

'O, nothing bad,' said she assuringly. 'Just a word now and then.'

'Now, come, tell me, there's a dear. I don't like to be crossed. It shall be a sacred secret between us. Come, now!'

Anne was embarrassed, and her smile was uncomfortable. 'I shall not tell you,' she said at last.

'There it is again!' said the yeoman, throwing himself into a despair. 'I shall soon begin to believe that my name is not worth sixpence about here!'

'I tell you 'twas nothing against you,' repeated Anne.

'That means it might have been for me,' said Festus, in a mollified tone.

'Well, though, to speak the truth, I have a good many faults, some people will praise me, I suppose. 'Twas praise?'

'It was.'

'Well, I am not much at farming, and I am not much in company, and I am not much at figures, but perhaps I must own, since it is forced upon me, that I can show as fine a soldier's figure on the Esplanade as any man of the cavalry.'

'You can,' said Anne; for though her flesh crept in mortal terror of his irascibility, she could not resist the fearful pleasure of leading him on. 'You look very well; and some say, you are--'

'What? Well, they say I am good-looking. I don't make myself, so 'tis no praise. Hullo! what are you looking across there for?'

'Only at a bird that I saw fly out of that tree,' said Anne.

'What? Only at a bird, do you say?' he heaved out in a voice of thunder.

'I see your shoulders a-shaking, young madam. Now don't you provoke me with that laughing! By God, it won't do!'

'Then go away!' said Anne, changed from mirthfulness to irritation by his rough manner. 'I don't want your company, you great bragging thing! You

are so touchy there's no bearing with you. Go away!

'No, no, Anne; I am wrong to speak to you so. I give you free liberty to say what you will to me. Say I am not a bit of a soldier, or anything! Abuse me--do now, there's a dear. I'm scum, I'm froth, I'm dirt before the besom--yes!'

'I have nothing to say, sir. Stay where you are till I am out of this field.'

'Well, there's such command in your looks that I ha'n't heart to go against you. You will come this way to-morrow at the same time? Now, don't be uncivil.'

She was too generous not to forgive him, but the short little lip murmured that she did not think it at all likely she should come that way to-morrow.

'Then Sunday?' he said.

'Not Sunday,' said she.

'Then Monday--Tuesday--Wednesday, surely?' he went on experimentally.

She answered that she should probably not see him on either day, and, cutting short the argument, went through the wicket into the other field.

Festus paused, looking after her; and when he could no longer see her slight figure he swept away his deliberations, began singing, and turned off in the other direction.