

XXIV. A LETTER, A VISITOR, AND A TIN BOX

The result of the explanation upon Anne was bitter self-reproach. She was so sorry at having wronged the kindly soldier that next morning she went by herself to the down, and stood exactly where his tent had covered the sod on which he had lain so many nights, thinking what sadness he must have suffered because of her at the time of packing up and going away. After that she wiped from her eyes the tears of pity which had come there, descended to the house, and wrote an impulsive letter to him, in which occurred the following passages, indiscreet enough under the circumstances:--

'I find all justice, all rectitude, on your side, John; and all impertinence, all inconsiderateness, on mine. I am so much convinced of your honour in the whole transaction, that I shall for the future mistrust myself in everything. And if it be possible, whenever I differ from you on any point I shall take an hour's time for consideration before I say that I differ. If I have lost your friendship, I have only myself to thank for it; but I sincerely hope that you can forgive.'

After writing this she went to the garden, where Bob was shearing the spring grass from the paths. 'What is John's direction?' she said, holding the sealed letter in her hand.

'Exonbury Barracks,' Bob faltered, his countenance sinking.

She thanked him and went indoors. When he came in, later in the day, he passed the door of her empty sitting-room and saw the letter on the mantelpiece. He disliked the sight of it. Hearing voices in the other room, he entered and found Anne and her mother there, talking to Cripplestraw, who had just come in with a message from Squire Derriman, requesting Miss Garland, as she valued the peace of mind of an old and troubled man, to go at once and see him.

'I cannot go,' she said, not liking the risk that such a visit involved.

An hour later Cripplestraw shambled again into the passage, on the same errand.

'Maister's very poorly, and he hopes that you'll come, Mis'ess Anne. He wants to see 'ee very particular about the French.'

Anne would have gone in a moment, but for the fear that some one besides the farmer might encounter her, and she answered as before.

Another hour passed, and the wheels of a vehicle were heard. Cripplestraw had come for the third time, with a horse and gig; he was dressed in his best clothes, and brought with him on this occasion a basket containing raisins, almonds, oranges, and sweet cakes. Offering them to her as a gift from the old farmer, he repeated his request for her to accompany

him, the gig and best mare having been sent as an additional inducement.

'I believe the old gentleman is in love with you, Anne,' said her mother.

'Why couldn't he drive down himself to see me?' Anne inquired of Cripplestraw.

'He wants you at the house, please.'

'Is Mr. Festus with him?'

'No; he's away to Budmouth.'

'I'll go,' said she.

'And I may come and meet you?' said Bob.

'There's my letter--what shall I do about that?' she said, instead of answering him. 'Take my letter to the post-office, and you may come,' she added.

He said yes and went out, Cripplestraw retreating to the door till she should be ready.

'What letter is it?' said her mother.

'Only one to John,' said Anne. 'I have asked him to forgive my suspicions. I could do no less.'

'Do you want to marry him?' asked Mrs. Loveday bluntly.

'Mother!'

'Well; he will take that letter as an encouragement. Can't you see that he will, you foolish girl?'

Anne did see instantly. 'Of course!' she said. 'Tell Robert that he need not go.'

She went to her room to secure the letter. It was gone from the mantelpiece, and on inquiry it was found that the miller, seeing it there, had sent David with it to Budmouth hours ago. Anne said nothing, and set out for Oxwell Hall with Cripplestraw.

'William,' said Mrs. Loveday to the miller when Anne was gone and Bob had resumed his work in the garden, 'did you get that letter sent off on purpose?'

'Well, I did. I wanted to make sure of it. John likes her, and now 'twill be made up; and why shouldn't he marry her? I'll start him in business, if so be she'll have him.'

'But she is likely to marry Festus Derriman.'

'I don't want her to marry anybody but John,' said the miller doggedly.

'Not if she is in love with Bob, and has been for years, and he with her?' asked his wife triumphantly.

'In love with Bob, and he with her?' repeated Loveday.

'Certainly,' said she, going off and leaving him to his reflections.

When Anne reached the hall she found old Mr. Derriman in his customary chair. His complexion was more ashen, but his movement in rising at her entrance, putting a chair and shutting the door behind her, were much the same as usual.

'Thank God you've come, my dear girl,' he said earnestly. 'Ah, you don't trip across to read to me now! Why did ye cost me so much to fetch you? Fie! A horse and gig, and a man's time in going three times. And what I sent ye cost a good deal in Budmouth market, now everything is so dear there, and 'twould have cost more if I hadn't bought the raisins and oranges some months ago, when they were cheaper. I tell you this because we are old friends, and I have nobody else to tell my troubles to. But I don't begrudge anything to ye since you've come.'

'I am not much pleased to come, even now,' said she. 'What can make you

so seriously anxious to see me?'

'Well, you be a good girl and true; and I've been thinking that of all people of the next generation that I can trust, you are the best. 'Tis my bonds and my title-deeds, such as they be, and the leases, you know, and a few guineas in packets, and more than these, my will, that I have to speak about. Now do ye come this way.'

'O, such things as those!' she returned, with surprise. 'I don't understand those things at all.'

'There's nothing to understand. 'Tis just this. The French will be here within two months; that's certain. I have it on the best authority, that the army at Boulogne is ready, the boats equipped, the plans laid, and the First Consul only waits for a tide. Heaven knows what will become o' the men o' these parts! But most likely the women will be spared. Now I'll show 'ee.'

He led her across the hall to a stone staircase of semi-circular plan, which conducted to the cellars.

'Down here?' she said.

'Yes; I must trouble ye to come down here. I have thought and thought who is the woman that can best keep a secret for six months, and I say, "Anne Garland." You won't be married before then?'

'O no!' murmured the young woman.

'I wouldn't expect ye to keep a close tongue after such a thing as that. But it will not be necessary.'

When they reached the bottom of the steps he struck a light from a tinder-box, and unlocked the middle one of three doors which appeared in the whitewashed wall opposite. The rays of the candle fell upon the vault and sides of a long low cellar, littered with decayed woodwork from other parts of the hall, among the rest stair-balusters, carved finials, tracery panels, and wainscoting. But what most attracted her eye was a small flagstone turned up in the middle of the floor, a heap of earth beside it, and a measuring-tape. Derriman went to the corner of the cellar, and pulled out a clamped box from under the straw. 'You be rather heavy, my dear, eh?' he said, affectionately addressing the box as he lifted it. 'But you are going to be put in a safe place, you know, or that rascal will get hold of ye, and carry ye off and ruin me.' He then with some difficulty lowered the box into the hole, raked in the earth upon it, and lowered the flagstone, which he was a long time in fixing to his satisfaction. Miss Garland, who was romantically interested, helped him to brush away the fragments of loose earth; and when he had scattered over the floor a little of the straw that lay about, they again ascended to upper air.

'Is this all, sir?' said Anne.

'Just a moment longer, honey. Will you come into the great parlour?'

She followed him thither.

'If anything happens to me while the fighting is going on--it may be on these very fields--you will know what to do,' he resumed. 'But first please sit down again, there's a dear, whilst I write what's in my head. See, there's the best paper, and a new quill that I've afforded myself for't.'

'What a strange business! I don't think I much like it, Mr. Derriman,' she said, seating herself.

He had by this time begun to write, and murmured as he wrote--

""Twenty-three and a half from N.W. Sixteen and three-quarters from N.E."--There, that's all. Now I seal it up and give it to you to keep safe till I ask ye for it, or you hear of my being trampled down by the enemy.'

'What does it mean?' she asked, as she received the paper.

'Clk! Ha! ha! Why, that's the distance of the box from the two corners of the cellar. I measured it before you came. And, my honey, to make all sure, if the French soldiery are after ye, tell your mother the

meaning on't, or any other friend, in case they should put ye to death, and the secret be lost. But that I am sure I hope they won't do, though your pretty face will be a sad bait to the soldiers. I often have wished you was my daughter, honey; and yet in these times the less cares a man has the better, so I am glad you bain't. Shall my man drive you home?'

'No, no,' she said, much depressed by the words he had uttered. 'I can find my way. You need not trouble to come down.'

'Then take care of the paper. And if you outlive me, you'll find I have not forgot you.'