

## XXV. FESTUS SHOWS HIS LOVE

Festus Derriman had remained in the Royal watering-place all that day, his horse being sick at stables; but, wishing to coax or bully from his uncle a remount for the coming summer, he set off on foot for Oxwell early in the evening. When he drew near to the village, or rather to the hall, which was a mile from the village, he overtook a slim, quick-eyed woman, sauntering along at a leisurely pace. She was fashionably dressed in a green spencer, with 'Mameluke' sleeves, and wore a velvet Spanish hat and feather.

'Good afternoon t'ye, ma'am,' said Festus, throwing a sword-and-pistol air into his greeting. 'You are out for a walk?'

'I am out for a walk, captain,' said the lady, who had criticized him from the crevice of her eye, without seeming to do much more than continue her demure look forward, and gave the title as a sop to his apparent character.

'From the town?--I'd swear it, ma'am; 'pon my honour I would!'

'Yes, I am from the town, sir,' said she.

'Ah, you are a visitor! I know every one of the regular inhabitants; we soldiers are in and out there continually. Festus Derriman, Yeomanry

Cavalry, you know. The fact is, the watering-place is under our charge; the folks will be quite dependent upon us for their deliverance in the coming struggle. We hold our lives in our hands, and theirs, I may say, in our pockets. What made you come here, ma'am, at such a critical time?'

'I don't see that it is such a critical time?'

'But it is, though; and so you'd say if you was as much mixed up with the military affairs of the nation as some of us.'

The lady smiled. 'The King is coming this year, anyhow,' said she.

'Never!' said Festus firmly. 'Ah, you are one of the attendants at court perhaps, come on ahead to get the King's chambers ready, in case Boney should not land?'

'No,' she said; 'I am connected with the theatre, though not just at the present moment. I have been out of luck for the last year or two; but I have fetched up again. I join the company when they arrive for the season.'

Festus surveyed her with interest. 'Faith! and is it so? Well, ma'am, what part do you play?'

'I am mostly the leading lady--the heroine,' she said, drawing herself up

with dignity.

'I'll come and have a look at ye if all's well, and the landing is put off--hang me if I don't!--Hullo, hullo, what do I see?'

His eyes were stretched towards a distant field, which Anne Garland was at that moment hastily crossing, on her way from the hall to Overcombe.

'I must be off. Good-day to ye, dear creature!' he exclaimed, hurrying forward.

The lady said, 'O, you droll monster!' as she smiled and watched him stride ahead.

Festus bounded on over the hedge, across the intervening patch of green, and into the field which Anne was still crossing. In a moment or two she looked back, and seeing the well-known Herculean figure of the yeoman behind her felt rather alarmed, though she determined to show no difference in her outward carriage. But to maintain her natural gait was beyond her powers. She spasmodically quickened her pace; fruitlessly, however, for he gained upon her, and when within a few strides of her exclaimed, 'Well, my darling!' Anne started off at a run.

Festus was already out of breath, and soon found that he was not likely to overtake her. On she went, without turning her head, till an unusual noise behind compelled her to look round. His face was in the act of

falling back; he swerved on one side, and dropped like a log upon a convenient hedgerow-bank which bordered the path. There he lay quite still.

Anne was somewhat alarmed; and after standing at gaze for two or three minutes, drew nearer to him, a step and a half at a time, wondering and doubting, as a meek ewe draws near to some strolling vagabond who flings himself on the grass near the flock.

'He is in a swoon!' she murmured.

Her heart beat quickly, and she looked around. Nobody was in sight; she advanced a step nearer still and observed him again. Apparently his face was turning to a livid hue, and his breathing had become obstructed.

"Tis not a swoon; 'tis apoplexy!' she said, in deep distress. 'I ought to untie his neck.' But she was afraid to do this, and only drew a little closer still.

Miss Garland was now within three feet of him, whereupon the senseless man, who could hold his breath no longer, sprang to his feet and darted at her, saying, 'Ha! ha! a scheme for a kiss!'

She felt his arm slipping round her neck; but, twirling about with amazing dexterity, she wriggled from his embrace and ran away along the field. The force with which she had extricated herself was sufficient to

throw Festus upon the grass, and by the time that he got upon his legs again she was many yards off. Uttering a word which was not exactly a blessing, he immediately gave chase; and thus they ran till Anne entered a meadow divided down the middle by a brook about six feet wide. A narrow plank was thrown loosely across at the point where the path traversed this stream, and when Anne reached it she at once scampered over. At the other side she turned her head to gather the probabilities of the situation, which were that Festus Derriman would overtake her even now. By a sudden forethought she stooped, seized the end of the plank, and endeavoured to drag it away from the opposite bank. But the weight was too great for her to do more than slightly move it, and with a desperate sigh she ran on again, having lost many valuable seconds.

But her attempt, though ineffectual in dragging it down, had been enough to unsettle the little bridge; and when Derriman reached the middle, which he did half a minute later, the plank turned over on its edge, tilting him bodily into the river. The water was not remarkably deep, but as the yeoman fell flat on his stomach he was completely immersed; and it was some time before he could drag himself out. When he arose, dripping on the bank, and looked around, Anne had vanished from the mead.

Then Festus's eyes glowed like carbuncles, and he gave voice to fearful imprecations, shaking his fist in the soft summer air towards Anne, in a way that was terrible for any maiden to behold. Wading back through the stream, he walked along its bank with a heavy tread, the water running from his coat-tails, wrists, and the tips of his ears, in silvery

dribbles, that sparkled pleasantly in the sun. Thus he hastened away, and went round by a by-path to the hall.

Meanwhile the author of his troubles was rapidly drawing nearer to the mill, and soon, to her inexpressible delight, she saw Bob coming to meet her. She had heard the flounce, and, feeling more secure from her pursuer, had dropped her pace to a quick walk. No sooner did she reach Bob than, overcome by the excitement of the moment, she flung herself into his arms. Bob instantly enclosed her in an embrace so very thorough that there was no possible danger of her falling, whatever degree of exhaustion might have given rise to her somewhat unexpected action; and in this attitude they silently remained, till it was borne in upon Anne that the present was the first time in her life that she had ever been in such a position. Her face then burnt like a sunset, and she did not know how to look up at him. Feeling at length quite safe, she suddenly resolved not to give way to her first impulse to tell him the whole of what had happened, lest there should be a dreadful quarrel and fight between Bob and the yeoman, and great difficulties caused in the Loveday family on her account, the miller having important wheat transactions with the Derrimans.

'You seem frightened, dearest Anne,' said Bob tenderly.

'Yes,' she replied. 'I saw a man I did not like the look of, and he was inclined to follow me. But, worse than that, I am troubled about the French. O Bob! I am afraid you will be killed, and my mother, and John,

and your father, and all of us hunted down!"

'Now I have told you, dear little heart, that it cannot be. We shall drive 'em into the sea after a battle or two, even if they land, which I don't believe they will. We've got ninety sail of the line, and though it is rather unfortunate that we should have declared war against Spain at this ticklish time, there's enough for all.' And Bob went into elaborate statistics of the navy, army, militia, and volunteers, to prolong the time of holding her. When he had done speaking he drew rather a heavy sigh.

'What's the matter, Bob?'

'I haven't been yet to offer myself as a sea-fencible, and I ought to have done it long ago.'

'You are only one. Surely they can do without you?'

Bob shook his head. She arose from her restful position, her eye catching his with a shamefaced expression of having given way at last. Loveday drew from his pocket a paper, and said, as they slowly walked on, 'Here's something to make us brave and patriotic. I bought it in Budmouth. Isn't it a stirring picture?'

It was a hieroglyphic profile of Napoleon. The hat represented a maimed French eagle; the face was ingeniously made up of human carcasses, knotted

and writhing together in such directions as to form a physiognomy; a band, or stock, shaped to resemble the English Channel, encircled his throat, and seemed to choke him; his epaulette was a hand tearing a cobweb that represented the treaty of peace with England; and his ear was a woman crouching over a dying child. {225}

'It is dreadful!' said Anne. 'I don't like to see it.'

She had recovered from her emotion, and walked along beside him with a grave, subdued face. Bob did not like to assume the privileges of an accepted lover and draw her hand through his arm; for, conscious that she naturally belonged to a politer grade than his own, he feared lest her exhibition of tenderness were an impulse which cooler moments might regret. A perfect Paul-and-Virginia life had not absolutely set in for him as yet, and it was not to be hastened by force. When they had passed over the bridge into the mill-front they saw the miller standing at the door with a face of concern.

'Since you have been gone,' he said, 'a Government man has been here, and to all the houses, taking down the numbers of the women and children, and their ages and the number of horses and waggons that can be mustered, in case they have to retreat inland, out of the way of the invading army.'

The little family gathered themselves together, all feeling the crisis more seriously than they liked to express. Mrs. Loveday thought how ridiculous a thing social ambition was in such a conjuncture as this, and



vowed that she would leave Anne to love where she would. Anne, too, forgot the little peculiarities of speech and manner in Bob and his father, which sometimes jarred for a moment upon her more refined sense, and was thankful for their love and protection in this looming trouble.

On going upstairs she remembered the paper which Farmer Derriman had given her, and searched in her bosom for it. She could not find it there. 'I must have left it on the table,' she said to herself. It did not matter; she remembered every word. She took a pen and wrote a duplicate, which she put safely away.

But Anne was wrong. She had, after all, placed the paper where she supposed, and there it ought to have been. But in escaping from Festus, when he feigned apoplexy, it had fallen out upon the grass. Five minutes after that event, when pursuer and pursued were two or three fields ahead, the gaily-dressed woman whom the yeoman had overtaken, peeped cautiously through the stile into the corner of the field which had been the scene of the scramble; and seeing the paper she climbed over, secured it, loosened the wafer without tearing the sheet, and read the memorandum within. Unable to make anything of its meaning, the saunterer put it in her pocket, and, dismissing the matter from her mind, went on by the by-path which led to the back of the mill. Here, behind the hedge, she stood and surveyed the old building for some time, after which she meditatively turned, and retraced her steps towards the Royal watering-place.