

## XXVI. THE ALARM

The night which followed was historic and memorable. Mrs. Loveday was awakened by the boom of a distant gun: she told the miller, and they listened awhile. The sound was not repeated, but such was the state of their feelings that Mr. Loveday went to Bob's room and asked if he had heard it. Bob was wide awake, looking out of the window; he had heard the ominous sound, and was inclined to investigate the matter. While the father and son were dressing they fancied that a glare seemed to be rising in the sky in the direction of the beacon hill. Not wishing to alarm Anne and her mother, the miller assured them that Bob and himself were merely going out of doors to inquire into the cause of the report, after which they plunged into the gloom together. A few steps' progress opened up more of the sky, which, as they had thought, was indeed irradiated by a lurid light; but whether it came from the beacon or from a more distant point they were unable to clearly tell. They pushed on rapidly towards higher ground.

Their excitement was merely of a piece with that of all men at this critical juncture. Everywhere expectation was at fever heat. For the last year or two only five-and-twenty miles of shallow water had divided quiet English homesteads from an enemy's army of a hundred and fifty

thousand men. We had taken the matter lightly enough, eating and drinking as in the days of Noe, and singing satires without end. We punned on Buonaparte and his gunboats, chalked his effigy on stage-coaches, and published the same in prints. Still, between these bursts of hilarity, it was sometimes recollected that England was the only European country which had not succumbed to the mighty little man who was less than human in feeling, and more than human in will; that our spirit for resistance was greater than our strength; and that the Channel was often calm. Boats built of wood which was greenly growing in its native forest three days before it was bent as wales to their sides, were ridiculous enough; but they might be, after all, sufficient for a single trip between two visible shores.

The English watched Buonaparte in these preparations, and Buonaparte watched the English. At the distance of Boulogne details were lost, but we were impressed on fine days by the novel sight of a huge army moving and twinkling like a school of mackerel under the rays of the sun. The regular way of passing an afternoon in the coast towns was to stroll up to the signal posts and chat with the lieutenant on duty there about the latest inimical object seen at sea. About once a week there appeared in the newspapers either a paragraph concerning some adventurous English gentleman who had sailed out in a pleasure-boat till he lay near enough to Boulogne to see Buonaparte standing on the heights among his marshals; or else some lines about a mysterious stranger with a foreign accent, who, after collecting a vast deal of information on our resources, had hired a boat at a southern port, and vanished with it towards France

before his intention could be divined.

In forecasting his grand venture, Buonaparte postulated the help of Providence to a remarkable degree. Just at the hour when his troops were on board the flat-bottomed boats and ready to sail, there was to be a great fog, that should spread a vast obscurity over the length and breadth of the Channel, and keep the English blind to events on the other side. The fog was to last twenty-four hours, after which it might clear away. A dead calm was to prevail simultaneously with the fog, with the twofold object of affording the boats easy transit and dooming our ships to lie motionless. Thirdly, there was to be a spring tide, which should combine its manoeuvres with those of the fog and calm.

Among the many thousands of minor Englishmen whose lives were affected by these tremendous designs may be numbered our old acquaintance Corporal Tullidge, who sported the crushed arm, and poor old Simon Burden, the dazed veteran who had fought at Minden. Instead of sitting snugly in the settle of the Old Ship, in the village adjoining Overcombe, they were obliged to keep watch on the hill. They made themselves as comfortable as was possible in the circumstances, dwelling in a hut of clods and turf, with a brick chimney for cooking. Here they observed the nightly progress of the moon and stars, grew familiar with the heaving of moles, the dancing of rabbits on the hillocks, the distant hoot of owls, the bark of foxes from woods further inland; but saw not a sign of the enemy. As, night after night, they walked round the two ricks which it was their

duty to fire at a signal--one being of furze for a quick flame, the other of turf, for a long, slow radiance--they thought and talked of old times, and drank patriotically from a large wood flagon that was filled every day.

Bob and his father soon became aware that the light was from the beacon. By the time that they reached the top it was one mass of towering flame, from which the sparks fell on the green herbage like a fiery dew; the forms of the two old men being seen passing and repassing in the midst of it. The Lovedays, who came up on the smoky side, regarded the scene for a moment, and then emerged into the light.

'Who goes there?' said Corporal Tullidge, shouldering a pike with his sound arm. 'O, 'tis neighbour Loveday!'

'Did you get your signal to fire it from the east?' said the miller hastily.

'No; from Abbotsea Beach.'

'But you are not to go by a coast signal!'

'Chok' it all, wasn't the Lord-Lieutenant's direction, whenever you see Rainbarrow's Beacon burn to the nor'east'ard, or Haggardon to the nor'west'ard, or the actual presence of the enemy on the shore?'

'But is he here?'

'No doubt o't! The beach light is only just gone down, and Simon heard the guns even better than I.'

'Hark, hark! I hear 'em!' said Bob.

They listened with parted lips, the night wind blowing through Simon Burden's few teeth as through the ruins of Stonehenge. From far down on the lower levels came the noise of wheels and the tramp of horses upon the turnpike road.

'Well, there must be something in it,' said Miller Loveday gravely. 'Bob, we'll go home and make the women-folk safe, and then I'll don my soldier's clothes and be off. God knows where our company will assemble!'

They hastened down the hill, and on getting into the road waited and listened again. Travellers began to come up and pass them in vehicles of all descriptions. It was difficult to attract their attention in the dim light, but by standing on the top of a wall which fenced the road Bob was at last seen.

'What's the matter?' he cried to a butcher who was flying past in his cart, his wife sitting behind him without a bonnet.

'The French have landed!' said the man, without drawing rein.

'Where?' shouted Bob.

'In West Bay; and all Budmouth is in uproar!' replied the voice, now faint in the distance.

Bob and his father hastened on till they reached their own house. As they had expected, Anne and her mother, in common with most of the people, were both dressed, and stood at the door bonneted and shawled, listening to the traffic on the neighbouring highway, Mrs. Loveday having secured what money and small valuables they possessed in a huge pocket which extended all round her waist, and added considerably to her weight and diameter.

"'Tis true enough,' said the miller: 'he's come! You and Anne and the maid must be off to Cousin Jim's at King's-Bere, and when you get there you must do as they do. I must assemble with the company.'

'And I?' said Bob.

'Thou'st better run to the church, and take a pike before they be all gone.'

The horse was put into the gig, and Mrs. Loveday, Anne, and the servant-maid were hastily packed into the vehicle, the latter taking the reins;

David's duties as a fighting-man forbidding all thought of his domestic offices now. Then the silver tankard, teapot, pair of candlesticks like Ionic columns, and other articles too large to be pocketed were thrown into a basket and put up behind. Then came the leave-taking, which was as sad as it was hurried. Bob kissed Anne, and there was no affectation in her receiving that mark of affection as she said through her tears, 'God bless you!' At last they moved off in the dim light of dawn, neither of the three women knowing which road they were to take, but trusting to chance to find it.

As soon as they were out of sight Bob went off for a pike, and his father, first new-flinting his firelock, proceeded to don his uniform, pipe-claying his breeches with such cursory haste as to bespatter his black gaiters with the same ornamental compound. Finding when he was ready that no bugle had as yet sounded, he went with David to the cart-house, dragged out the waggon, and put therein some of the most useful and easily-handled goods, in case there might be an opportunity for conveying them away. By the time this was done and the waggon pushed back and locked in, Bob had returned with his weapon, somewhat mortified at being doomed to this low form of defence. The miller gave his son a parting grasp of the hand, and arranged to meet him at King's-Bere at the first opportunity if the news were true; if happily false, here at their own house.

'Bother it all!' he exclaimed, looking at his stock of flints.

'What?' said Bob.

'I've got no ammunition: not a blessed round!'

'Then what's the use of going?' asked his son.

The miller paused. 'O, I'll go,' he said. 'Perhaps somebody will lend me a little if I get into a hot corner?'

'Lend ye a little! Father, you was always so simple!' said Bob reproachfully.

'Well--I can bagnet a few, anyhow,' said the miller.

The bugle had been blown ere this, and Loveday the father disappeared towards the place of assembly, his empty cartridge-box behind him. Bob seized a brace of loaded pistols which he had brought home from the ship, and, armed with these and a pike, he locked the door and sallied out again towards the turnpike road.

By this time the yeomanry of the district were also on the move, and among them Festus Derriman, who was sleeping at his uncle's, and had been awakened by Cripplestraw. About the time when Bob and his father were descending from the beacon the stalwart yeoman was standing in the stable-yard adjusting his straps, while Cripplestraw saddled the horse. Festus



clanked up and down, looked gloomily at the beacon, heard the retreating carts and carriages, and called Cripplestraw to him, who came from the stable leading the horse at the same moment that Uncle Benjy peeped unobserved from a mullioned window above their heads, the distant light of the beacon fire touching up his features to the complexion of an old brass clock-face.

'I think that before I start, Cripplestraw,' said Festus, whose lurid visage was undergoing a bleaching process curious to look upon, 'you shall go on to Budmouth, and make a bold inquiry whether the cowardly enemy is on shore as yet, or only looming in the bay.'

'I'd go in a moment, sir,' said the other, 'if I hadn't my bad leg again. I should have joined my company afore this; but they said at last drill that I was too old. So I shall wait up in the hay-loft for tidings as soon as I have packed you off, poor gentleman!'

'Do such alarms as these, Cripplestraw, ever happen without foundation? Buonaparte is a wretch, a miserable wretch, and this may be only a false alarm to disappoint such as me?'

'O no, sir; O no!'

'But sometimes there are false alarms?'

'Well, sir, yes. There was a pretended sally o' gunboats last year.'

'And was there nothing else pretended--something more like this, for instance?'

Cripplestraw shook his head. 'I notice yer modesty, Mr. Festus, in making light of things. But there never was, sir. You may depend upon it he's come. Thank God, my duty as a Local don't require me to go to the front, but only the valiant men like my master. Ah, if Boney could only see 'ee now, sir, he'd know too well there is nothing to be got from such a determined skilful officer but blows and musket-balls!'

'Yes, yes. Cripplestraw, if I ride off to Budmouth and meet 'em, all my training will be lost. No skill is required as a forlorn hope.'

'True; that's a point, sir. You would outshine 'em all, and be picked off at the very beginning as a too-dangerous brave man.'

'But if I stay here and urge on the faint-hearted ones, or get up into the turret-stair by that gateway, and pop at the invaders through the loophole, I shouldn't be so completely wasted, should I?'

'You would not, Mr. Derriman. But, as you was going to say next, the fire in yer veins won't let ye do that. You are valiant; very good: you don't want to husband yer valiance at home. The arg'ment is plain.'

'If my birth had been more obscure,' murmured the yeoman, 'and I had only

been in the militia, for instance, or among the humble pikemen, so much wouldn't have been expected of me--of my fiery nature. Cripplestraw, is there a drop of brandy to be got at in the house? I don't feel very well.'

'Dear nephew,' said the old gentleman from above, whom neither of the others had as yet noticed, 'I haven't any spirits opened--so unfortunate! But there's a beautiful barrel of crab-apple cider in draught; and there's some cold tea from last night.'

'What, is he listening?' said Festus, staring up. 'Now I warrant how glad he is to see me forced to go--called out of bed without breakfast, and he quite safe, and sure to escape because he's an old man!--Cripplestraw, I like being in the yeomanry cavalry; but I wish I hadn't been in the ranks; I wish I had been only the surgeon, to stay in the rear while the bodies are brought back to him--I mean, I should have thrown my heart at such a time as this more into the labour of restoring wounded men and joining their shattered limbs together--u-u-ugh!--more than I can into causing the wounds--I am too humane, Cripplestraw, for the ranks!'

'Yes, yes,' said his companion, depressing his spirits to a kindred level. 'And yet, such is fate, that, instead of joining men's limbs together, you'll have to get your own joined--poor young sojer!--all through having such a warlike soul.'

'Yes,' murmured Festus, and paused. 'You can't think how strange I feel here, Cripplestraw,' he continued, laying his hand upon the centre buttons of his waistcoat. 'How I do wish I was only the surgeon!'

He slowly mounted, and Uncle Benjy, in the meantime, sang to himself as he looked on, 'Twen-ty-three and half from N.W. Six-teen and three-quar-ters from N.E.'

'What's that old mummy singing?' said Festus savagely.

'Only a hymn for preservation from our enemies, dear nephew,' meekly replied the farmer, who had heard the remark. 'Twen-ty-three and half from N.W.'

Festus allowed his horse to move on a few paces, and then turned again, as if struck by a happy invention. 'Cripplestraw,' he began, with an artificial laugh, 'I am obliged to confess, after all--I must see her! 'Tisn't nature that makes me draw back--'tis love. I must go and look for her.'

'A woman, sir?'

'I didn't want to confess it; but 'tis a woman. Strange that I should be drawn so entirely against my natural wish to rush at 'em!'

Cripplestraw, seeing which way the wind blew, found it advisable to blow

in harmony. 'Ah, now at last I see, sir! Spite that few men live that be worthy to command ye; spite that you could rush on, marshal the troops to victory, as I may say; but then--what of it? there's the unhappy fate of being smit with the eyes of a woman, and you are unmanned! Maister Derriman, who is himself, when he's got a woman round his neck like a millstone?'

'It is something like that.'

'I feel the case. Be you valiant?--I know, of course, the words being a matter of form--be you valiant, I ask? Yes, of course. Then don't you waste it in the open field. Hoard it up, I say, sir, for a higher class of war--the defence of yer adorable lady. Think what you owe her at this terrible time! Now, Maister Derriman, once more I ask ye to cast off that first haughty wish to rush to Budmouth, and to go where your mis'ess is defenceless and alone.'

'I will, Cripplestraw, now you put it like that!'

'Thank ye, thank ye heartily, Maister Derriman. Go now and hide with her.'

'But can I? Now, hang flattery!--can a man hide without a stain? Of course I would not hide in any mean sense; no, not I!'

'If you be in love, 'tis plain you may, since it is not your own life,

but another's, that you are concerned for, and you only save your own because it can't be helped.'

"Tis true, Cripplestraw, in a sense. But will it be understood that way? Will they see it as a brave hiding?'

'Now, sir, if you had not been in love I own to ye that hiding would look queer, but being to save the tears, groans, fits, swowndings, and perhaps death of a comely young woman, yer principle is good; you honourably retreat because you be too gallant to advance. This sounds strange, ye may say, sir; but it is plain enough to less fiery minds.'

Festus did for a moment try to uncover his teeth in a natural smile, but it died away. 'Cripplestraw, you flatter me; or do you mean it? Well, there's truth in it. I am more gallant in going to her than in marching to the shore. But we cannot be too careful about our good names, we soldiers. I must not be seen. I'm off.'

Cripplestraw opened the hurdle which closed the arch under the portico gateway, and Festus passed under, Uncle Benjamin singing, Twen-ty-three and a half from N.W. with a sort of sublime ecstasy, feeling, as Festus had observed, that his money was safe, and that the French would not personally molest an old man in such a ragged, mildewed coat as that he wore, which he had taken the precaution to borrow from a scarecrow in one of his fields for the purpose.

Festus rode on full of his intention to seek out Anne, and under cover of protecting her retreat accompany her to King's-Bere, where he knew the Lovedays had relatives. In the lane he met Granny Seamore, who, having packed up all her possessions in a small basket, was placidly retreating to the mountains till all should be over.

'Well, granny, have ye seen the French?' asked Festus.

'No,' she said, looking up at him through her brazen spectacles. 'If I had I shouldn't ha' seed thee!'

'Faugh!' replied the yeoman, and rode on. Just as he reached the old road, which he had intended merely to cross and avoid, his countenance fell. Some troops of regulars, who appeared to be dragoons, were rattling along the road. Festus hastened towards an opposite gate, so as to get within the field before they should see him; but, as ill-luck would have it, as soon as he got inside, a party of six or seven of his own yeomanry troop were straggling across the same field and making for the spot where he was. The dragoons passed without seeing him; but when he turned out into the road again it was impossible to retreat towards Overcombe village because of the yeomen. So he rode straight on, and heard them coming at his heels. There was no other gate, and the highway soon became as straight as a bowstring. Unable thus to turn without meeting them, and caught like an eel in a water-pipe, Festus drew nearer and nearer to the fateful shore. But he did not relinquish hope. Just ahead there were cross-roads, and he might have a chance of slipping down

one of them without being seen. On reaching the spot he found that he was not alone. A horseman had come up the right-hand lane and drawn rein. It was an officer of the German legion, and seeing Festus he held up his hand. Festus rode up to him and saluted.

'It ist false report!' said the officer.

Festus was a man again. He felt that nothing was too much for him. The officer, after some explanation of the cause of alarm, said that he was going across to the road which led by the moor, to stop the troops and volunteers converging from that direction, upon which Festus offered to give information along the Casterbridge road. The German crossed over, and was soon out of sight in the lane, while Festus turned back upon the way by which he had come. The party of yeomanry cavalry was rapidly drawing near, and he soon recognized among them the excited voices of Stubb of Duddle Hole, Noakes of Muckleford, and other comrades of his orgies at the hall. It was a magnificent opportunity, and Festus drew his sword. When they were within speaking distance he reined round his charger's head to Budmouth and shouted, 'On, comrades, on! I am waiting for you. You have been a long time getting up with me, seeing the glorious nature of our deeds to-day!'

'Well said, Derriman, well said!' replied the foremost of the riders.

'Have you heard anything new?'

'Only that he's here with his tens of thousands, and that we are to ride



to meet him sword in hand as soon as we have assembled in the town ahead here.'

'O Lord!' said Noakes, with a slight falling of the lower jaw.

'The man who quails now is unworthy of the name of yeoman,' said Festus, still keeping ahead of the other troopers and holding up his sword to the sun. 'O Noakes, fie, fie! You begin to look pale, man.'

'Faith, perhaps you'd look pale,' said Noakes, with an envious glance upon Festus's daring manner, 'if you had a wife and family depending upon ye!'

'I'll take three frog-eating Frenchmen single-handed!' rejoined Derriman, still flourishing his sword.

'They have as good swords as you; as you will soon find,' said another of the yeomen.

'If they were three times armed,' said Festus--'ay, thrice three times--I would attempt 'em three to one. How do you feel now, my old friend Stubb?' (turning to another of the warriors.) 'O, friend Stubb! no bouncing health to our lady-loves in Oxwell Hall this summer as last. Eh, Brownjohn?'

'I am afraid not,' said Brownjohn gloomily.

'No rattling dinners at Stacie's Hotel, and the King below with his staff. No wrenching off door-knockers and sending 'em to the bakehouse in a pie that nobody calls for. Weeks of cut-and-thrust work rather!'

'I suppose so.'

'Fight how we may we shan't get rid of the cursed tyrant before autumn, and many thousand brave men will lie low before it's done,' remarked a young yeoman with a calm face, who meant to do his duty without much talking.

'No grinning matches at Mai-dun Castle this summer,' Festus resumed; 'no thread-the-needle at Greenhill Fair, and going into shows and driving the showman crazy with cock-a-doodle-doo!'

'I suppose not.'

'Does it make you seem just a trifle uncomfortable, Noakes? Keep up your spirits, old comrade. Come, forward! we are only ambling on like so many donkey-women. We have to get into Budmouth, join the rest of the troop, and then march along the coast west'ard, as I imagine. At this rate we shan't be well into the thick of battle before twelve o'clock. Spur on, comrades. No dancing on the green, Lockham, this year in the moonlight! You was tender upon that girl; gad, what will become o' her in the struggle?'

'Come, come, Derriman,' expostulated Lockham--'this is all very well, but I don't care for 't. I am as ready to fight as any man, but--'

'Perhaps when you get into battle, Derriman, and see what it's like, your courage will cool down a little,' added Noakes on the same side, but with secret admiration of Festus's reckless bravery.

'I shall be bayoneted first,' said Festus. 'Now let's rally, and on!'

Since Festus was determined to spur on wildly, the rest of the yeomen did not like to seem behindhand, and they rapidly approached the town. Had they been calm enough to reflect, they might have observed that for the last half-hour no carts or carriages had met them on the way, as they had done further back. It was not till the troopers reached the turnpike that they learnt what Festus had known a quarter of an hour before. At the intelligence Derriman sheathed his sword with a sigh; and the party soon fell in with comrades who had arrived there before them, whereupon the source and details of the alarm were boisterously discussed.

'What, didn't you know of the mistake till now?' asked one of these of the new-comers. 'Why, when I was dropping over the hill by the cross-roads I looked back and saw that man talking to the messenger, and he must have told him the truth.' The speaker pointed to Festus. They turned their indignant eyes full upon him. That he had sported with their deepest feelings, while knowing the rumour to be baseless, was soon

apparent to all.

'Beat him black and blue with the flat of our blades!' shouted two or three, turning their horses' heads to drop back upon Derriman, in which move they were followed by most of the party.

But Festus, foreseeing danger from the unexpected revelation, had already judiciously placed a few intervening yards between himself and his fellow-yeomen, and now, clapping spurs to his horse, rattled like thunder and lightning up the road homeward. His ready flight added hotness to their pursuit, and as he rode and looked fearfully over his shoulder he could see them following with enraged faces and drawn swords, a position which they kept up for a distance of more than a mile. Then he had the satisfaction of seeing them drop off one by one, and soon he and his panting charger remained alone on the highway.