

## XXVII. DANGER TO ANNE

He stopped and reflected how to turn this rebuff to advantage. Baulked in his project of entering the watering-place and enjoying congratulations upon his patriotic bearing during the advance, he sulkily considered that he might be able to make some use of his enforced retirement by riding to Overcombe and glorifying himself in the eyes of Miss Garland before the truth should have reached that hamlet. Having thus decided he spurred on in a better mood.

By this time the volunteers were on the march, and as Derriman ascended the road he met the Overcombe company, in which trudged Miller Loveday shoulder to shoulder with the other substantial householders of the place and its neighbourhood, duly equipped with pouches, cross-belts, firelocks, flint-boxes, pickers, worms, magazines, priming-horns, heel-ball, and pomatum. There was nothing to be gained by further suppression of the truth, and briefly informing them that the danger was not so immediate as had been supposed, Festus galloped on. At the end of another mile he met a large number of pikemen, including Bob Loveday, whom the yeoman resolved to sound upon the whereabouts of Anne. The circumstances were such as to lead Bob to speak more frankly than he might have done on reflection, and he told Festus the direction in which the women had been sent. Then Festus informed the group that the report of invasion was false, upon which they all turned to go homeward with greatly relieved spirits.

Bob walked beside Derriman's horse for some distance. Loveday had instantly made up his mind to go and look for the women, and ease their anxiety by letting them know the good news as soon as possible. But he said nothing of this to Festus during their return together; nor did Festus tell Bob that he also had resolved to seek them out, and by anticipating every one else in that enterprise, make of it a glorious opportunity for bringing Miss Garland to her senses about him. He still resented the ducking that he had received at her hands, and was not disposed to let that insult pass without obtaining some sort of sweet revenge.

As soon as they had parted Festus cantered on over the hill, meeting on his way the Longpuddle volunteers, sixty rank and file, under Captain Cunningham; the Casterbridge company, ninety strong (known as the 'Consideration Company' in those days), under Captain Strickland; and others--all with anxious faces and covered with dust. Just passing the word to them and leaving them at halt, he proceeded rapidly onward in the direction of King's-Bere. Nobody appeared on the road for some time, till after a ride of several miles he met a stray corporal of volunteers, who told Festus in answer to his inquiry that he had certainly passed no gig full of women of the kind described. Believing that he had missed them by following the highway, Derriman turned back into a lane along which they might have chosen to journey for privacy's sake, notwithstanding the badness and uncertainty of its track. Arriving again within five miles of Overcombe, he at length heard tidings of the

wandering vehicle and its precious burden, which, like the Ark when sent away from the country of the Philistines, had apparently been left to the instincts of the beast that drew it. A labouring man, just at daybreak, had seen the helpless party going slowly up a distant drive, which he pointed out.

No sooner had Festus parted from this informant than he beheld Bob approaching, mounted on the miller's second and heavier horse. Bob looked rather surprised, and Festus felt his coming glory in danger.

'They went down that lane,' he said, signifying precisely the opposite direction to the true one. 'I, too, have been on the look-out for missing friends.'

As Festus was riding back there was no reason to doubt his information, and Loveday rode on as misdirected. Immediately that he was out of sight Festus reversed his course, and followed the track which Anne and her companions were last seen to pursue.

This road had been ascended by the gig in question nearly two hours before the present moment. Molly, the servant, held the reins, Mrs. Loveday sat beside her, and Anne behind. Their progress was but slow, owing partly to Molly's want of skill, and partly to the steepness of the road, which here passed over downs of some extent, and was rarely or never mended. It was an anxious morning for them all, and the beauties of the early summer day fell upon unheeding eyes. They were too anxious

even for conjecture, and each sat thinking her own thoughts, occasionally glancing westward, or stopping the horse to listen to sounds from more frequented roads along which other parties were retreating. Once, while they listened and gazed thus, they saw a glittering in the distance, and heard the tramp of many horses. It was a large body of cavalry going in the direction of the King's watering-place, the same regiment of dragoons, in fact, which Festus had seen further on in its course. The women in the gig had no doubt that these men were marching at once to engage the enemy. By way of varying the monotony of the journey Molly occasionally burst into tears of horror, believing Buonaparte to be in countenance and habits precisely what the caricatures represented him. Mrs. Loveday endeavoured to establish cheerfulness by assuring her companions of the natural civility of the French nation, with whom unprotected women were safe from injury, unless through the casual excesses of soldiery beyond control. This was poor consolation to Anne, whose mind was more occupied with Bob than with herself, and a miserable fear that she would never again see him alive so paled her face and saddened her gaze forward, that at last her mother said, 'Who was you thinking of, my dear?' Anne's only reply was a look at her mother, with which a tear mingled.

Molly whipped the horse, by which she quickened his pace for five yards, when he again fell into the perverse slowness that showed how fully conscious he was of being the master-mind and chief personage of the four. Whenever there was a pool of water by the road he turned aside to drink a mouthful, and remained there his own time in spite of Molly's tug

at the reins and futile fly-flapping on his rump. They were now in the chalk district, where there were no hedges, and a rough attempt at mending the way had been made by throwing down huge lumps of that glaring material in heaps, without troubling to spread it or break them abroad. The jolting here was most distressing, and seemed about to snap the springs.

'How that wheel do wamble,' said Molly at last. She had scarcely spoken when the wheel came off, and all three were precipitated over it into the road.

Fortunately the horse stood still, and they began to gather themselves up. The only one of the three who had suffered in the least from the fall was Anne, and she was only conscious of a severe shaking which had half stupefied her for the time. The wheel lay flat in the road, so that there was no possibility of driving further in their present plight. They looked around for help. The only friendly object near was a lonely cottage, from its situation evidently the home of a shepherd.

The horse was unharnessed and tied to the back of the gig, and the three women went across to the house. On getting close they found that the shutters of all the lower windows were closed, but on trying the door it opened to the hand. Nobody was within; the house appeared to have been abandoned in some confusion, and the probability was that the shepherd had fled on hearing the alarm. Anne now said that she felt the effects

of her fall too severely to be able to go any further just then, and it was agreed that she should be left there while Mrs. Loveday and Molly went on for assistance, the elder lady deeming Molly too young and vacant-minded to be trusted to go alone. Molly suggested taking the horse, as the distance might be great, each of them sitting alternately on his back while the other led him by the head. This they did, Anne watching them vanish down the white and lumpy road.

She then looked round the room, as well as she could do so by the light from the open door. It was plain, from the shutters being closed, that the shepherd had left his house before daylight, the candle and extinguisher on the table pointing to the same conclusion. Here she remained, her eyes occasionally sweeping the bare, sunny expanse of down, that was only relieved from absolute emptiness by the overturned gig hard by. The sheep seemed to have gone away, and scarcely a bird flew across to disturb the solitude. Anne had risen early that morning, and leaning back in the withy chair, which she had placed by the door, she soon fell into an uneasy doze, from which she was awakened by the distant tramp of a horse. Feeling much recovered from the effects of the overturn, she eagerly rose and looked out. The horse was not Miller Loveday's, but a powerful bay, bearing a man in full yeomanry uniform.

Anne did not wait to recognize further; instantly re-entering the house, she shut the door and bolted it. In the dark she sat and listened: not a sound. At the end of ten minutes, thinking that the rider if he were not Festus had carelessly passed by, or that if he were Festus he had not

seen her, she crept softly upstairs and peeped out of the window.

Excepting the spot of shade, formed by the gig as before, the down was quite bare. She then opened the casement and stretched out her neck.

'Ha, young madam! There you are! I knew 'ee! Now you are caught!' came like a clap of thunder from a point three or four feet beneath her, and turning down her frightened eyes she beheld Festus Derriman lurking close to the wall. His attention had first been attracted by her shutting the door of the cottage; then by the overturned gig; and after making sure, by examining the vehicle, that he was not mistaken in her identity, he had dismounted, led his horse round to the side, and crept up to entrap her.

Anne started back into the room, and remained still as a stone. Festus went on--'Come, you must trust to me. The French have landed. I have been trying to meet with you every hour since that confounded trick you played me. You threw me into the water. Faith, it was well for you I didn't catch ye then! I should have taken a revenge in a better way than I shall now. I mean to have that kiss of ye. Come, Miss Nancy; do you hear?--'Tis no use for you to lurk inside there. You'll have to turn out as soon as Boney comes over the hill--Are you going to open the door, I say, and speak to me in a civil way? What do you think I am, then, that you should barricade yourself against me as if I was a wild beast or Frenchman? Open the door, or put out your head, or do something; or 'pon my soul I'll break in the door!'

It occurred to Anne at this point of the tirade that the best policy would be to temporize till somebody should return, and she put out her head and face, now grown somewhat pale.

'That's better,' said Festus. 'Now I can talk to you. Come, my dear, will you open the door? Why should you be afraid of me?'

'I am not altogether afraid of you; I am safe from the French here,' said Anne, not very truthfully, and anxiously casting her eyes over the vacant down.

'Then let me tell you that the alarm is false, and that no landing has been attempted. Now will you open the door and let me in? I am tired. I have been on horseback ever since daylight, and have come to bring you the good tidings.'

Anne looked as if she doubted the news.

'Come,' said Festus.

'No, I cannot let you in,' she murmured, after a pause.

'Dash my wig, then,' he cried, his face flaming up, 'I'll find a way to get in! Now, don't you provoke me! You don't know what I am capable of. I ask you again, will you open the door?'



'Why do you wish it?' she said faintly.

'I have told you I want to sit down; and I want to ask you a question.'

'You can ask me from where you are.'

'I cannot ask you properly. It is about a serious matter: whether you will accept my heart and hand. I am not going to throw myself at your feet; but I ask you to do your duty as a woman, namely, give your solemn word to take my name as soon as the war is over and I have time to attend to you. I scorn to ask it of a haughty hussy who will only speak to me through a window; however, I put it to you for the last time, madam.'

There was no sign on the down of anybody's return, and she said, 'I'll think of it, sir.'

'You have thought of it long enough; I want to know. Will you or won't you?'

'Very well; I think I will.' And then she felt that she might be buying personal safety too dearly by shuffling thus, since he would spread the report that she had accepted him, and cause endless complication. 'No,' she said, 'I have changed my mind. I cannot accept you, Mr. Derriman.'

'That's how you play with me!' he exclaimed, stamping. "'Yes," one moment; "No," the next. Come, you don't know what you refuse. That old

hall is my uncle's own, and he has nobody else to leave it to. As soon as he's dead I shall throw up farming and start as a squire. And now,' he added with a bitter sneer, 'what a fool you are to hang back from such a chance!'

'Thank you, I don't value it,' said Anne.

'Because you hate him who would make it yours?'

'It may not lie in your power to do that.'

'What--has the old fellow been telling you his affairs?'

'No.'

'Then why do you mistrust me? Now, after this will you open the door, and show that you treat me as a friend if you won't accept me as a lover? I only want to sit and talk to you.'

Anne thought she would trust him; it seemed almost impossible that he could harm her. She retired from the window and went downstairs. When her hand was upon the bolt of the door, her mind misgave her. Instead of withdrawing it she remained in silence where she was, and he began again--

'Are you going to unfasten it?'

Anne did not speak.

'Now, dash my wig, I will get at you! You've tried me beyond endurance. One kiss would have been enough that day in the mead; now I'll have forty, whether you will or no!'

He flung himself against the door; but as it was bolted, and had in addition a great wooden bar across it, this produced no effect. He was silent for a moment, and then the terrified girl heard him attempt the shuttered window. She ran upstairs and again scanned the down. The yellow gig still lay in the blazing sunshine, and the horse of Festus stood by the corner of the garden--nothing else was to be seen. At this moment there came to her ear the noise of a sword drawn from its scabbard; and, peeping over the window-sill, she saw her tormentor drive his sword between the joints of the shutters, in an attempt to rip them open. The sword snapped off in his hand. With an imprecation he pulled out the piece, and returned the two halves to the scabbard.

'Ha! ha!' he cried, catching sight of the top of her head. "'Tis only a joke, you know; but I'll get in all the same. All for a kiss! But never mind, we'll do it yet!' He spoke in an affectedly light tone, as if ashamed of his previous resentful temper; but she could see by the livid back of his neck that he was brimful of suppressed passion. 'Only a jest, you know,' he went on. 'How are we going to do it now? Why, in this way. I go and get a ladder, and enter at the upper window where my love is. And there's the ladder lying under that corn-rick in the first

enclosed field. Back in two minutes, dear!

He ran off, and was lost to her view.

## XXVIII. ANNE DOES WONDERS

Anne fearfully surveyed her position. The upper windows of the cottage were of flimsiest lead-work, and to keep him out would be hopeless. She felt that not a moment was to be lost in getting away. Running downstairs she opened the door, and then it occurred to her terrified understanding that there would be no chance of escaping him by flight afoot across such an extensive down, since he might mount his horse and easily ride after her. The animal still remained tethered at the corner of the garden; if she could release him and frighten him away before Festus returned, there would not be quite such odds against her. She accordingly unhooked the horse by reaching over the bank, and then, pulling off her muslin neckerchief, flapped it in his eyes to startle him. But the gallant steed did not move or flinch; she tried again, and he seemed rather pleased than otherwise. At this moment she heard a cry from the cottage, and turning, beheld her adversary approaching round the corner of the building.