XXXVIII. A DELICATE SITUATION

'I am ready to go,' said Anne, as soon as he arrived.

He paused as if taken aback by her readiness, and replied with much uncertainty, 'Would it--wouldn't it be better to put it off till there is less sun?'

The very slightest symptom of surprise arose in her as she rejoined, 'But the weather may change; or had we better not go at all?'

'O no!--it was only a thought. We will start at once.'

And along the vale they went, John keeping himself about a yard from her right hand. When the third field had been crossed they came upon half-a-dozen little boys at play.

'Why don't he clasp her to his side, like a man?' said the biggest and rudest boy.

'Why don't he clasp her to his side, like a man?' echoed all the rude smaller boys in a chorus.

The trumpet-major turned, and, after some running, succeeded in smacking two of them with his switch, returning to Anne breathless. 'I am ashamed they should have insulted you so,' he said, blushing for her.

'They said no harm, poor boys,' she replied reproachfully.

Poor John was dumb with perception. The gentle hint upon which he would have eagerly spoken only one short day ago was now like fire to his wound.

They presently came to some stepping-stones across a brook. John crossed first without turning his head, and Anne, just lifting the skirt of her dress, crossed behind him. When they had reached the other side a village girl and a young shepherd approached the brink to cross. Anne stopped and watched them. The shepherd took a hand of the young girl in each of his own, and walked backward over the stones, facing her, and keeping her upright by his grasp, both of them laughing as they went.

'What are you staying for, Miss Garland?' asked John.

'I was only thinking how happy they are,' she said quietly; and withdrawing her eyes from the tender pair, she turned and followed him, not knowing that the seeming sound of a passing bumble-bee was a suppressed groan from John.

When they reached the hill they found forty navvies at work removing the

dark sod so as to lay bare the chalk beneath. The equestrian figure that their shovels were forming was scarcely intelligible to John and Anne now they were close, and after pacing from the horse's head down his breast to his hoof, back by way of the king's bridle-arm, past the bridge of his nose, and into his cocked-hat, Anne said that she had had enough of it, and stepped out of the chalk clearing upon the grass. The trumpet-major had remained all the time in a melancholy attitude within the rowel of his Majesty's right spur.

'My shoes are caked with chalk,' she said as they walked downwards again; and she drew back her dress to look at them. 'How can I get some of it cleared off?'

'If you was to wipe them in the long grass there,' said John, pointing to a spot where the blades were rank and dense, 'some of it would come off.' Having said this, he walked on with religious firmness.

Anne raked her little feet on the right side, on the left side, over the toe, and behind the heel; but the tenacious chalk held its own. Panting with her exertion, she gave it up, and at length overtook him.

'I hope it is right now?' he said, looking gingerly over his shoulder.

'No, indeed!' said she. 'I wanted some assistance--some one to steady me. It is so hard to stand on one foot and wipe the other without support. I was in danger of toppling over, and so gave it up.'

'Merciful stars, what an opportunity!' thought the poor fellow while she waited for him to offer help. But his lips remained closed, and she went on with a pouting smile--

'You seem in such a hurry! Why are you in such a hurry? After all the fine things you have said about--about caring so much for me, and all that, you won't stop for anything!'

It was too much for John. 'Upon my heart and life, my dea--' he began. Here Bob's letter crackled warningly in his waistcoat pocket as he laid his hand asseveratingly upon his breast, and he became suddenly scaled up to dumbness and gloom as before.

When they reached home Anne sank upon a stool outside the door, fatigued with her excursion. Her first act was to try to pull off her shoe--it was a difficult matter; but John stood beating with his switch the leaves of the creeper on the wall.

'Mother--David--Molly, or somebody--do come and help me pull off these dirty shoes!' she cried aloud at last. 'Nobody helps me in anything!'

'I am very sorry,' said John, coming towards her with incredible slowness and an air of unutterable depression.

'O, I can do without you. David is best,' she returned, as the old man

approached and removed the obnoxious shoes in a trice.

Anne was amazed at this sudden change from devotion to crass indifference. On entering her room she flew to the glass, almost expecting to learn that some extraordinary change had come over her pretty countenance, rendering her intolerable for evermore. But it was, if anything, fresher than usual, on account of the exercise. 'Well!' she said retrospectively. For the first time since their acqaintance she had this week encouraged him; and for the first time he had shown that encouragement was useless. 'But perhaps he does not clearly understand,' she added serenely.

When he next came it was, to her surprise, to bring her newspapers, now for some time discontinued. As soon as she saw them she said, 'I do not care for newspapers.'

'The shipping news is very full and long to-day, though the print is rather small.'

'I take no further interest in the shipping news,' she replied with cold dignity.

She was sitting by the window, inside the table, and hence when, in spite of her negations, he deliberately unfolded the paper and began to read about the Royal Navy she could hardly rise and go away. With a stoical mien he read on to the end of the report, bringing out the name of Bob's

ship with tremendous force.

'No,' she said at last, 'I'll hear no more! Let me read to you.'

The trumpet-major sat down. Anne turned to the military news, delivering every detail with much apparent enthusiasm. 'That's the subject I like!' she said fervently.

'But--but Bob is in the navy now, and will most likely rise to be an officer. And then--'

'What is there like the army?' she interrupted. 'There is no smartness about sailors. They waddle like ducks, and they only fight stupid battles that no one can form any idea of. There is no science nor stratagem in sea-fights--nothing more than what you see when two rams run
their heads together in a field to knock each other down. But in military battles there is such art, and such splendour, and the men are so smart, particularly the horse-soldiers. O, I shall never forget what gallant men you all seemed when you came and pitched your tents on the downs! I like the cavalry better than anything I know; and the dragoons the best of the cavalry--and the trumpeters the best of the dragoons!'

'O, if it had but come a little sooner!' moaned John within him. He replied as soon as he could regain self-command, 'I am glad Bob is in the navy at last--he is so much more fitted for that than the

merchant-service--so brave by nature, ready for any daring deed. I have heard ever so much more about his doings on board the Victory. Captain Hardy took special notice that when he--'

'I don't want to know anything more about it,' said Anne impatiently; 'of course sailors fight; there's nothing else to do in a ship, since you can't run away! You may as well fight and be killed as be killed not fighting.'

'Still it is his character to be careless of himself where the honour of his country is concerned,' John pleaded. 'If you had only known him as a boy you would own it. He would always risk his own life to save anybody else's. Once when a cottage was afire up the lane he rushed in for a baby, although he was only a boy himself, and he had the narrowest escape. We have got his hat now with the hole burnt in it. Shall I get it and show it to you?'

'No--I don't wish it. It has nothing to do with me.' But as he persisted in his course towards the door, she added, 'Ah! you are leaving because I am in your way. You want to be alone while you read the paper--I will go at once. I did not see that I was interrupting you.' And she rose as if to retreat.

'No, no! I would rather be interrupted by you than--O, Miss Garland, excuse me! I'll just speak to father in the mill, now I am here.'

It is scarcely necessary to state that Anne (whose unquestionable gentility amid somewhat homely surroundings has been many times insisted on in the course of this history) was usually the reverse of a woman with a coming-on disposition; but, whether from pique at his manner, or from wilful adherence to a course rashly resolved on, or from coquettish maliciousness in reaction from long depression, or from any other thing,--so it was that she would not let him go.

'Trumpet-major,' she said, recalling him.

'Yes?' he replied timidly.

'The bow of my cap-ribbon has come untied, has it not?' She turned and fixed her bewitching glance upon him.

The bow was just over her forehead, or, more precisely, at the point where the organ of comparison merges in that of benevolence, according to the phrenological theory of Gall. John, thus brought to, endeavoured to look at the bow in a skimming, duck-and-drake fashion, so as to avoid dipping his own glance as far as to the plane of his interrogator's eyes.
'It is untied,' he said, drawing back a little.

She came nearer, and asked, 'Will you tie it for me, please?'

As there was no help for it, he nerved himself and assented. As her head only reached to his fourth button she necessarily looked up for his

convenience, and John began fumbling at the bow. Try as he would it was impossible to touch the ribbon without getting his finger tips mixed with the curls of her forehead.

'Your hand shakes--ah! you have been walking fast,' she said.

'Yes--yes.'

'Have you almost done it?' She inquiringly directed her gaze upward through his fingers.

'No--not yet,' he faltered in a warm sweat of emotion, his heart going like a flail.

'Then be quick, please.'

'Yes, I will, Miss Garland! B-B-Bob is a very good fel--'

'Not that man's name to me!' she interrupted.

John was silent instantly, and nothing was to be heard but the rustling of the ribbon; till his hands once more blundered among the curls, and then touched her forehead.

'O good God!' ejaculated the trumpet-major in a whisper, turning away hastily to the corner-cupboard, and resting his face upon his hand.

'What's the matter, John?' said she.

'I can't do it!'

'What?'

'Tie your cap-ribbon.'

'Why not?'

'Because you are so--Because I am clumsy, and never could tie a bow.'

'You are clumsy indeed,' answered Anne, and went away.

After this she felt injured, for it seemed to show that he rated her happiness as of meaner value than Bob's; since he had persisted in his idea of giving Bob another chance when she had implied that it was her wish to do otherwise. Could Miss Johnson have anything to do with his firmness? An opportunity of testing him in this direction occurred some days later. She had been up the village, and met John at the mill-door.

'Have you heard the news? Matilda Johnson is going to be married to young Derriman.'

Anne stood with her back to the sun, and as he faced her, his features

were searchingly exhibited. There was no change whatever in them, unless it were that a certain light of interest kindled by her question turned to complete and blank indifference. 'Well, as times go, it is not a bad match for her,' he said, with a phlegm which was hardly that of a lover.

John on his part was beginning to find these temptations almost more than he could bear. But being quartered so near to his father's house it was unnatural not to visit him, especially when at any moment the regiment might be ordered abroad, and a separation of years ensue; and as long as he went there he could not help seeing her.

The year changed from green to gold, and from gold to grey, but little change came over the house of Loveday. During the last twelve months Bob had been occasionally heard of as upholding his country's honour in Denmark, the West Indies, Gibraltar, Malta, and other places about the globe, till the family received a short letter stating that he had arrived again at Portsmouth. At Portsmouth Bob seemed disposed to remain, for though some time elapsed without further intelligence, the gallant seaman never appeared at Overcombe. Then on a sudden John learnt that Bob's long-talked-of promotion for signal services rendered was to be an accomplished fact. The trumpet-major at once walked off to Overcombe, and reached the village in the early afternoon. Not one of the family was in the house at the moment, and John strolled onwards over the hill towards Casterbridge, without much thought of direction till, lifting his eyes, he beheld Anne Garland wandering about with a little

basket upon her arm.

At first John blushed with delight at the sweet vision; but, recalled by his conscience, the blush of delight was at once mangled and slain. He looked for a means of retreat. But the field was open, and a soldier was a conspicuous object: there was no escaping her.

'It was kind of you to come,' she said, with an inviting smile.

'It was quite by accident,' he answered, with an indifferent laugh. 'I thought you was at home.'

Anne blushed and said nothing, and they rambled on together. In the middle of the field rose a fragment of stone wall in the form of a gable, known as Faringdon Ruin; and when they had reached it John paused and politely asked her if she were not a little tired with walking so far. No particular reply was returned by the young lady, but they both stopped, and Anne seated herself on a stone, which had fallen from the ruin to the ground.

'A church once stood here,' observed John in a matter-of-fact tone.

'Yes, I have often shaped it out in my mind,' she returned. 'Here where I sit must have been the altar.'

'True; this standing bit of wall was the chancel end.'

Anne had been adding up her little studies of the trumpet-major's character, and was surprised to find how the brightness of that character increased in her eyes with each examination. A kindly and gentle sensation was again aroused in her. Here was a neglected heroic man, who, loving her to distraction, deliberately doomed himself to pensive shade to avoid even the appearance of standing in a brother's way.

'If the altar stood here, hundreds of people have been made man and wife just there, in past times,' she said, with calm deliberateness, throwing a little stone on a spot about a yard westward.

John annihilated another tender burst and replied, 'Yes, this field used to be a village. My grandfather could call to mind when there were houses here. But the squire pulled 'em down, because poor folk were an eyesore to him.'

'Do you know, John, what you once asked me to do?' she continued, not accepting the digression, and turning her eyes upon him.

'In what sort of way?'

'In the matter of my future life, and yours.'

'I am afraid I don't.'

'John Loveday!'

He turned his back upon her for a moment, that she might not see his face. 'Ah--I do remember,' he said at last, in a dry, small, repressed voice.

'Well--need I say more? Isn't it sufficient?'

'It would be sufficient,' answered the unhappy man. 'But--'

She looked up with a reproachful smile, and shook her head. 'That summer,' she went on, 'you asked me ten times if you asked me once. I am older now; much more of a woman, you know; and my opinion is changed about some people; especially about one.'

'O Anne, Anne!' he burst out as, racked between honour and desire, he snatched up her hand. The next moment it fell heavily to her lap. He had absolutely relinquished it half-way to his lips.

'I have been thinking lately,' he said, with preternaturally sudden calmness, 'that men of the military profession ought not to m--ought to be like St. Paul, I mean.'

'Fie, John; pretending religion!' she said sternly. 'It isn't that at all. It's Bob!'

'Yes!' cried the miserable trumpet-major. 'I have had a letter from him to-day.' He pulled out a sheet of paper from his breast. 'That's it! He's promoted--he's a lieutenant, and appointed to a sloop that only cruises on our own coast, so that he'll be at home on leave half his time--he'll be a gentleman some day, and worthy of you!'

He threw the letter into her lap, and drew back to the other side of the gable-wall. Anne jumped up from her seat, flung away the letter without looking at it, and went hastily on. John did not attempt to overtake her. Picking up the letter, he followed in her wake at a distance of a hundred yards.

But, though Anne had withdrawn from his presence thus precipitately, she never thought more highly of him in her life than she did five minutes afterwards, when the excitement of the moment had passed. She saw it all quite clearly; and his self-sacrifice impressed her so much that the effect was just the reverse of what he had been aiming to produce. The more he pleaded for Bob, the more her perverse generosity pleaded for John. To-day the crisis had come--with what results she had not foreseen.

As soon as the trumpet-major reached the nearest pen-and-ink he flung himself into a seat and wrote wildly to Bob:--

'DEAR ROBERT,--I write these few lines to let you know that if you want Anne Garland you must come at once--you must come instantly, and

post-haste--or she will be gone! Somebody else wants her, and she wants him! It is your last chance, in the opinion of--

'Your faithful brother and well-wisher,

'JOHN.

'P.S.--Glad to hear of your promotion. Tell me the day and I'll meet the coach.'