

THE ALARM

(1803)

See "The Trumpet-Major"

IN MEMORY OF ONE OF THE WRITER'S FAMILY WHO WAS A VOLUNTEER
DURING

THE WAR WITH NAPOLEON

In a ferny byway
Near the great South-Wessex Highway,
A homestead raised its breakfast-smoke aloft;
The dew-damps still lay steamless, for the sun had made no sky-way,
And twilight cloaked the croft.

'Twas hard to realize on
This snug side the mute horizon
That beyond it hostile armaments might steer,
Save from seeing in the porchway a fair woman weep with eyes on
A harnessed Volunteer.

In haste he'd flown there
To his comely wife alone there,
While marching south hard by, to still her fears,
For she soon would be a mother, and few messengers were known there
In these campaigning years.

'Twas time to be Good-bying,
Since the assembly-hour was nighing
In royal George's town at six that morn;
And betwixt its wharves and this retreat were ten good miles of
hieing
Ere ring of bugle-horn.

"I've laid in food, Dear,
And broached the spiced and brewed, Dear;
And if our July hope should antedate,
Let the char-wench mount and gallop by the halterpath and wood, Dear,
And fetch assistance straight.

"As for Buonaparte, forget him;
He's not like to land! But let him,
Those strike with aim who strike for wives and sons!
And the war-boats built to float him; 'twere but wanted to upset him
A slat from Nelson's guns!

"But, to assure thee,
And of creeping fears to cure thee,
If he SHOULD be rumoured anchoring in the Road,
Drive with the nurse to Kingsbere; and let nothing thence allure thee
Till we've him safe-bestowed.

"Now, to turn to marching matters:-
I've my knapsack, firelock, spatters,
Crossbelts, priming-horn, stock, bay'net, blackball, clay,
Pouch, magazine, flints, flint-box that at every quick-step clatters;
. . . My heart, Dear; that must stay!"

--With breathings broken
Farewell was kissed unspoken,
And they parted there as morning stroked the panes;
And the Volunteer went on, and turned, and twirled his glove for
token,
And took the coastward lanes.

When above He'th Hills he found him,
He saw, on gazing round him,
The Barrow-Beacon burning--burning low,
As if, perhaps, uplighted ever since he'd homeward bound him;
And it meant: Expect the Foe!

Leaving the byway,
And following swift the highway,
Car and chariot met he, faring fast inland;
"He's anchored, Soldier!" shouted some: "God save thee, marching thy
way,
Th'lt front him on the strand!"

He slowed; he stopped; he paltered
Awhile with self, and faltered,
"Why courting misadventure shoreward roam?
To Molly, surely! Seek the woods with her till times have altered;
Charity favours home.

Else, my denying
He would come she'll read as lying -
Think the Barrow-Beacon must have met my eyes--
That my words were not unwareness, but deceit of her, while trying
My life to jeopardize.

"At home is stocked provision,
And to-night, without suspicion,
We might bear it with us to a covert near;
Such sin, to save a childing wife, would earn it Christ's remission,
Though none forgive it here!"

While thus he, thinking,
A little bird, quick drinking
Among the crowfoot tufts the river bore,
Was tangled in their stringy arms, and fluttered, well-nigh sinking,
Near him, upon the moor.

He stepped in, reached, and seized it,
And, preening, had released it

But that a thought of Holy Writ occurred,
And Signs Divine ere battle, till it seemed him Heaven had pleased it
As guide to send the bird.

"O Lord, direct me! . . .
Doth Duty now expect me
To march a-coast, or guard my weak ones near?
Give this bird a flight according, that I thence know to elect me
The southward or the rear."

He loosed his clasp; when, rising,
The bird--as if surmising -
Bore due to southward, crossing by the Froom,
And Durnover Great-Field and Fort, the soldier clear advising -
Prompted he wist by Whom.

Then on he panted
By grim Mai-Don, and slanted
Up the steep Ridge-way, hearkening betwixt whiles;
Till, nearing coast and harbour, he beheld the shore-line planted
With Foot and Horse for miles.

Mistrusting not the omen,
He gained the beach, where Yeomen,
Militia, Fencibles, and Pikemen bold,
With Regulars in thousands, were enmassed to meet the Foemen,

Whose fleet had not yet shoaled.

Captain and Colonel,
Sere Generals, Ensigns vernal,
Were there; of neighbour-natives, Michel, Smith,
Meggs, Bingham, Gambier, Cunningham, roused by the hues nocturnal
Swoop on their land and kith.

But Buonaparte still tarried;
His project had miscarried;
At the last hour, equipped for victory,
The fleet had paused; his subtle combinations had been parried
By British strategy.

Homeward returning
Anon, no beacons burning,
No alarms, the Volunteer, in modest bliss,
Te Deum sang with wife and friends: "We praise Thee, Lord,
discerning
That Thou hast helped in this!"