

## XX. THE EVENTS OF THREE HOURS

### 1. MARCH THE TWENTY-THIRD. MIDDAY

Thirty-six hours had elapsed since Manston's escape.

It was market-day at the county-town. The farmers outside and inside the corn-exchange looked at their samples of wheat, and poured them critically as usual from one palm to another, but they thought and spoke of Manston. Grocers serving behind their counters, instead of using their constant phrase, 'The next article, please?' substituted, 'Have you heard if he's caught?' Dairymen and drovers standing beside the sheep and cattle pens, spread their legs firmly, readjusted their hats, thrust their hands into the lowest depths of their pockets, regarded the animals with the utmost keenness of which the eye was capable, and said, 'Ay, ay, so's: they'll have him avore night.'

Later in the day Edward Springrove passed along the street hurriedly and anxiously. 'Well, have you heard any more?' he said to an acquaintance who accosted him.

'They tracked him in this way,' said the other young man. 'A vagrant first told them that Manston had passed a rick at daybreak, under which this man was lying. They followed the track he pointed out and ultimately came to a stile. On the other side was a heap of half-hardened mud, scraped from the road. On the surface of the heap,

where it had been smoothed by the shovel, was distinctly imprinted the form of a man's hand, the buttons of his waistcoat, and his watch-chain, showing that he had stumbled in hurrying over the stile, and fallen there. The pattern of the chain proved the man to have been Manston. They followed on till they reached a ford crossed by stepping-stones--on the further bank were the same footmarks that had shown themselves beside the stile. The whole of this course had been in the direction of Budmouth. On they went, and the next clue was furnished them by a shepherd. He said that wherever a clear space three or four yards wide ran in a line through a flock of sheep lying about a ewe-lease, it was a proof that somebody had passed there not more than half-an-hour earlier. At twelve o'clock that day he had noticed such a feature in his flock. Nothing more could be heard of him, and they got into Budmouth. The steam-packet to the Channel Islands was to start at eleven last night, and they at once concluded that his hope was to get to France by way of Jersey and St. Malo--his only chance, all the railway-stations being watched.

'Well, they went to the boat: he was not on board then. They went again at half-past ten: he had not come. Two men now placed themselves under the lamp immediately beside the gangway. Another stayed by the office door, and one or two more up Mary Street--the straight cut to the quay. At a quarter to eleven the mail-bags were put on board. Whilst the attention of the idlers was directed to the mails, down Mary Street came a man as boldly as possible. The gait was Manston's, but not the clothes. He passed over to the shaded part of the street: heads were

turned. I suppose this warned him, for he never emerged from the shadow. They watched and waited, but the steward did not reappear. The alarm was raised--they searched the town high and low--no Manston. All this morning they have been searching, but there's not a sign of him anywhere. However, he has lost his last chance of getting across the Channel. It is reported that he has since changed clothes with a labourer.'

During this narration, Edward, lost in thought, had let his eyes follow a shabby man in a smock-frock, but wearing light boots--who was stalking down the street under a bundle of straw which overhung and concealed his head. It was a very ordinary circumstance for a man with a bundle of straw on his shoulders and overhanging his head, to go down the High Street. Edward saw him cross the bridge which divided the town from the country, place his shaggy encumbrance by the side of the road, and leave it there.

Springrove now parted from his acquaintance, and went also in the direction of the bridge, and some way beyond it. As far as he could see stretched the turnpike road, and, while he was looking, he noticed a man to leap from the hedge at a point two hundred, or two hundred and fifty yards ahead, cross the road, and go through a wicket on the other side. This figure seemed like that of the man who had been carrying the bundle of straw. He looked at the straw: it still stood alone.

The subjoined facts sprang, as it were, into juxtaposition in his

brain:--

Manston had been seen wearing the clothes of a labouring man--a brown smock-frock. So had this man, who seemed other than a labourer, on second thoughts: and he had concealed his face by his bundle of straw with the greatest ease and naturalness.

The path the man had taken led, among other places, to Tolchurch, where Cytherea was living.

If Mrs. Manston was murdered, as some said, on the night of the fire, Cytherea was the steward's lawful wife. Manston at bay, and reckless of results, might rush to his wife and harm her.

It was a horrible supposition for a man who loved Cytherea to entertain; but Springrove could not resist its influence. He started off for Tolchurch.

## 2. ONE TO TWO O'CLOCK P.M.

On that self-same mid-day, whilst Edward was proceeding to Tolchurch by the footpath across the fields, Owen Graye had left the village and was riding along the turnpike road to the county-town, that he might ascertain the exact truth of the strange rumour which had reached him concerning Manston. Not to disquiet his sister, he had said nothing to her of the matter.

She sat by the window reading. From her position she could see up the lane for a distance of at least a hundred yards. Passers-by were so rare in this retired nook, that the eyes of those who dwelt by the wayside were invariably lifted to every one on the road, great and small, as to a novelty.

A man in a brown smock-frock turned the corner and came towards the house. It being market-day at Casterbridge, the village was nearly deserted, and more than this, the old farm-house in which Owen and his sister were staying, stood, as has been stated, apart from the body of cottages. The man did not look respectable; Cytherea arose and bolted the door.

Unfortunately he was near enough to see her cross the room. He advanced to the door, knocked, and, receiving no answer, came to the window; he next pressed his face against the glass, peering in.

Cytherea's experience at that moment was probably as trying a one as ever fell to the lot of a gentlewoman to endure. She recognized in the peering face that of the man she had married.

But not a movement was made by her, not a sound escaped her. Her fear was great; but had she known the truth--that the man outside, feeling he had nothing on earth to lose by any act, was in the last stage of recklessness, terrified nature must have given way.

'Cytherea,' he said, 'let me come in: I am your husband.'

'No,' she replied, still not realizing the magnitude of her peril. 'If you want to speak to us, wait till my brother comes.'

'O, he's not at home? Cytherea, I can't live without you! All my sin has been because I love you so! Will you fly with me? I have money enough for us both--only come with me.'

'Not now--not now.'

'I am your husband, I tell you, and I must come in.'

'You cannot,' she said faintly. His words began to terrify her.

'I will, I say!' he exclaimed. 'Will you let me in, I ask once more?'

'No--I will not,' said Cytherea.

'Then I will let myself in!' he answered resolutely. 'I will, if I die for it!'

The windows were glazed in lattice panes of leadwork, hung in casements. He broke one of the panes with a stone, thrust his hand through the hole, unfastened the latch which held the casement close, and began

opening the window.

Instantly the shutters flew together with a slam, and were barred with desperate quickness by Cytherea on the inside.

'Damn you!' he exclaimed.

He ran round to the back of the house. His impatience was greater now: he thrust his fist through the pantry window at one blow, and opened it in the same way as the former one had been opened, before the terror-stricken girl was aware that he had gone round. In an instant he stood in the pantry, advanced to the front room where she was, flung back the shutters, and held out his arms to embrace her.

In extremely trying moments of bodily or mental pain, Cytherea either flushed hot or faded pale, according to the state of her constitution at the moment. Now she burned like fire from head to foot, and this preserved her consciousness.

Never before had the poor child's natural agility served her in such good stead as now. A heavy oblong table stood in the middle of the room. Round this table she flew, keeping it between herself and Manston, her large eyes wide open with terror, their dilated pupils constantly fixed upon Manston's, to read by his expression whether his next intention was to dart to the right or the left.

Even he, at that heated moment, could not endure the expression of unutterable agony which shone from that extraordinary gaze of hers. It had surely been given her by God as a means of defence. Manston continued his pursuit with a lowered eye.

The panting and maddened desperado--blind to everything but the capture of his wife--went with a rush under the table: she went over it like a bird. He went heavily over it: she flew under it, and was out at the other side.

'One on her youth and pliant limbs relies,  
One on his sinews and his giant size.'

But his superior strength was sure to tire her down in the long-run. She felt her weakness increasing with the quickness of her breath; she uttered a wild scream, which in its heartrending intensity seemed to echo for miles.

At the same juncture her hair became unfastened, and rolled down about her shoulders. The least accident at such critical periods is sufficient to confuse the overwrought intelligence. She lost sight of his intended direction for one instant, and he immediately outmanoeuvred her.

'At last! my Cytherea!' he cried, overturning the table, springing over it, seizing one of the long brown tresses, pulling her towards him, and clasping her round. She writhed downwards between his arms and breast,



and fell fainting on the floor. For the first time his action was leisurely. He lifted her upon the sofa, exclaiming, 'Rest there for a while, my frightened little bird!'

And then there was an end of his triumph. He felt himself clutched by the collar, and whizzed backwards with the force of a battering-ram against the fireplace. Springrove, wild, red, and breathless, had sprung in at the open window, and stood once more between man and wife.

Manston was on his legs again in an instant. A fiery glance on the one side, a glance of pitiless justice on the other, passed between them.

It was again the meeting in the vineyard of Naboth the Jezreelite: 'Hast thou found me, O mine enemy? And he answered, I have found thee: because

thou hast sold thyself to work evil in the sight of the Lord.'

A desperate wrestle now began between the two men. Manston was the taller, but there was in Edward much hard tough muscle which the delicate flesh of the steward lacked. They flew together like the jaws of a gin. In a minute they were both on the floor, rolling over and over, locked in each other's grasp as tightly as if they had been one organic being at war with itself--Edward trying to secure Manston's arms with a small thong he had drawn from his pocket, Manston trying to reach his knife.

Two characteristic noises pervaded the apartment through this momentous

space of time. One was the sharp panting of the two combatants, so similar in each as to be undistinguishable; the other was the stroke of their heels and toes, as they smote the floor at every contortion of body or limbs.

Cytherea had not lost consciousness for more than half-a-minute. She had then leapt up without recognizing that Edward was her deliverer, unfastened the door, and rushed out, screaming wildly, 'Come! Help! O, help!'

Three men stood not twenty yards off, looking perplexed. They dashed forward at her words. 'Have you seen a shabby man with a smock-frock on lately?' they inquired. She pointed to the door, and ran on the same as before.

Manston, who had just loosened himself from Edward's grasp, seemed at this moment to renounce his intention of pushing the conflict to a desperate end. 'I give it all up for life--dear life!' he cried, with a hoarse laugh. 'A reckless man has a dozen lives--see how I'll baffle you all yet!'

He rushed out of the house, but no further. The boast was his last. In one half-minute more he was helpless in the hands of his pursuers.

Edward staggered to his feet, and paused to recover breath. His thoughts

had never forsaken Cytherea, and his first act now was to hasten up the lane after her. She had not gone far. He found her leaning upon a bank by the roadside, where she had flung herself down in sheer exhaustion. He ran up and lifted her in his arms, and thus aided she was enabled to stand upright--clinging to him. What would Springrove have given to imprint a kiss upon her lips then!

They walked slowly towards the house. The distressing sensation of whose wife she was could not entirely quench the resuscitated pleasure he felt at her grateful recognition of him, and her confiding seizure of his arm for support. He conveyed her carefully into the house.

A quarter of an hour later, whilst she was sitting in a partially recovered, half-dozing state in an arm-chair, Edward beside her waiting anxiously till Graye should arrive, they saw a spring-cart pass the door. Old and dry mud-splashes from long-forgotten rains disfigured its wheels and sides; the varnish and paint had been scratched and dimmed; ornament had long been forgotten in a restless contemplation of use. Three men sat on the seat, the middle one being Manston. His hands were bound in front of him, his eyes were set directly forward, his countenance pallid, hard, and fixed.

Springrove had told Cytherea of Manston's crime in a few short words. He now said solemnly, 'He is to die.'

'And I cannot mourn for him,' she replied with a shudder, leaning back

and covering her face with her hands.

In the silence that followed the two short remarks, Springrove watched the cart round the corner, and heard the rattle of its wheels gradually dying away as it rolled in the direction of the county-town.

## XXI. THE EVENTS OF EIGHTEEN HOURS

### 1. MARCH THE TWENTY-NINTH. NOON

Exactly seven days after Edward Springrove had seen the man with the bundle of straw walking down the streets of Casterbridge, old Farmer Springrove was standing on the edge of the same pavement, talking to his friend, Farmer Baker.

There was a pause in their discourse. Mr. Springrove was looking down the street at some object which had attracted his attention. 'Ah, 'tis what we shall all come to!' he murmured.

The other looked in the same direction. 'True, neighbour Springrove; true.'

Two men, advancing one behind the other in the middle of the road, were