

At this moment the miller entered the office hastily.

'Come, John,' he cried, 'I have been waiting and waiting for that there letter till I was nigh crazy!'

John briefly explained the news, and when his father had recovered from his astonishment, taken off his hat, and wiped the exact line where his forehead joined his hair, he walked with Anne up the street, leaving John to return alone. The miller was so absorbed in his mental perspective of Bob's marriage, that he saw nothing of the gaieties they passed through; and Anne seemed also so much impressed by the same intelligence, that she crossed before the inn occupied by Festus without showing a recollection of his presence there.

XIV. LATER IN THE EVENING OF THE SAME DAY

When they reached home the sun was going down. It had already been noised abroad that miller Loveday had received a letter, and, his cart having been heard coming up the lane, the population of Overcombe drew down towards the mill as soon as he had gone indoors--a sudden flash of brightness from the window showing that he had struck such an early light as nothing but the immediate deciphering of literature could require.

Letters were matters of public moment, and everybody in the parish had an interest in the reading of those rare documents; so that when the miller had placed the candle, slanted himself, and called in Mrs. Garland to have her opinion on the meaning of any hieroglyphics that he might encounter in his course, he found that he was to be additionally assisted by the opinions of the other neighbours, whose persons appeared in the doorway, partly covering each other like a hand of cards, yet each showing a large enough piece of himself for identification. To pass the time while they were arranging themselves, the miller adopted his usual way of filling up casual intervals, that of snuffing the candle.

'We heard you had got a letter, Maister Loveday,' they said.

'Yes; "Southampton, the twelfth of August, dear father," said Loveday; and they were as silent as relations at the reading of a will. Anne, for whom the letter had a singular fascination, came in with her mother and sat down.

Bob stated in his own way that having, since landing, taken into consideration his father's wish that he should renounce a seafaring life and become a partner in the mill, he had decided to agree to the proposal; and with that object in view he would return to Overcombe in three days from the time of writing.

He then said incidentally that since his voyage he had been in lodgings at Southampton, and during that time had become acquainted with a lovely

and virtuous young maiden, in whom he found the exact qualities necessary to his happiness. Having known this lady for the full space of a fortnight he had had ample opportunities of studying her character, and, being struck with the recollection that, if there was one thing more than another necessary in a mill which had no mistress, it was somebody who could play that part with grace and dignity, he had asked Miss Matilda Johnson to be his wife. In her kindness she, though sacrificing far better prospects, had agreed; and he could not but regard it as a happy chance that he should have found at the nick of time such a woman to adorn his home, whose innocence was as stunning as her beauty. Without much ado, therefore, he and she had arranged to be married at once, and at Overcombe, that his father might not be deprived of the pleasures of the wedding feast. She had kindly consented to follow him by land in the course of a few days, and to live in the house as their guest for the week or so previous to the ceremony.

'Tis a proper good letter,' said Mrs. Comfort from the background. 'I never heerd true love better put out of hand in my life; and they seem 'nation fond of one another.'

'He haven't knowed her such a very long time,' said Job Mitchell dubiously.

'That's nothing,' said Esther Beach. 'Nater will find her way, very rapid when the time's come for't. Well, 'tis good news for ye, miller.'

'Yes, sure, I hope 'tis,' said Loveday, without, however, showing any great hurry to burst into the frantic form of fatherly joy which the event should naturally have produced, seeming more disposed to let off his feelings by examining thoroughly into the fibres of the letter-paper.

'I was five years a-courting my wife,' he presently remarked. 'But folks were slower about everything in them days. Well, since she's coming we must make her welcome. Did any of ye catch by my reading which day it is he means? What with making out the penmanship, my mind was drawn off from the sense here and there.'

'He says in three days,' said Mrs. Garland. 'The date of the letter will fix it.'

On examination it was found that the day appointed was the one nearly expired; at which the miller jumped up and said, 'Then he'll be here before bedtime. I didn't gather till now that he was coming afore Saturday. Why, he may drop in this very minute!'

He had scarcely spoken when footsteps were heard coming along the front, and they presently halted at the door. Loveday pushed through the neighbours and rushed out; and, seeing in the passage a form which obscured the declining light, the miller seized hold of him, saying, 'O my dear Bob; then you are come!'

'Scrounch it all, miller, don't quite pull my poor shoulder out of joint!

Whatever is the matter?' said the new-comer, trying to release himself from Loveday's grasp of affection. It was Uncle Benjy.

'Thought 'twas my son!' faltered the miller, sinking back upon the toes of the neighbours who had closely followed him into the entry. 'Well, come in, Mr. Derriman, and make yerself at home. Why, you haven't been here for years! Whatever has made you come now, sir, of all times in the world?'

'Is he in there with ye?' whispered the farmer with misgiving.

'Who?'

'My nephew, after that maid that he's so mighty smit with?'

'O no; he never calls here.'

Farmer Derriman breathed a breath of relief. 'Well, I've called to tell ye,' he said, 'that there's more news of the French. We shall have 'em here this month as sure as a gun. The gunboats be all ready--near two thousand of 'em--and the whole army is at Boulogne. And, miller, I know ye to be an honest man.'

Loveday did not say nay.

'Neighbour Loveday, I know ye to be an honest man,' repeated the old

squireen. 'Can I speak to ye alone?'

As the house was full, Loveday took him into the garden, all the while upon tenter-hooks, not lest Buonaparte should appear in their midst, but lest Bob should come whilst he was not there to receive him. When they had got into a corner Uncle Benjy said, 'Miller, what with the French, and what with my nephew Festus, I assure ye my life is nothing but wherit from morning to night. Miller Loveday, you are an honest man.'

Loveday nodded.

'Well, I've come to ask a favour--to ask if you will take charge of my few poor title-deeds and documents and suchlike, while I am away from home next week, lest anything should befall me, and they should be stole away by Boney or Festus, and I should have nothing left in the wide world? I can trust neither banks nor lawyers in these terrible times; and I am come to you.'

Loveday after some hesitation agreed to take care of anything that Derriman should bring, whereupon the farmer said he would call with the parchments and papers alluded to in the course of a week. Derriman then went away by the garden gate, mounted his pony, which had been tethered outside, and rode on till his form was lost in the shades.

The miller rejoined his friends, and found that in the meantime John had arrived. John informed the company that after parting from his father

and Anne he had rambled to the harbour, and discovered the Pewit by the quay. On inquiry he had learnt that she came in at eleven o'clock, and that Bob had gone ashore.

'We'll go and meet him,' said the miller. 'Tis still light out of doors.'

So, as the dew rose from the meads and formed fleeces in the hollows, Loveday and his friends and neighbours strolled out, and loitered by the stiles which hampered the footpath from Overcombe to the high road at intervals of a hundred yards. John Loveday, being obliged to return to camp, was unable to accompany them, but Widow Garland thought proper to fall in with the procession. When she had put on her bonnet she called to her daughter. Anne said from upstairs that she was coming in a minute; and her mother walked on without her.

What was Anne doing? Having hastily unlocked a receptacle for emotional objects of small size, she took thence the little folded paper with which we have already become acquainted, and, striking a light from her private tinder-box, she held the paper, and curl of hair it contained, in the candle till they were burnt. Then she put on her hat and followed her mother and the rest of them across the moist grey fields, cheerfully singing in an undertone as she went, to assure herself of her indifference to circumstances.