

eyes and parted lips at the door by which he had gone. Having remained with suspended breath in this attitude for a few seconds she turned round, bent her head upon the table, and burst out weeping anew with thrice the violence of the former time. It really seemed now as if her grief would overwhelm her, all the emotions which had been suppressed, bottled up, and concealed since Bob's return having made themselves a sluice at last.

But such things have their end; and left to herself in the large, vacant, old apartment, she grew quieter, and at last calm. At length she took the candle and ascended to her bedroom, where she bathed her eyes and looked in the glass to see if she had made herself a dreadful object. It was not so bad as she had expected, and she went downstairs again.

Nobody was there, and, sitting down, she wondered what Bob had really meant by his words. It was too dreadful to think that he intended to go straight away to sea without seeing her again, and frightened at what she had done she waited anxiously for his return.

## XL. A CALL ON BUSINESS

Her suspense was interrupted by a very gentle tapping at the door, and

then the rustle of a hand over its surface, as if searching for the latch in the dark. The door opened a few inches, and the alabaster face of Uncle Benjy appeared in the slit.

'O, Squire Derriman, you frighten me!'

'All alone?' he asked in a whisper.

'My mother and Mr. Loveday are somewhere about the house.'

'That will do,' he said, coming forward. 'I be wherrited out of my life, and I have thought of you again--you yourself, dear Anne, and not the miller. If you will only take this and lock it up for a few days till I can find another good place for it--if you only would!' And he breathlessly deposited the tin box on the table.

'What, obliged to dig it up from the cellar?'

'Ay; my nephew hath a scent of the place--how, I don't know! but he and a young woman he's met with are searching everywhere. I worked like a wire-drawer to get it up and away while they were scraping in the next cellar. Now where could ye put it, dear? 'Tis only a few documents, and my will, and such like, you know. Poor soul o' me, I'm worn out with running and fright!'

'I'll put it here till I can think of a better place,' said Anne, lifting

the box. 'Dear me, how heavy it is!'

'Yes, yes,' said Uncle Benjy hastily; 'the box is iron, you see. However, take care of it, because I am going to make it worth your while. Ah, you are a good girl, Anne. I wish you was mine!'

Anne looked at Uncle Benjy. She had known for some time that she possessed all the affection he had to bestow.

'Why do you wish that?' she said simply.

'Now don't ye argue with me. Where d'ye put the coffer?'

'Here,' said Anne, going to the window-seat, which rose as a flap, disclosing a boxed receptacle beneath, as in many old houses.

'Tis very well for the present,' he said dubiously, and they dropped the coffer in, Anne locking down the seat, and giving him the key. 'Now I don't want ye to be on my side for nothing,' he went on. 'I never did now, did I? This is for you.' He handed her a little packet of paper, which Anne turned over and looked at curiously. 'I always meant to do it,' continued Uncle Benjy, gazing at the packet as it lay in her hand, and sighing. 'Come, open it, my dear; I always meant to do it!'

She opened it and found twenty new guineas snugly packed within.

'Yes, they are for you. I always meant to do it!' he said, sighing again.

'But you owe me nothing!' returned Anne, holding them out.

'Don't say it!' cried Uncle Benjy, covering his eyes. 'Put 'em away. . . .

Well, if you don't want 'em--But put 'em away, dear Anne; they are for you, because you have kept my counsel. Good-night t'ye. Yes, they are for you.'

He went a few steps, and turning back added anxiously, 'You won't spend 'em in clothes, or waste 'em in fairings, or ornaments of any kind, my dear girl?'

'I will not,' said Anne. 'I wish you would have them.'

'No, no,' said Uncle Benjy, rushing off to escape their shine. But he had got no further than the passage when he returned again.

'And you won't lend 'em to anybody, or put 'em into the bank--for no bank is safe in these troublous times?. . . If I was you I'd keep them exactly as they be, and not spend 'em on any account. Shall I lock them into my box for ye?'

'Certainly,' said she; and the farmer rapidly unlocked the window-bench, opened the box, and locked them in.

"Tis much the best plan,' he said with great satisfaction as he returned the keys to his pocket. 'There they will always be safe, you see, and you won't be exposed to temptation.'

When the old man had been gone a few minutes, the miller and his wife came in, quite unconscious of all that had passed. Anne's anxiety about Bob was again uppermost now, and she spoke but meagrely of old Derriman's visit, and nothing of what he had left. She would fain have asked them if they knew where Bob was, but that she did not wish to inform them of the rupture. She was forced to admit to herself that she had somewhat tried his patience, and that impulsive men had been known to do dark things with themselves at such times.

They sat down to supper, the clock ticked rapidly on, and at length the miller said, 'Bob is later than usual. Where can he be?'

As they both looked at her, she could no longer keep the secret.

'It is my fault,' she cried; 'I have driven him away! What shall I do?'

The nature of the quarrel was at once guessed, and her two elders said no more. Anne rose and went to the front door, where she listened for every sound with a palpitating heart. Then she went in; then she went out: and on one occasion she heard the miller say, 'I wonder what hath passed

between Bob and Anne. I hope the chap will come home.'

Just about this time light footsteps were heard without, and Bob bounced into the passage. Anne, who stood back in the dark while he passed, followed him into the room, where her mother and the miller were on the point of retiring to bed, candle in hand.

'I have kept ye up, I fear,' began Bob cheerily, and apparently without the faintest recollection of his tragic exit from the house. 'But the truth on't is, I met with Fess Derriman at the "Duke of York" as I went from here, and there we have been playing Put ever since, not noticing how the time was going. I haven't had a good chat with the fellow for years and years, and really he is an out and out good comrade--a regular hearty! Poor fellow, he's been very badly used. I never heard the rights of the story till now; but it seems that old uncle of his treats him shamefully. He has been hiding away his money, so that poor Fess might not have a farthing, till at last the young man has turned, like any other worm, and is now determined to ferret out what he has done with it. The poor young chap hadn't a farthing of ready money till I lent him a couple of guineas--a thing I never did more willingly in my life. But the man was very honourable. "No; no," says he, "don't let me deprive ye." He's going to marry, and what may you think he is going to do it for?'

'For love, I hope,' said Anne's mother.

'For money, I suppose, since he's so short,' said the miller.

'No,' said Bob, 'for spite. He has been badly served--deuced badly served--by a woman. I never heard of a more heartless case in my life. The poor chap wouldn't mention names, but it seems this young woman has trifled with him in all manner of cruel ways--pushed him into the river, tried to steal his horse when he was called out to defend his country--in short, served him rascally. So I gave him the two guineas and said, "Now let's drink to the hussy's downfall!"'

'O!' said Anne, having approached behind him.

Bob turned and saw her, and at the same moment Mr. and Mrs. Loveday discreetly retired by the other door.

'Is it peace?' he asked tenderly.

'O yes,' she anxiously replied. 'I--didn't mean to make you think I had no heart.' At this Bob inclined his countenance towards hers. 'No,' she said, smiling through two incipient tears as she drew back. 'You are to show good behaviour for six months, and you must promise not to frighten me again by running off when I--show you how badly you have served me.'

'I am yours obedient--in anything,' cried Bob. 'But am I pardoned?'

Youth is foolish; and does a woman often let her reasoning in favour of

the worthier stand in the way of her perverse desire for the less worthy at such times as these? She murmured some soft words, ending with 'Do you repent?'

It would be superfluous to transcribe Bob's answer.

Footsteps were heard without.

'O begad; I forgot!' said Bob. 'He's waiting out there for a light.'

'Who?'

'My friend Derriman.'

'But, Bob, I have to explain.'

But Festus had by this time entered the lobby, and Anne, with a hasty 'Get rid of him at once!' vanished upstairs.

Here she waited and waited, but Festus did not seem inclined to depart; and at last, foreboding some collision of interests from Bob's new friendship for this man, she crept into a storeroom which was over the apartment into which Loveday and Festus had gone. By looking through a knot-hole in the floor it was easy to command a view of the room beneath, this being unceiled, with moulded beams and rafters.



Festus had sat down on the hollow window-bench, and was continuing the statement of his wrongs. 'If he only knew what he was sitting upon,' she thought apprehensively, 'how easily he could tear up the flap, lock and all, with his strong arm, and seize upon poor Uncle Benjy's possessions!' But he did not appear to know, unless he were acting, which was just possible. After a while he rose, and going to the table lifted the candle to light his pipe. At the moment when the flame began diving into the bowl the door noiselessly opened and a figure slipped across the room to the window-bench, hastily unlocked it, withdrew the box, and beat a retreat. Anne in a moment recognized the ghostly intruder as Festus Derriman's uncle. Before he could get out of the room Festus set down the candle and turned.

'What--Uncle Benjy--haw, haw! Here at this time of night?'

Uncle Benjy's eyes grew paralyzed, and his mouth opened and shut like a frog's in a drought, the action producing no sound.

'What have we got here--a tin box--the box of boxes? Why, I'll carry it for 'ee, uncle!--I am going home.'

'N-no-no, thanky, Festus: it is n-n-not heavy at all, thanky,' gasped the squireen.

'O but I must,' said Festus, pulling at the box.

'Don't let him have it, Bob!' screamed the excited Anne through the hole in the floor.

'No, don't let him!' cried the uncle. "'Tis a plot--there's a woman at the window waiting to help him!'

Anne's eyes flew to the window, and she saw Matilda's face pressed against the pane.

Bob, though he did not know whence Anne's command proceeded obeyed with

alacrity, pulled the box from the two relatives, and placed it on the table beside him.

'Now, look here, hearties; what's the meaning o' this?' he said.

'He's trying to rob me of all I possess!' cried the old man. 'My heart-strings seem as if they were going crack, crack, crack!'

At this instant the miller in his shirt-sleeves entered the room, having got thus far in his undressing when he heard the noise. Bob and Festus turned to him to explain; and when the latter had had his say Bob added, 'Well, all I know is that this box'--here he stretched out his hand to lay it upon the lid for emphasis. But as nothing but thin air met his fingers where the box had been, he turned, and found that the box was gone, Uncle Benjy having vanished also.

Festus, with an imprecation, hastened to the door, but though the night was not dark Farmer Derriman and his burden were nowhere to be seen. On

the bridge Festus joined a shadowy female form, and they went along the road together, followed for some distance by Bob, lest they should meet with and harm the old man. But the precaution was unnecessary: nowhere on the road was there any sign of Farmer Derriman, or of the box that belonged to him. When Bob re-entered the house Anne and Mrs. Loveday had

joined the miller downstairs, and then for the first time he learnt who had been the heroine of Festus's lamentable story, with many other particulars of that yeoman's history which he had never before known. Bob swore that he would not speak to the traitor again, and the family retired.

The escape of old Mr. Derriman from the annoyances of his nephew not only held good for that night, but for next day, and for ever. Just after dawn on the following morning a labouring man, who was going to his work, saw the old farmer and landowner leaning over a rail in a mead near his house, apparently engaged in contemplating the water of a brook before him. Drawing near, the man spoke, but Uncle Benjy did not reply. His head was hanging strangely, his body being supported in its erect position entirely by the rail that passed under each arm. On after-examination it was found that Uncle Benjy's poor withered heart had cracked and stopped its beating from damages inflicted on it by the excitements of his life, and of the previous night in particular. The

unconscious carcass was little more than a light empty husk, dry and fleshless as that of a dead heron found on a moor in January.

But the tin box was not discovered with or near him. It was searched for all the week, and all the month. The mill-pond was dragged, quarries were examined, woods were threaded, rewards were offered; but in vain.

At length one day in the spring, when the mill-house was about to be cleaned throughout, the chimney-board of Anne's bedroom, concealing a yawning fire-place, had to be taken down. In the chasm behind it stood the missing deed-box of Farmer Derriman.

Many were the conjectures as to how it had got there. Then Anne remembered that on going to bed on the night of the collision between Festus and his uncle in the room below, she had seen mud on the carpet of her room, and the miller remembered that he had seen footprints on the back staircase. The solution of the mystery seemed to be that the late Uncle Benjy, instead of running off from the house with his box, had doubled on getting out of the front door, entered at the back, deposited his box in Anne's chamber where it was found, and then leisurely pursued his way home at the heels of Festus, intending to tell Anne of his trick the next day--an intention that was for ever frustrated by the stroke of death.

Mr. Derriman's solicitor was a Casterbridge man, and Anne placed the box in his hands. Uncle Benjy's will was discovered within; and by this

testament Anne's queer old friend appointed her sole executrix of his said will, and, more than that, gave and bequeathed to the same young lady all his real and personal estate, with the solitary exception of five small freehold houses in a back street in Budmouth, which were devised to his nephew Festus, as a sufficient property to maintain him decently, without affording any margin for extravagances. Oxwell Hall, with its muddy quadrangle, archways, mullioned windows, cracked battlements, and weed-grown garden, passed with the rest into the hands of Anne.