

# THE STORY OF BESSIE COSTRELL\*

BY MRS. HUMPHRY WARD

## SCENE IV.

JUST before dark on the following day, a man descended from a down train at the Clinton Magna station. The porters knew him and greeted him; so did one or two laborers outside, as he set off to walk to the village, which was about a mile distant.

"Well, John, so yer coom back," said one of them, an old man, grasping the new-comer by the hand. "An' I can't say as yer looks is any credit to Frampton—no, that aa can't."

John, indeed, wore a sallow and pinched air, and walked lamely, with a stick.

"Noa," he said, peevishly; "it's a beastly place is Frampton; a damp, nasty hole as iver I saw—gives yer the rheumaticks to look at it. I've 'ad a doose of a time, I 'ave, I can tell yer—iver sense I went. But I'll pull up now."

"Aye, this air 'll do yer," said the other. "Where are yer stoppin'? Costrells'?"

John nodded.

"They don't know nothin' about my comin', but I dessay they'll find me somethin' to sleep on. I'll 'ave my own place soon, and someone to look arter it."

He drew himself up involuntarily, with the dignity that waits on property. A laugh, rather jeering than cordial, ran through the group of laborers.

"Aye, yer'll be livin' at your ease," said the man who had spoken first. "When will yo' give us a drink, yer lardship?"

The others grinned.

"Where's your money, John?" said a younger man suddenly, staring hard at the returned wanderer.

John started.

"Don't you talk your nonsense!" he said, fretfully; "an' I must be getting on afore dark."

He went his way, but as he turned a

corner of the road, he saw them still standing where he had left them. They seemed to be watching his progress, which astonished him.

A light of windy sunset lay spread over the white valley, and the freshening gusts drove the powdery snow before them, and sent little stabs of pain through John's shrinking body. Yet how glad he was to find himself again between those familiar hedges, to see the church-tower in front of him, the long hill to his right! His heart swelled at once with longing and satisfaction. During his Frampton job, and in the infirmary, he had suffered much, physically and mentally. He had missed Eliza and the tendance of years more than he had ever imagined he could; and he had found himself too old for new faces and a new society. When he fell ill he had been sorely tempted to send for some of his money, and get himself nursed and cared for at the respectable lodging where he had put up. But no; in the end he set his teeth and went into the infirmary. He had planned not to touch his hoard till he had done with the Frampton job, and returned to Clinton for good. His peasant obstinacy could not endure to be beaten; nor, indeed, could he bring himself to part with his keys, to trust the opening of the hoard even to Isaac.

Since then he had passed through many weary weeks, sometimes of acute pain, sometimes of sinking weakness, during which he had been haunted by many secret torments, springing mainly from the fear of death. He had almost been driven to make his will. But in the end superstitious reluctance prevailed. He had not made the will; and to dwell on the fact gave him the sensation of having escaped a bond, if not a danger. He did not want to leave his money behind him; he wanted to spend it, as he had told Eliza and Mary Anne and Bessie scores of times. To have

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assigned it to anyone else, even after his death, would have made it less his own.

Ah, well! those bad weeks were done, and here he was, at home again. Suddenly, as he tramped on, he caught sight against the hill of Bessie's cottage, the blue smoke from it blown across the rime-laden trees behind it. He drew in his breath with a deep, tremulous delight. That buoyant self-congratulation indeed which had stood between him and the pain of Eliza's death was gone. Rather there was in him a profound yearning for rest, for long dreaming by the fire or in the sun, with his pipe to smoke, and Jim's Louisa to look after him, and nothing to do but to draw a half-crown from his box when he wanted it. No more hard work in rain and cold; and no cringing, either, to the young and prosperous for the mere fault of age. The snowy valley with its circling woods opened to him like a mother's breast; the sight of it filled him with a hundred simple hopes and consolations; he hurried to bury himself in it, and be at peace.

He was within a hundred yards of the first house in the village, when he saw a tall figure in uniform approaching, and recognized Watson.

At sight of him the policeman stopped short, and John was conscious of a moment's vague impression of something strange in Watson's looks.

However, Watson shook hands with great friendliness.

"Well, I'm glad to see yer, John, I'm sure. An' now, I s'pose, you're back for good?"

"Aye. I'm not going away no more. I've done my share—I wants a bit o' rest."

"Of coorse yer do. You've been ill, 'aven't yer? You look like it. An' yer puttin' up at Costrells'?"

"Yes, till I can turn round a bit. 'Ave yer seen anythin' ov 'em? 'Ow's Bessie?"

Watson faced back toward the village.

"I'll walk with yer a bit—I'm in no 'urry. Oh, she's all right. You 'eard of her bit o' money?"

John opened his eyes.

"Noa, I don't know as I did."

"It wor an aunt o' hers, soa I understan'—quite a good bit o' money."

"Did yer iver hear the name?" said John, eagerly.

"Someone livin' at Bedford, I did 'ear say."

John laughed, not without good-humored relief. It would have touched his vanity had his niece been discovered to be richer than himself.

"Oh, that's old Sophy Clarke," he said. "Her 'usband bought the lease o' two little 'ouses in Church Street, and they braat 'er in six shillin's a week for years, an' she allus said she'd leave it to Bessie if she wor took afore the lease wor up. But the lease ull be up end o' next year I know, for I saw the old lady myself last Michaelmas twelvemonth, an' she told me all about it, though I worn't to tell nobody meself. An' I didn't know Sophy wor gone. Ah, well! it's not much, but it's 'andy—it's 'andy."

"Six shillin's a week!" said Watson, raising his eyebrows. "It's a nice bit o' money while it lassts, but I'd ha' thought Mrs. Costrell 'ad come into a deal more nor that."

"Oh, but she's sich a one to spend, is Bessie," said John, anxiously. "It's surprisin' 'ow the money runs. It's sixpence 'ere, an' sixpence there, allus dribblin', an' dribblin', out ov 'er. I've allus tole 'er as she'll end 'er days on the parish."

"Sixpences!" said Watson, with a laugh. "It's not sixpences as Mrs. Costrell's 'ad the spendin' of this last month or two—it's *suverins*—an' plenty ov 'em. You may be sure you've got the wrong tale about the money, John; it wor a deal more nor you say."

John stood stock still at the word "*soverigns*," his jaw dropping.

"*Suverins*," he said, trembling; "*suverins*? Bessie ain't got no *suverins*. Isaac 'arns sixteen shillin' a week."

The color was ebbing fast from his cheek and lips. Watson threw him a quick professional glance, then rapidly consulted with himself. No; he decided to hold his tongue.

"Yo' *are* reg'lar used up," he said, taking hold of the old fellow kindly by the arm. "Shall I walk yer up the hill?"

John withdrew himself.

"*Suverins!*" he repeated, in a low, hoarse voice. "She ain't got 'em, I tell yer—she ain't got 'em!"

The last words rose to a sort of cry, and without another word to Watson the old man started at a feeble run, his head hanging.

Watson followed him, afraid lest he should drop in the road. Instead, John seemed to gather strength. He made straight for the hill, taking no heed whatever of two or three startled acquaintances who stopped and shouted to him. When the ground began to rise, he stumbled again and again, but by a marvel did not fall, and his pace hardly slackened. Watson had difficulty in keeping up with him.

But when the policeman reached his own cottage on the side of the road, he stopped, panting, and contented himself with looking after the mounting figure. As soon as it turned the corner of the Costrells' lane, he went into his own house, said a word to his wife, and sat himself down at his own back door to await events—to ponder, also, a few conversations he had held that morning, with Mrs. Moulsey at "the shop," with Dawson, with Hall the butcher. Poor old John—poor old fellow!

When Bolderfield reached the paling in front of the Costrells' cottage, he paused a moment, holding for support to the half-open gate and struggling for breath. "I must keep my 'edd, I must," he was saying to himself piteously; "don' yer be a fool, John Borroful, don't yer be a fool!"

As he stood there, a child's face pushed the window-blind of the cottage aside, and the lame boy's large eyes looked Bolderfield up and down. Immediately after the door opened, and all four children stood huddling behind each other on the threshold. They all looked shyly at the new-comer. They knew him, but in six months they had grown strange to him.

"Arthur, where's your mother?" said John, at last able to walk firmly up to the door.

"Don' know."

"When did yer see her lasst?"

"She wor 'ere gettin' us our tea,"

said another child; "but she didn't eat nothin'."

John impatiently pushed the children before him back into the kitchen.

"You 'old your tongues," he said, "an' stay 'ere."

And he made for the door in the kitchen wall. But Arthur caught hold of his coat-tails and clung to them.

"Yer oughtn't to go up there—mother don't let anyone go there."

John wrenched himself violently away.

"Oh, don't she! yo' take your 'ands away, yer little varmint, or I'll brain yer."

He raised his stick, threatening. The child, terrified, fell back, and John, opening the door, rushed up the stairs.

He was so terribly excited that his fumbling fingers could hardly find the ribbon round his neck. At last he drew it over his head, and made stupendous efforts to steady his hand sufficiently to put the key in the lock.

The children below heard a sharp cry directly the cupboard door was opened; then the frantic dragging of a box on to the stairs, the creak of hinges—a groan, long and lingering—and then silence.

They clung together in terror, and the little girls began to cry. At last Arthur took courage and opened the door.

The old man was sitting on the top stair, supported sideways by the wall, his head hanging forward, and his hands dropping over his knees, in a dead faint.

At the sight all four children ran helter-skelter into the lane, shouting "Mammy! mammy!" in an anguish of fright. Their clamor was caught by the fierce north wind, which had begun to sweep the hill, and was borne along till it reached the ears of a woman who was sitting sewing in a cottage some fifty yards farther up the lane. She stepped to her door, opened it and listened.

"It's at Bessie's," she said; "whatever's wrong wi' the childer?"

By this time Arthur had begun to run toward her. Darkness was falling rapidly, but she could distinguish his small figure against the snow, and his halting gait.

"What is it, Arthur?—what is it, lam-mie?"

"O cousin Mary Anne! cousin Mary Anne! It's uncle John, and ee's dead!"

She ran like the wind at the words, catching at the child's hand in the dark, and dragging him along with her.

"Where is he, Arthur?—don't take on, honey!"

The child hurried on with her, sobbing, and she was soon on the stairs beside the unconscious John.

Mary Anne looked with amazement at the cupboard and the open box. Then she laid the old man on the floor, her gentle face working with the effort to remember what the doctor had once told her of the best way of dealing with persons in a faint. She got water, and she sent Arthur to a neighbor for brandy.

"Where's your mother, child?" she asked, as she despatched him.

"Don' know," repeated the boy, stupidly.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, she's never at Dawson's again!" groaned Mary Anne to herself; "she wor there last night, an' the night afore that. And her mother's brother lyin' like this in 'er house."

He was so long in coming round that her ignorance began to fear the worst. But just as she was telling the eldest girl to put on her hat and jacket and run for the doctor, poor John revived.

He struggled to a sitting posture, looked wildly at her and at the box. As his eye caught the two sovereigns still lying at the bottom, he gave a cry of rage, and got upon his feet with a mighty effort.

"Where's Bessie, I tell yer? Where's the huzzy gone? I'll have the law on 'er! I'll make 'er give it up—by the Lord I will!"

"John, what is it?—John, my dear!" cried Mary Anne, supporting him, and terrified lest he should pitch headlong down the stairs.

"Yo' 'elp me down," he said, violently. "We'll find 'er—we'll wring it out ov 'er—the mean thievin' vagabond! Changin' suverins, 'as she? we'll soon know about that—yo' 'elp me down, I tell yer."

And with her assistance he hobbled

down the stairs, hardly able to stand. Mary Anne's eyes were starting out of her head with fear and agitation, and the children were staring at the old man as he came tottering into the kitchen when a sound at the outer door made them all turn.

The door opened, and Bessie appeared on the threshold.

At sight of her John seemed to lose his senses. He rushed at her, threatening, imploring, reviling—while Mary Anne could only cling to his arms and coat, lest he should attempt some bodily mischief.

Bessie closed the door, leant against it, and folded her arms. She was white and haggard, but perfectly cool. In this moment of excitement it struck neither John nor Mary Anne—nor, indeed, herself—that her manner, with its brutality, and its poorly feigned surprise, was the most revealing element in the situation.

"What's all this about yer money?" she said, staring John in the face. "What do I know about yer money? 'Ow dare yer say such things? I 'aven't anythin' to do with it, an' never 'ad."

He raved at her, in reply, about the position in which he had found the box—on the top of its fellow instead of underneath, where he had placed it—about the broken lock, the sovereigns she had been changing, and the things Watson had said of her—winding up with a peremptory demand for his money.

"Yo' gi' me my money back," he said, holding out a shaking hand. "Yer can't 'ave spent it all—'tain't possible—an' yer ain't chucked it out o' winder. Yer've got it somewhere 'idden, an' I'll get it out o' you if I die for 't!"

Bessie surveyed him steadily. She had not even flinched at the mention of the sovereigns.

"What yer 'aven't got, yer can't give," she said. "I don' know nothin' about it, an' I've tole yer. There's plenty o' bad people in the world—beside me. Somebody came in o' nights, I suppose, an' picked the lock—there's many as 'ud think nothin' of it. And it 'ud be easy done—we all sleeps 'ard."

"Bessie!" cried Mary Anne, out-

raged by something in her tone, "aren't yer sorry for 'im?"

She pointed to the haggard and trembling man.

Bessie turned to her reluctantly. "Aye, I'm sorry," she said, sullenly. "But he shouldn't fly out at yer without 'earin' a word. 'Ow should I know anythin' about his money? Ee locked it up hisself, an' tuk the keys."

"An' them suverins," roared John, rattling his stick on the floor; "where did yer get them suverins?"

"I got 'em from old Sophy Clarke—leastways from Sophy Clarke's lawyer. And it ain't no business o' yourn."

At this John fell into a frenzy, shouting at her in inarticulate passion, calling her liar and thief.

She fronted it with perfect composure. Her fine eyes blazed, but otherwise her face might have been a waxen mask. With her, in this scene, was all the tragic dignity; with him, the weakness and vulgarity.

At last the little widow caught her by the arm, and drew her from the door.

"Let me take 'im to my place," she pleaded; "it's no good talkin' while ee's like ee is—not a bit o' good. John—John dear! you come along wi' me. Shall I get Saunders to come an' speak to yer?"

A gleam of sudden hope shot into the old man's face. He had not thought of Saunders; but Saunders had a head; he might unravel this accursed thing.

"Aye!" he said, lurching forward, "let's find Saunders—coom along—let's find Saunders."

Mary Anne guided him through the door, Bessie standing aside. As the widow passed, she touched Bessie piteously.

"O Bessie, yer *didn't* do it—say yer didn't!"

Bessie looked at her, dry-eyed and contemptuous. Something in the speaker's emotion seemed to madden her.

"Don't yer be a fool, Mary Anne—that's all!" she said, scornfully, and Mary Anne fled from her.

When the door had closed upon them, Bessie came up to the fire, her

teeth chattering. She sank down in front of it, spreading out her hands to the warmth. The children silently crowded up to her; first she pushed them away, then she caught at the child nearest to her, pressed its fair head against her, then again roughly put it aside. She was accustomed to chatter with them, scold them and slap them; but to-night they were uneasily dumb. They looked at her with round eyes; and at last their looks annoyed her. She told them to go to bed, and they slunk away, gaping at the open box on the stairs, and huddling together overhead, all on one bed, in the bitter cold, to whisper to each other. Isaac was a stern parent; Bessie a capricious one; and the children, though they could be riotous enough by themselves, were nervous and easily cowed at home.

Bessie, left alone, sat silently over the fire, her thin lips tight-set. She would deny everything—*everything*. Let them find out what they could. Who could prove what was in John's box when he left it? Who could prove she hadn't got those half-crowns in change somewhere?

The reflection of the day had only filled her with a passionate and fierce regret. *Why* had she not followed her first impulse, and thrown it all on Timothy?—told the story to Isaac, while she was still bleeding from his son's violence? It had been her only chance, and out of pure stupidity she had lost it. To have grasped it might at least have made him take *her* part, if it had forced him to give up Timothy. And who would have listened to Timothy's tales?

She sickened at the thought of her own folly, beating her knee with her clenched fist. For to tell the tale now would only be to make her doubly vile in Isaac's eyes. He would not believe her—no one would believe her. What motive could she plead for her twenty-four hours of silence, she knowing that John was coming back immediately? Isaac would only hate her for throwing it on Timothy.

Then again the memory of the half-crowns, and the village talk—and Watson—would close upon her, putting her



in a cold sweat. When would Isaac come? Who would tell him? As she looked forward to the effect upon him, all her muscles stiffened. If he drove her to it, aye, she *would* tell him—she didn't care a haporth, she vowed. If he must have it, let him. But as the name of Isaac, the thought of Isaac, hovered in her brain, she must needs brush away wild tears. That morning, for the first time for months, he had been so kind to her and the children, so chatty and cheerful.

Distant steps along the lane! She sprang to her feet, ran into the back kitchen, tied on her apron, hastily filled an earthenware bowl with water from the pump, and carrying it back to the front kitchen began to wash up the tea-things, making a busy household clatter as she slid them into the bowl.

A confused sound of feet approached the house, and there was a knock.

"Come in," said Bessie.

Three figures appeared, the huge form of Saunders the smith in front, John and Mary Anne Waller behind.

Saunders took off his cap politely. The sight of his bald head, his double chin, his mouth with its queer twitch, which made him seem as though perpetually about to laugh, if he had not perpetually thought better of it, filled Bessie with angry excitement. She barely nodded to him, in reply to his greeting.

"May we come in, Mrs. Costrell?" Saunders inquired, in his most deliberate voice.

"If yer want to," said Bessie, shortly, taking out a cup and drying it.

Saunders drew in the other two and shut the door.

"Sit down, John. Sit down, Mrs. Waller."

John did as he was told. Dishevelled and hopeless misery spoke in his stained face, his straggling hair, his shirt burst open at the neck and showing his wrinkled throat. But he fixed his eyes passionately on Saunders, thirsting for every word.

"Well, Mrs. Costrell," said Saunders, settling himself comfortably, "you'll be free to confess, won't yer, this is an oogly business—a very oogly business? Now, will yer let us ask yer a question or two?"

"I dessay," said Bessie, polishing her cup.

"Well, then—to begin reg'lar, Mrs. Costrell—yo' agree, don't yer, as Muster Bolderfield put his money in your upstairs cupboard?"

"I agree as he put his box there," said Bessie, sharply.

John broke into inarticulate and abusive clamor. Bessie turned upon him.

"'Ow did any of us know what yer'd got in your box? Did yer ever show it to me, or Mary Anne there, or any livin' soul in Clinton? Did yer?"

She waited, hawk-like, for the answer.

"Did yer, John?" repeated Saunders, judicially.

John groaned, rocking himself to and fro.

"Noa. I niver did—I niver did," he said. "Nobbut to Eliza—an' she's gone—she's gone!"

"Keep your 'ead, John," said Saunders, putting out a calming hand. "Let's get to the bottom o' this, quiet an' reg'lar. An' yer didn't tell anyone 'ow much yer 'ad?"

"Nobbut Eliza—nobbut Eliza!" said the old man again.

"Yer didn't tell *me*, I know," said Saunders, blandly.

John seemed to shrink together under the smith's glance. If only he had not been a jealous fool, and had left it with Saunders!

Saunders, however, refrained for the present from drawing this self-evident moral. He sat twirling his cap between his knees, and his shrewd eye travelled round the kitchen, coming back finally to Bessie, who was washing and drying diligently. As he watched her cool movements Saunders felt the presence of an enemy worthy of his steel, and his emulation rose.

"I understan', Mrs. Costrell," he said, speaking with great civility, "as the cupboard where John put his money is a cupboard *hon* the stairs? Not in hany room, but *hon* the stairs? Yer'll kindly correck me if I say anythin' wrong."

Bessie nodded.

"Aye—top o' the stairs—right-'and side," groaned John.

"An' John locked it hisself, an' tuk the key?" Saunders proceeded.

John plucked at his neck again, and, dumbly, held out the key.

"An' there worn't nothin' wrong wi' the lock when yo' opened it, John?"

"Nothin', Muster Saunders—I'll take my davy."

Saunders ruminated.

"Theer's a cupboard there," he said suddenly, raising his hand and pointing to the cupboard beside the fireplace. "Is't anythin' like the cupboard on th' stairs, John?"

"Aye, 'tis!" said John, startled and staring. "Aye, 'tis, Muster Saunders?"

Saunders rose.

"Per'aps," he said, slowly, "Mrs. Costrell will do us the favor ov lettin' us hexamine that 'ere cupboard?"

He walked across to it. Bessie's hand dropped; she turned sharply, supporting herself against the table, and watched him, her chest heaving.

"There's no key 'ere," said Saunders, stooping to look at the lock. "Try yours, John."

John rushed forward, but Bessie put herself in the way.

"What are yer meddlin' with my 'ouse for?" she said, fiercely. "Just mek yourselves scarce, all the lot o' yer! I don't know nothin' about his money, an' I'll not have yer *insultin'* me in me own place! Get out o' my kitchen, if yo' please!"

Saunders buttoned his coat.

"Sartinly, Mrs. Costrell, sartinly," he said with emphasis. "Come along, John. Yer must get Watson and put it in 'is hands. Ee's the law is Watson. Maybe as Mrs. Costrell ull listen to 'im."

Mary Anne ran to Bessie in despair.

"O Bessie, Bessie, my dear—don't let 'em get Watson; let 'em look into 't theirselves—it'll be better for yer, my dear, it *will*."

Bessie looked from one to the other, panting. Then she turned back to the table.

"I don' care what they do," she said, with sullen passion. "I'm not stannin' in anyone's way, I tell yer. The more they finds out the better I'm pleased."

The look of incipient laughter on Saunders's countenance became more pronounced—that is to say, the left-hand corner of his mouth twitched a

little higher. But it was rare for him to complete the act, and he was not in the least minded to do so now. He beckoned to John, and John, trembling took off his keys and gave them to him, pointing to that which belonged to the treasure cupboard.

Saunders slipped it into the lock before him. It moved with ease, backward and forward.

"H'm, that's strange," he said, taking out the key and turning it over thoughtfully in his hand. "Yer didn't think as there were *another* key in this 'ouse that would open your cupboard, did yer, Bolderfield?"

The old man sank weeping on a chair. He was too broken, too exhausted, to revile Bessie any more.

"Yo' tell her, Muster Saunders," he said, "to gi'e it me back! I'll not ast for all on it, but some on it, Muster Saunders—some on it. She *can't* a spent it. She must a got it somewhere. Yo' speak to her, Muster Saunders. It's a crule thing to rob an old man like me—an' her own mother's brother. Yo' speak to 'er—an' yo', too, Mary Ann."

He looked piteously from one to the other. But his misery only seemed to goad Bessie to fresh fury. She turned upon him, arms akimbo.

"Oh! an' of course it must be *me* as robs yer! It couldn't be nobody else, could it? There isn't tramps, an' thieves, an' rogues—'undreds of 'em—going about o' nights? Nary one, I believe yer! There isn't another thief in Clinton Magna, nobbut Bessie Costrell, is ther? But yer'll not black-guard me for nothin', I can tell yer. Now will yer jest oblige me by takin' yourselves off? I shall 'ave to clean up after yer"—she pointed, scornfully, to the marks of their muddy boots on the floor—"an' it's gettin' late."

"One moment, Mrs. Costrell," said Saunders, gently rubbing his hands. "With your leave, John and I ull just inspect the cupboard *hupstairs* before leavin', an' then we'll clear out double quick. But we'll 'ave one try if we can't 'it on somethin' as ull show 'ow the thief got in—with your leave, of *coorse*."

Bessie hesitated; then she threw

some spoons she held into the water beside her with a violent gesture.

"Go where yer wants," she said, and returned to her washing.

Saunders began to climb the narrow stairs, with John behind him. But the smith's small eyes had a puzzled look.

"There *somethin'* rum," he said, to himself. "'Ow *did* she spend it all? As she been carryin' on with someone be'ind Isaac's back, or is Isaac in it, too? It's one or t'other."

Meanwhile Bessie, left behind, was consumed by a passionate effort of memory. *What* had she done with the key, the night before, after she had locked the cupboard? Her brain was blurred. The blow—the fall—seemed to have confused even the remembrance of the scene with Timothy. How was it, for instance, that she had put the box back in the wrong place? She put her hand to her head, trying in an anguish to recollect the exact details.

The little widow sat meanwhile a few yards away, her thin hands clasped on her lap in her usual attitude of humble entreaty; her soft gray eyes, brimmed with tears, were fixed on Bessie. Bessie did not know that she was there—that she existed.

The door had closed after the two men. Bessie could hear vague movements, but nothing more. Presently she could bear it no longer. She went to the door and opened it.

She was just in time. By the light of the bit of candle that John held, she saw Saunders sitting on the stair, the shadow of his huge frame thrown black on the white wall; she saw him stoop suddenly, as a bird pounces; she heard an exclamation, then a sound of metal.

Her involuntary cry startled the men above.

"All right, Mrs. Costrell," said Saunders, briskly, "all right. We'll be down directly."

She came back into the kitchen, a mist before her eyes, and fell heavily on a chair by the fire. Mary Anne approached her, only to be pushed back. The widow stood listening, in an agony.

It took Saunders a minute or two to complete his case. Then he slowly de-

scended the stairs, carrying the box, his great weight making the house shake. He entered the kitchen first, John behind him. But at the same moment that they appeared the outer door opened, and Isaac Costrell, preceded by a gust of snow, stood on the threshold.

"Why, John!" he cried, in amazement—"an' *Saunders!*"

He looked at them, then at Mary Anne, then at his wife.

There was an instant's dead silence. Then the tottering John came forward.

"An' I'm glad yer come, Isaac, that I am—thankful! Now yer can tell me what yer wife's done with my money. D'yer mind that box? It wor you an' I carried it across that night as Watson come out on us. An' yo'll bear me witness as we locked it up, an' yo' saw me tie the two keys roun' my neck—yo' *did*, Isaac. An' now, Isaac"—the hoarse voice began to tremble—"now there's two—suverins—left, and one arf-crown—out o' seventy-one pound fower an' sixpence—seventy-one pound, Isaac! Yo'll get it out on 'er, Isaac, yer will, won't yer?"

He looked up, imploringly.

Isaac, after the first violent start, stood absolutely motionless, Saunders observing him. As one of the main props of Church Establishment in the village, Saunders had no great opinion of Isaac Costrell, who stood for the dissidence of dissent. The two men had never been friends, and Saunders in this affair had perhaps exercised the quasi-judicial functions the village had long by common consent allowed him, with more readiness than usual.

As soon as John ceased speaking, Isaac walked up to Saunders.

"Let me see that box," he said, peremptorily, "put it down."

Saunders, who had rested the box on the back of a chair, placed it gently on the table, assisted by Isaac. A few feet away stood Bessie, saying nothing, her hand holding the duster on her hip, her eyes following her husband.

He looked carefully at the two sovereigns lying on the bit of old cloth which covered the bottom of the box, and the one half-crown that Timothy had forgotten; he took up the bit of



cloth and shook it, he felt along the edge of the box, he examined the wrenched lock.

Then he stood for an instant, his hand on the box, his eyes staring straight before him in a kind of dream.

Saunders grew impatient. He pushed John aside, and came to the table, leaning his hands upon it, so as to command Isaac's face.

"Now look 'ere, Isaac," he said, in a different voice from any that he had yet employed, "let's come to business. These 'ere are the facks o' this case, an' 'ow we're agoin' to get over 'em, I don't see. John leaves his money in your cupboard. Yo' an' he lock it up, an' John goes away with 'is keys 'ung roun' 'is neck. Yo' agree to that? Well an' good. But there's *another* key in your 'ouse, Isaac, as opens John's cupboard. Ah——"

He waved his hand in deprecation of Isaac's movement.

"I dessay yo' didn't know nowt about it—that's noather 'ere nor there. Yo' try John's key in that there door"—he pointed to the cupboard by the fire—"an' yo'll find it fits *ex-act*. Then, thinks I, where's the key as belongs to that 'ere cupboard? An' John an' I goes upstairs to look about us, an' in noa time at aw, I sees a 'ole in the skirtin'. I whips in my finger—lor' bless yer! I knew it wor there the moment I sets eyes on the hole."

He held up the key triumphantly. By this time no Old Bailey lawyer making a hanging speech could have had more command of his task.

"'Ere then we 'ave"—he checked the items off on his fingers—"box locked up—key in the 'ouse as fits it, unbeknown to John—money tuk out—key 'idden away. But that's not all—not by long chalks—there's another side to the affair *haltogether*."

Saunders drew himself up, thrust his hands deep into his pockets, and cleared his throat.

"Per'aps yer don't know—I'm sartin sure yer don't know—leastways I'm hinc-lined that way—as Mrs. Costrell"—he made a polite inclination toward Bessie—" 'ave been makin' free with money—fower—five—night a week at the 'Spotted Deer'—fower—five—night a

week. She'd used to treat every young feller, an' plenty old uns too, as turned up; an' there was a many as only went to Dawson's becoss they knew as she'd treat 'em. Now she didn't go on tick at Dawson's; she'd *pay*—an' she allus payed in arf-crowns. An' those arf-crowns were curous arf-crowns; an' it came into Dawson's 'ead as he'd colleck them arf-crowns. Ee wanted to see summat, ee said—an' I dessay ee did. An' people began to taak. Last night theer wor a bit of a roompus, it seems, while Mrs. Costrell was a payin another o' them things, an' summat as was said come to my ears—an' come to Watson's. An' me and Watson 'ave been makin' inquiries—an' Mr. Dawson wor obligin' enough to make me a small loan, ee wor. Now I've got just one question to ask o' John Borroful."

He put his hand into his waistcoat pocket and drew out a silver coin.

"Is that yourn, John?"

John fell upon it with a cry.

"Aye, Saunders, it's mine. Look ye 'ere, Isaac, it's a king's 'ead. It's Wil-lum—not Victory. I saved that un up when I wor a lad at Mason's, an' look yer, there's my mark in the corner—every arf-crown I ever 'ad I marked like that."

He held it under Isaac's staring eyes, pointing to the little scratched cross in the corner.

"'Ere's another, John—two on 'em," said Saunders, pulling out a second and a third.

John, in a passion of hope, identified them both.

"Then," said Saunders, slapping the table solemnly, "theer's nobbut one more thing to say—an' sorry I am to say it. Them coins, Isaac"—he pointed a slow finger at Bessie, whose white, fierce face moved involuntarily—"them arf-crowns wor paid across the bar lasst night, or the night afore, at Dawson's, by *yor wife*, as is now stannin' there, an' she'll deny it if she can!"

For an instant the whole group preserved their positions—the breath suspended on their lips.

Then Isaac strode up to his wife, and gripped her by the arms.

"Did yer do it?" he asked her.

He held her, looking into her eyes. Slowly she sank away from him ; she would have fallen, but for a chair that stood beside her.

"Oh, yer brute!" she said, turning her head to Saunders an instant, and

speaking under her breath, with a kind of sob. "Yer brute!"

Isaac walked to the door, and threw it open.

"Per'aps yer'll go," he said, grimly.

And the three went, without a word.

(To be concluded.)



## AMERICAN WOOD-ENGRAVERS—FRANK FRENCH

IN saying anything about Frank French and his work, it seems hardly necessary to state that he was born in New England. For a number of years he has shown in his work a fondness for, and appreciation of, New England types of character and scenes, plainly proving his title "to the manner born." In the first article contributed by him to the pages of a magazine, in August, 1889, "Wood-Engravers in Camp," he described a delightful and unique outing near Hadley, Mass., spent in his friend Kingsley's famous sketching-car on wheels. He said then, referring to the subjects of his drawings: "For my part I have tried to introduce, to such as may care to know them, some of the

fast disappearing types of a sturdy race who have lived untrammelled by the mandates of fashion, and who have preserved their independent and original character, both in the inward being and its outward expression. I have done this work without one moment of careless or flippant thoughtlessness, and while I am deeply conscious of the faults of technique, I hope I have atoned for them by the earnest purpose which has actuated me. Not one wrinkle upon the faces of these time-worn veterans has been traced by me without increasing my respect for my rude New England forefathers, for I see in them that which reminds me of my boyhood days."

French's boyhood was spent on a farm at Loudon, N. H. His early expressed wish to become an artist was

\*. The illustrations in this article are from original drawings by French.