Business is Business

by John Trevena, 1870-?

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Tavy river rises on Cranmere, flows down Tavy Cleave, divides the parish of Mary Tavy from that of Peter Tavy, passes Tavy Mount, and leaves Dartmoor at Tavystock, or Tavistock as it is now spelt. Each Dartmoor river confers its name, or a portion of it, upon certain features of its own district. The Okements meet at Okehampton, and one of them has Oke Tor, which has been corrupted into Ock and even Hock. Even the tiny Lyd has its Lydford. Each river also has its particular characteristic. The East Okement is the river of ferns, the Teign the river of woods, the Taw the river of noise, the Dart the river of silence, and the Tavy is the river of rocks. Tavy Cleave from the top of Ger Tor, presents a grand and solemn spectacle of rock masses piled one upon the other; it is a valley of rocks, relieved only by the foaming little river.

Mary Tavy is a straggling village of unredeemed ugliness, wild and bare. It lies exposed on the side of the moor and is swept by every wind, for not a bush or even a bramble will be found upon the rounded hills adjoining. Once the place was a mining centre of some importance. The black moor has been torn into pits and covered with mounds by the tin-streamers in early days, and more recently by the copper-miners. All around Mary Tavy appear the dismal ruins of

these mines, or wheals as they are called. Peter Tavy, across the river, is not so dreary, but is equally exposed. This region during the winter is one of the most inhospitable spots to be found in England.

In Peter Tavy there lived, until quite recently, an elderly man, who might have posed as the most incompetent creature in the West Country. It is hardly necessary to say he did not do so; on the contrary, he posed as a many-sided genius. He occupied a hideous little tin house, which would have been condemned at a glance in those parts of the country where building by-laws are in existence. At one time and another he had borrowed the dregs of paint-pots, and had endeavoured to decorate the exterior. As a result, one portion was black, another white, and another blue. Over the door a board appeared setting forth the accomplishments of Peter Tavy, as he may here be called. According to his own showing he was a clock-maker; he was a photographer; he was a Dartmoor guide; he was a dealer in antiquities; he was a Reeve attached to the Manor of Lydford; and he was a purveyor of manure. This board was in its way a masterpiece of fiction. Once upon a time a resident, anxious to put Peter's powers to the test, sent him an old kitchen-clock to repair. He examined and gave it as his opinion that the undertaking would require time. When a year had passed the owner of the clock requested Peter to report progress. He replied that the work was getting on, but „'Twas a slow business and 'twould take another six months to make a job of it." At the end of that period the clock was removed, almost by force, and it was then discovered that Peter had sold most of the interior mechanism to a singularly innocent tourist as Druidical remains unearthed by him in one of the shafts of Wheal Betsy.

As a photographer he carried his impudence still further. Some one had given him an old camera and a few plates. He began at once to inveigle visitors—chiefly elderly ladies, „half-dafty maidens" he impolitely called them—down Tavy Cleave, where he would pose them on rocks and pretend to photograph them with plates which had already been exposed more than once. „If I doan't get a picture first time, I goes on till I do," he explained. Once, when Peter announced „'twas a fine picture this time," a gentleman of the party reminded him he had omitted to remove the cap from the lens. Peter was not to be caught that way: „I took 'en," he said, „I took 'en, but yew was yawning."

As a guide upon the moor Peter was an equal failure. He ought to have known Dartmoor after living upon it all his life; the truth was, he would have lost his way upon the road to Tavistock had he strayed from it a moment. Visitors, lured by the notice-board, had approached him from time to time with the request to be guided to Cranmere. Peter would take them along Tavy Cleave for a mile, then assure them a storm was coming up and it would be necessary to seek shelter as soon as possible, hurry them back, and demand half-a-guinea in return for his services. Peter had never been to Cranmere Pool, and had no idea how to get there. Sometimes a party would insist upon proceeding, in spite of the guide's warning, and in such cases the bewildered Peter would have to be shown the way home by his victims. He would demand the half-guinea all the same.

As a dealer in antiquities nothing came amiss. Broken pipes, bits of crockery, old mining-tools, any rubbish rotting or rusting upon the peat were gathered and classified as Druidical remains. No one knew where Peter had picked up the word Druidical; but it was certain he picked up their supposed remains on

the piece of black moor which surrounded his house. Sometimes, it was said, he found a tourist foolish enough to purchase a selection of this rubbish.

What he meant by describing himself as an official receiving pay from the Duchy of Cornwall nobody ever knew. As a Reeve (another word he had picked up somewhere) of the Manor of Lydford he believed himself to be intimately connected with the lord of that manor, who is the Prince of Wales. He knew that august personage was interested somehow in three feathers. The public-house in the neighbourhood called The Plume of Feathers had something to do with it he was sure, though he had never seen „goosey‘s feathers same as they on the sign-board.“ Once he thought seriously of erecting three feathers above his own door, and for that purpose captured a neighbor‘s goose and plucked three large quills from one of its wings, accompanying his action with the bland request, „Now bide still, goosey-gander, do‘ ye.“ He could not make his three goose-quills graceful and drooping, like those upon the sign-board, and that was probably why Peter refrained from doing the Lord of Dartmoor the compliment of assuming his crest.

The village of Peter Tavy, like most spots upon Dartmoor, has its summer visitors; and these were sure, sooner or later, to make the acquaintance of Peter Tavy the man. They thought him a harmless idiot, and he reciprocated. One summer a journalist came upon the moor for his health and, desiring to combine business with pleasure, he wrote a descriptive sketch of Peter, and this was published in due course in a paper which by a curious accident reached Peter himself. The man was furious. He went about the two villages with the paper in his hand, his scanty hair bristling, his watery eyes bulging, his mouth twisted into a very ugly shape. It was a good thing the journalist had departed, for just then Peter was angry and vindictive enough for anything. Presently he met his clergyman; he made towards him, held out the paper, and, regardless of grammar, cried out, „That‘s me.“

„He does not mention you by name,“ said the clergyman.

„He says the man in the iron house wi‘ notice-board atop. He‘s got down the notice-board as ‘tis,“ spluttered Peter. „He says a ginger-headed man—that‘s me; face like a rabbit—that‘s me.“

It was as a purveyor of manure that Peter found his level, if not a living. Probably he received financial assistance from his sister, who lived across the river at Mary Tavy. She had been formerly a lady‘s maid in Torquay; after more than thirty years‘ service her mistress had died, and had bequeathed to her a modest income, and on this she lived comfortably in retirement, crossing Tavy Cleave occasionally to visit her eccentric brother. She, too, was said to be eccentric, but that was only because she was fond of getting full value for a halfpenny. Mary Tavy was a spinster, and Peter Tavy was a bachelor. On those occasions when some ne‘er-do-well attempted to annex Mary and her income, the good woman‘s eccentricity had revealed itself very strongly; and as for Peter, his own sister would remark, „Women never could abide he.“

The Tavies always passed Christmas together. One year Peter would go across and stop with Mary for three days; the next, Mary would come across and stop with Peter for three days. Their rule on this matter was fixed; the visit never extended beyond three days, and Peter would not have dreamed of going across to Mary if it were the turn of Mary to come across to him.

Peter had a little cart and a pony to draw it. How he came by the pony nobody knew, but as it was never identified no hard questions were asked.

Every year a few Dartmoor ponies are missed when the drift takes place; and at the same time certain individuals take to owning shaggy little steeds which have no past history. When a brand has been skilfully removed, one Dartmoor pony is very much like a score of others. To drive Peter into a corner over his title to the pony which pulled his shameful little cart—it was hardly better than a packing-case on wheels—would have been impossible. He had hinted that it was a present from the Prince of Wales as a slight return for services rendered; and as no one else in the Tavy district was in the habit of communicating with the lord of the manor, his statement could not easily be refuted.

With this pony and unlicensed cart Peter would convey people from time to time to the station at Mary Tavy, making a charge of eighteen pence, which was not exorbitant considering the dangers and difficulties of the road. For conveying his sister from her home to his at Christmas he made a charge of one shilling; when she expostulated, as she always did, and quoted the proverb „Charity begins at home," Peter invariably replied with another proverb, „Business is business."

Few will have forgotten the winter of 1881, when snow fell for over a week, and every road was lost and every cleave choked. Snow was lurking in sheltered nooks upon the tops of Ger Tor and the High Willhays range as late as the following May. Snow upon Dartmoor does not always mean snow elsewhere. It is possible sometimes to stand knee-deep upon the high moor and look down upon a stretch of country without a flake upon it, and so on to the sugared and frosted hills of Exmoor; but no part of the country escaped the great fall of 1881. Every one on the moor can tell of some incident in connection with that Christmas. At the two Tavies they tell how Peter tried to drive Mary from his village to hers, how he failed in the attempt, and how both of them remained good business people to the end.

It was Mary's turn to visit Peter that year, and she arrived upon Christmas Eve, quaintly but warmly dressed, a small boy carrying her basket, which contained the articles that she deemed necessary for her visit, together with a bottle of spiced wine, some cream cakes, and a plum-pudding as big as her head. The boy said a good many uncomplimentary things about that pudding as they climbed up from the Tavy, comparing it to the Giant's Pebble higher up the cleave. When Mary raised her black-mittened hand and threatened him with chastisement, the urchin lifted out the pudding in its cloth, set it at her feet, and told her to carry it herself, as it was „enough to pinch a strong man dragging that great thing up the cleave"; so Mary had to finish the journey hugging the pudding like a baby. She was walking to save herself sixpence. Peter had offered to come for her with his pony and cart, the charge to be one shilling, payable as follows—sixpence when she got into the cart and sixpence when she got out; but Mary had told him that she could get a boy to carry her basket for half that amount; when he protested she reminded him that business was business.

A light sprinkle of snow had fallen, just enough to dust over the rocks and furze-bushes; but it was very cold, the clouds were low and wood-like, and there was in the air that feel of snow which animals can nearly always detect, and men who live on the moors can sometimes.

Peter and Mary spent the evening in simple style. Peter sat on one side of the fire, Mary on the other; sometimes Peter stirred to get fresh turves for the fire; sometimes Mary got up to heap the little table with good cheer and place it

midway between the old-fashioned chairs. They both smoked, they both took snuff, they both drank spiced wine. Towards evening they talked of old times and became merry. Then they talked of old people and grew sentimental, dropping tears into their hot wine. Peter got up and kissed Mary, but Mary did not care for Peter‘s caresses and told him so, whereupon Peter advised her to „get along home then.“ Mary declared she would, but changed her mind when she thought of the gloomy cleave and the Tavy in winter flood; so they went on smoking, taking snuff, and drinking spiced wine.

The next day was fine, and Peter and Mary went to chapel. Mary gave her brother a penny to put into the plate, but he put it into his pocket instead; he was always a man of business. She also gave him a bright new florin as a Christmas present. He had made her understand, when the coin was safe in his possession, that he should still demand a shilling for driving her home, and over that point they wrangled for some time. In the evening, when Peter had fallen asleep over the fire, Mary repented of her kindness and sought to regain the florin; but Peter had it hidden away safely in his boot.

When the time came for Mary to start homewards it was snowing fast, and she did not like the prospect. Although it was not much after three o‘clock, the outlook was exceedingly dark; there was an unpleasant silence upon the moor, and the snowflakes were larger and falling thickly. But the pony was harnessed to the unsteady conveyance, and Peter was waiting; before Mary could utter a word of protest, he had bundled her in and they were off.

„‘Twould have paid me better to bide home,“ said Mary.

„Do‘ye sit quiet,“ Peter growled. Then he added, „Where‘s the shillun?“

„There now, doan‘t ye worry about the shillun,“ said Mary; „I‘ll give it ye when I‘m safe and sound to home wi‘ no bones broke.“

„Shillun be poor pay vor driving this weather,“ said her business-like brother.

Now and again a light appeared from one of the cottages. The pony struggled on with its head down, while the silence seemed to grow more unearthly, and the darkness increased, and the snow became a solid descending mass. The road between the two Tavies is not easy in winter under favorable conditions, and on that night it was to become practically impassable. When the last light of Peter Tavy the village had vanished, Peter Tavy the man had about as much idea where he was as if he had just dropped out of the moon.

„Where be‘st going?“ shrieked Mary, as the cart swerved violently to the right.

„Taking a short cut,“ explained Peter.

„Dear life!“ gasped Mary, „he‘m pixy-led.“

„I b‘ain‘t,“ said Peter; „I be driving straight vor Mary Tavy.“

Had he said straight for the edge of Tavy Cleave he would have spoken the truth. The pony knew perfectly well that they were off the road, and the sensible beast would have returned to the right way had it not been for Peter, who kept pulling its head towards the cleave. Left to itself the pony would have returned to Peter Tavy, having quite enough sense to know that it was impossible to reach the sister village on such a night. Its master, with his fatal knack of blundering, tugged at the reins with one hand and plied the whip with the other. The snow was like a wall on every side; the clouds seemed to be dissolving upon them; suddenly the silence was broken by the roaring of the Tavy below.

„Us be going to kingdom come,“ shrieked Mary.

„Us b‘ain‘t,“ said Peter; „us be going to Mary Tavy.“

The pony stopped. Peter used his whip, and the next instant the snow appeared to rush towards them, open, and swallow them up. They had struck a boulder and gone over the cleave. The body of the cart was in one spot, its wheels were in another; and wallowing in the sea and snow were Peter and Mary and the pony. The animal was the first to regain its feet, and made off at once, with the broken harness trailing behind. Mary was the next to rise, plastered over with snow from head to foot; but she was soon down again, because her legs refused to support her. Presently she heard her brother's voice. He was invisible, because he had been thrown several feet lower, and had landed among rocks somewhat bruised and sprained; had it not been for the soft snow he would probably have been killed.

„I be broke to bits," he wailed.

„So be I," cried Mary; „So be the cart."

„Be the cart broke?" said Peter; and when Mary had replied it was only fit for firewood (it had not been fit for much else before the accident), he went on, „'Twill cost ye a lot o' money to buy me a new one."

„Buy ye a new one? The man be dafty!" screamed Mary.

„'Twas taking yew home what broke it," Peter explained.

„Call this taking me home?" Mary shouted.

„I done my best," said Peter; „'twas your weight what sent it over. There'll be the cart, and the harness and the doctor's bill; 'twill cost ye a heap o' money."

„Dear life, hear the man talk!" said Mary, appealing to the snow which was piled upon her ample form.

„Mayhap there'll be funeral expenses," said Peter lugubriously; „I be hurt dreadful."

„Yew won't want the cart then," his sister muttered; „and I'll have the pony."

„Where be the pony?" Peter demanded.

„Gone home likely; got more sense than we," said Mary. „Why doan't ye get up, Peter?"

„Get up wi' my two legs broke!" Peter replied in disgust.

„Dear life, man, get up!" Mary went on, with real alarm. „If us doan't get up soon us'll be stone dead carpses when us gets home."

„I'll try, Mary, I'll try," said Peter.

„Come up here, Peter; there be a sheltered spot over agin them rocks," said Mary.

„There be a sheltered spot down here," Peter answered; „'tis easier vor yew to roll down than vor me to climb up."

When the question had been argued, Mary went down; that is to say, she groped and grovelled through the snow, half-rolling, half-sliding, until she reached the shelter to which Peter had dragged himself. It was a small cleft, a chimney, mountaineers would have called it, in the centre of a rock-mass which made a small tor on the side of the cleave. Normally, this chimney acted as a drain for the rock-basin above, but it was then frozen up and dry. Peter was right at the back, huddled up as he could never have been had any bones been broken. When Mary appeared he dragged her in; she was almost too stout to pass inside, but as he placed her she made an excellent protection for him against the storm. Mary realised this, and suggested they should change places; but Peter pointed out that in his shattered condition any movement might prove fatal.

Presently Mary began to cry, realizing the gravity of their position. The snow was descending more thickly than ever, drifting up the side of the cleave and choking the entrance to their cleft. Fortunately the night was not very cold, and they were both warmly clad, while the snow which was threatening to bury them was itself a protection. Help could not possibly reach them while the night lasted; no one would know what had befallen them, and they were unable to walk. When Mary began to cry Peter abused her, until his thoughts also began to trouble him.

„Think they'll put what's on my notice-board on my tombstone?" he inquired.

„Now doan't ye talk about tombstoanes, doan't ye now," implored Mary tearfully.

„Business is business," said Peter. „I told 'em to give me a great big tombstone, and to put upon him, Peter Tavy, Clock-maker, Photographer, Dealer in Antiquities, Dartmoor Guide, Reeve of the Manor of Lydford, Purveyor of Manure, and et cetera."

„Doan't ye worry about it; they'll put it all down," said Mary.

„Us'll be buried together, same afternoon, half-past two likely," Peter went on.

„Doan't ye talk about funerals and tombstoanes," Mary implored. „Talk about spicy wine, and goosey fair, and them wooden horses that go round and round, and hurdy-gurdy music; talk about they, Peter."

„It ain't the time," said Peter bitterly.

A long dreary period of silence followed. Peter Tavy the village and Mary Tavy its sister were completely snowed up; and in the cleave of the river which divided the parishes Peter Tavy the man was snowed up with Mary Tavy his sister. They were miserably cold and drowsy. The snow was piled up in front of the chimney like a wall; there was hardly room for Mary to move, and Peter kept on groaning. At length he roused himself to remark: „Yew owes me a shillun."

„What would I owe ye a shillun vor?" said Mary sharply, wide-awake immediately at any suggestion of parting with money.

„Vor the drive," said Peter.

„I was to give ye a shillun vor taking me home, not vor breaking me bones and leaving me to perish in Tavy Cleave," said Mary. „Yew ain't earned the shillun, and I doan't see how yew'm going to."

„Yew owes me a shillun," repeated her brother doggedly. „I done my best to tak' ye home, and there was naught in your agreement wi' me about accidents. I never contracted to tak' ye home neither."

„Yew never promised to starve me wi' ice and snow on Tavy Cleave neither," replied Mary.

„I didn't promise nothing. I meant to tak' ye home, reasonable wear and tear excepted; this here is reasonable wear and tear. Yew promised to give me a shillun."

„When yew put me down," added Mary.

„Yew wur put down," said Peter.

„Not to my door."

„That warn't my fault," said Peter. „'Twas your worriting what done it; if yew hadn't worrited I'd have put ye out to Mary Tavy. Yew worrited and upset the cart, and now we'm dying."

„I b'ain't dying," said Mary stoutly.

„I be," said Peter drearily. „I be all cold and nohow inside. I be a going to die; I'd like to die wi' that shillun in my pocket."

„Doan't ye go on about it, Peter. If yew'm dying yew'll soon be in a place where yew won't want shilluns."

„While I be here I want 'en," said Peter. „Yew'll be fearful sorry when yew see me lying a cold carpse wi'out a shillun in my pocket."

„Give over, can't ye," cried Mary. „You'll be giving me the creepies. If yew wur to turn carpsy I wouldn't bide wi' ye."

There was no reply. Silence fell again, and the only sound was the moaning of the wind and the roaring of the Tavy; the snow went on falling and drifting. Another hour passed, and then Mary shook off her drowsiness, and called timidly, „Peter." There was no answer; she could see nothing; her fear returned and she shuddered. „Peter," she called again; there was still no reply. Mary pressed her stout figure forward and reached out fearfully; she heard a groan. „Ah, doan't ye die," she implored; „wait till us gets out o' this. What's the matter, Peter?"

„Yew owes me a shillun," whispered a voice.

„I doan't owe it, Peter, I doan't," cried Mary. „If yew had drove me across the river I'd have paid ye, I would; but us be still in the parish of Peter Tavy—"

She was interrupted by another and a deeper groan. „Be yew that bad?" she asked earnestly.

„I be like an old clock past mending," Peter answered. „My mainspring be broke; I be about to depart this life, December the twenty-seventh, eighteen hundred and eighty-one, aged fifty-eight, in hopes of being thoroughly cleaned and repaired and set a going in the world to come."

„Can't I do anything vor ye, Peter?" asked Mary gently.

„Yew can give me the shillun yew owes me," replied Peter.

„'Tis hard of ye to want a shillun if yew'm dying."

„Business is business," Peter moaned.

Fumbling in the little black bag she carried beneath her skirt, Mary produced a coin and held it out, saying sadly: „Here 'tis, Peter; I doan't want to give it to ye, but if 'twill make yew die happy, I must."

With singular agility Peter reached out his hand, and after groping a little in the darkness secured the precious coin. He felt it, he bit it, and he asked with suspicion: „How I be to know 'tis a shillun? He tastes like a halfpenny."

„I know 'tis a shillun; I ain't got no coppers," Mary answered.

Peter's groans ceased from that moment; he pocketed the coin and chuckled.

„I be a lot better," he said; „my legs b'ain't quite broke, I reckon, and I ain't so cold inside, neither."

Mary's reply was too eccentric to mention.

So soon as it was day a party of villagers set out from Peter Tavy well supplied with blankets and stimulants; Peter and Mary were not the only ones missing that fateful morning. The pony had returned to its stable the evening before, and had been seen by the local constable trailing its broken harness past the beer-house. An attempt had been made to find the couple then, but their tracks were completely hidden. Snow was still descending as the relief party waded through the drifts upon the edge of the cleave. The moor had disappeared during the night, and a strange region of white mountains had risen in its stead. The searchers worked their way on, with a hopeless feeling that they were only wasting their time, when they thought they heard a whistle.

They stopped and argued the matter like the three jolly huntsmen; one said it was a man, another said it was a bird, and another it was the wind. They were all wrong; it was a woman. Out of the centre of a huge white mass down the cleave appeared a black scarf tied to the end of an umbrella.

Peter and Mary were rescued, not without difficulty, because the snow was four feet in depth on the side of the cleave, and were conveyed in due course to their respective villages. Being a hardy couple they were little the worse for their adventure, although Peter posed as an invalid to the end of his days, and sought parish relief in consequence; that was simply a matter of business.

So soon as the roads became passable and he was able to walk, Peter tramped across to Mary Tavy, to pay his sister a friendly, and a business, visit. „There be ten shilluns yew owes vor breaking my cart and harness," he explained. „When be yew a going to pay?"

„Never," replied Mary decidedly.

„Then I'll tak' ye into court," said Peter.