CHAPTER XXII.

THE COLLECTION IN THE ROAD.

THE beauty of the calm autumn afternoon was marred by tne hubbub and commotion of the crowd in the road. The rays of the sun came filtering through the foliage of the trees, the deep blue sky was without a cloud, the air was still and balmy: the whole imparted an idea of peace. But in that dusty highway, so lonely at other times, there had gathered a throng of people, and they talked and swayed, and altogether made much clatter and disturbance.

A throng that was momentarily being added to. Stragglers came up from all directions with eager eyes and open mouth. An accident, such as this which had befallen Madam Chattaway and her son, is an event in a locality where accidents are rare. An upset and broken shafts may be seen any day in the streets of London, but in a rustic place it is one of the incidents to be remembered for a lifetime.

The affair had got wind. How these affairs do get wind who can tell? It had been exaggerated in the usual fashion. "Madam was killed; and the dog-cart smashed to pieces; and the horse lamed; and Mr. Cris wounded." Half the gaping people who came up believed it all: and the chief hubbub was caused, not so much by discussing the accident, as by endeavouring to explain that its effects were not very disastrous.

The news had travelled with its embellishments to Trevlyn Farm, amidst other places; and it brought out Nora. Without waiting to put anything on, she took her way to the spot. Mrs. Ryle was expecting company that afternoon, and Nora was at leisure and *en grande toilette*: a black silk gown, its flounces edged with velvet, and a cap of blonde lace trimmed with white flowers. The persons who were gathered on the spot made way for her. The wrecked dog-cart lay partly in the ditch, partly out of it. Opposite was the grinding-machine, its owner now silent and crestfallen, as he inwardly speculated upon what the law could do to him.

"Then it's not true that Madam's killed?" cried Nora, after listening to the various explanations.

A dozen voices answered the question. "Madam warn't hurt to speak of, only shook a bit: she had telled 'em so herself. She had walked off on Mr. George Ryle's arm, without waiting for the carriage that Mr. Cris had gone to fetch."

"I'll be about that Jim Sanders," retorted Nora, wrathfully. "How dare he come bringing in such tales? He said Madam was lying dead in the road."

She had barely spoken, when the throng standing over the dog-cart was invaded by a new-arrival, one who had been walking in a neighbouring field, and wondered what the collection could mean. The rustics fell back and stared at him: first, because he was a stranger; secondly, because his appearance was somewhat out of the common way; thirdly, because he carried a red umbrella. A tall man with a long white beard, a hat, the like of which had never been seen by country eyes, and a foreign look.

You will at once recognize him for the traveller who had introduced himself at the parsonage as the Reverend Mr. Daw, a friend of its owner. The crowd, having had no such introduction, could only stare, marvelling where he came from, and whether he had dropped from the clouds. He had been out all the afternoon, taking notes of the neighbourhood, and since his conversation with old Canham—which you heard related afterwards to Mr. Chattaway, to that gentleman's intense dread—he had plunged into the fields on the opposite side of the way. There he had remained, musing and wandering, until aroused by the commotion in the road, to which he speedily made his way.

"What has happened?" he exclaimed. "An accident?"

The assemblage fell back to give him a wide berth. Rustics are prone to be suspicious of strangers, if their appearance is peculiar, and not one of them found a ready answer to the question. Nora, however, whose tongue had, perhaps, never been at fault in its whole career, stood her ground.

"There's not much damage done, as far as I can learn," she said, in her usual free manner. "The dog-cart's the worst of it. There it lies. It was Cris Chattaway's own; and I should think it will be a lesson to him not to be so fond of driving strange horses."

"Is it to the Chattaways that the accident has occurred?" asked the stranger.

Nora nodded. She was stooping down to survey more critically the damages done to the dog-cart. "Cris Chattaway was driving his mother out," she said, rising. "He was trying a strange horse, and this was the result," touching the

wheel with her foot. "Madam was thrown into the ditch here."

"And hurt?" laconically asked Mr. Daw.

"Only shaken—as they say. But a shaking may be dangerous for one so delicate as Madam Chattaway. A pity but it had been *him*."

Nora spoke the last word with emphasis so demonstrative that her hearer raised his eyes in wonderment. "Of whom do you speak?" he said.

"Of Chattaway: Madam's husband. A shaking might do him good."

"You don't like him, apparently," observed the stranger.

"I don't know who does," freely spoke Nora.

"Ah," said Mr. Daw, quietly. "Then I am not singular. *I* don't."

"Do you know him?" she rejoined.

But to this the stranger gave no answer; he had evidently no intention of giving any; and the reticence whetted Nora's curiosity more than any answer could have done, however obscure or mysterious. Perhaps no living woman within a circuit of five miles had a curiosity equal to that of Nora Dickson.

"Where have you known Chattaway?" she exclaimed.

"It does not matter," said the stranger. "He is in the enjoyment of Trevlyn Hold, I hear."

To say "I hear," as applied to the subject, imparted the idea that the stranger had only just gained the information. Nora threw her quick black eyes searchingly upon him.

"Have you lived in a wood not to know that James Chattaway was possessor of Trevlyn Hold?" she said, with her characteristic plainness of speech. "He has enjoyed it these twenty years, to the exclusion of Rupert Trevlyn."

"Rupert Trevlyn is its rightful owner," said the stranger, almost as demonstratively as Nora herself could have spoken.

"Ah," said Nora, with a sort of indignant groan, "the whole parish knows that. But Chattaway has possession of it, you see."

"Why doesn't some one help Rupert Trevlyn to his rights?"

"Who's to do it?" crossly responded Nora. "Can you?"

"Possibly," returned the stranger.

Had the gentleman asserted that he might possibly cause the moon to shine by day instead of by night, Nora could not have shown more intense surprise. "Help—him—to—his—rights?"

she slowly repeated. "Do you mean to say you could displace Chattaway?"

"Possibly," was the repeated answer.

"Why—who are you?" uttered the amazed Nora.

A smile flitted for a moment over Mr. Daw's countenance, the first symptom of a break to its composed sadness. But he gave no reply.

"Do you know Rupert Trevlyn?" she reiterated.

But even to that there was no direct answer. "I came to this place partly to see Rupert Trevlyn," were the words that issued from his lips. "I knew his father; he was my dear friend."

"Who can he be?" was the question reiterating itself in Nora's active brain. "Are you a lawyer?" she asked, the idea suddenly occurring to her: as it had, you may remember, to old Canham.

Mr. Daw coughed. "Lawyers are keen men," was his answering remark, and Nora could have beaten him for its vagueness. But before she could say more, an interruption occurred.

This conversation had been carried on aloud; neither the stranger nor Nora having deemed it necessary to speak in a low tone. The consequence of which was, that those in the midst of whom they stood had listened with open ears, drawing their own deductions—and very remarkable deductions some of them were. The knife-grinder—though a stranger to the local politics, and totally uninterested in them—had listened with the rest. One conclusion that *he* hastily came to at this juncture, was, that the remarkable-looking gentleman with the white beard *was* a lawyer; and he pushed himself to the front of the throng.

"You be a lawyer, master," he broke in, with some excitement. "Would you mind telling of me whether they *can* harm me. If I ain't at liberty to ply my trade under a roadside hedge but I must be took up and punished for it, why, it's a fresh wrinkle as I've got to learn. I've done it all my life; others as is in the same trade does it; can the law touch us?"

Mr. Daw had turned in wonderment. He had heard nothing of the grinding-machine in connection with the accident, and the man's address was unintelligible. A score of voices hastened to enlighten him, but before it was well done, the eager knife-grinder's voice rose above the rest.

"Can the laws touch me for it, master?"

"I cannot tell you," was the answer.

The man's low brow scowled fitfully: he was somewhat ill-looking to the eye of a physiognomist. "What'll it cost?" he roughly said, taking from his pocket a bag in which was a handful of copper money mixed with a sprinkling of small silver, mostly sixpenny and fourpenny pieces. "I might have knowed a lawyer wouldn't give nothing for nothing, but I'll pay to know. If the laws can be down upon me for grinding a knife in the highway as is open to the world, all I can say is, that the laws is infamous."

He stood looking at the stranger, with an air and manner of demand, not of supplication—and rather insulting demand, too. Mr. Daw showed no signs of resenting the incipient insolence; on the contrary, his voice took a kind and sympathizing tone.

"My good man, you may put up your money. I can give you no information about the law, simply because I am ignorant of its bearing on these cases. In the old days, when I was an inhabitant of England, I have seen many a machine such as yours plying its trade in the public roads, and the law, as I supposed, could not touch them, neither did it attempt to. But that may be altered now: there has been time enough for it; years and years have passed since I last set foot on English soil."

The razor-grinder, frowning none the less, thrust his bag into his pocket again, and began to push back to the spot from whence he had come. The gaping mob had listened with open ears. But they had gained little further information. Whether he was a lawyer or whether he was not; where he had come from, and what his business was amongst them, unless it was the placing of young Rupert Trevlyn in possession of his "rights," they could not tell.

Nora could not tell—and the fact did not please her. If there was one thing that provoked Nora Dickson more than all else, it was to be balked in her curiosity. She felt that she had been balked now. Turning away in a temper, speaking not a syllable to the stranger by way of a polite adieu, she began to retrace her steps to Trevlyn Farm, holding up the flounces of her black silk gown, that they might not come in contact with the dusty road.

But—somewhat to her surprise—she found that the mysterious stranger had also extricated himself from the busy mob, and was following her. Nora was rather on the high ropes just then, and would not notice him. He, however, accosted her.

"By what I gathered from a word or two you let fall, I should assume that you are a friend of Rupert Trevlyn's, ma'am?"

"I hope I am," said Nora, mollified at the prospect of enlightenment. "Few folks about here but are friends to him, unless it's Chattaway and that lot at the Hold."

"Then perhaps you will have no objection to inform me—if you can inform me—how it was that Mr. Chattaway came into possession of the Hold, in place of young Rupert Trevlyn. I cannot understand how it could possibly have been. Until I came here this day, I never supposed but that the lad, Rupert, was the Squire of Trevlyn Hold."

"Perhaps you'll first of all tell me what you want the information for?" returned Nora. "I don't know who you are, sir, remember."

"You heard me say I was a friend of his father's; I should like to be a friend to the boy. It appears to me to be a monstrous injustice that he should not have succeeded to the estate of his ancestors. Has he been *legally* deprived of it?"

"As legally as a properly-made will could deprive him," was the reply of Nora. "Legality and justice don't always go together in our parts: I don't know what they may do in yours."

"Joe Trevlyn—my friend—was the direct heir to Trevlyn Hold. Upon his death his son became the heir. Why did he not succeed?"

"There are folks that say he was cheated out of it," replied Nora, in very significant tones.

"Cheated out of it?"

"It is said that the news of Rupert's birth was never suffered to reach the ears of Squire Trevlyn. That the Squire went to his grave, never knowing that he had a grandson in the direct male line—went to it after willing the estate to Chattaway."

"Kept from it, by whom?" eagerly cried Mr. Daw.

"By those who had an interest in keeping it from him—Chattaway and Miss Diana Trevlyn. It is so said, I say: *I* don't assert it. There may be danger in speaking too openly to a stranger," candidly added Nora.

"There is no danger in speaking to me," he frankly said. "I have told you but the truth—that I am a friend of young Rupert Trevlyn's. Chattaway is not a friend of mine, and I never saw him in my life."

Nora, won over to forget caution and ill-temper, opened her

heart to the stranger. She told him all she knew of the fraud —a tacit fraud, surely, if not an active one—she told him of Rupert's friendlessness, of his undesirable position at the Hold. Nora's tongue, set going upon any grievance which she felt strongly, could not be stopped. It was like the wheels of a clock, that once wound up, must and will run down. They walked on until the fold-yard gate of Trevlyn Farm was reached. There Nora came to a halt. And there she was in the midst of a concluding oration, delivered with forcible eloquence, and there the stranger was listening eagerly, when they were interrupted by George Ryle.

Nora ceased suddenly. The stranger looked round, and seeing a gentleman-like man who evidently belonged in some way to Nora, lifted his hat. George returned it.

"It's somebody strange to the place," unceremoniously pronounced Nora, by way of introducing him to George. "He was asking about Rupert Trevlyn."

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE DANGER COMING VERY CLOSE.

If they had possessed extraordinarily good eyes, any one of the three, they might have detected a head peering at them over a hedge about two fields off, in the direction of Trevlyn Hold. The head was Mr. Chattaway's. That gentleman rode home from the lodge, after hearing old Canham's account of the mysterious visit, in a state not to be described. Encountering Miss Diana, he despatched her with Octave to the lodge to see after his wife; he met George Ryle, and told him *his* services were no further needed—that Madam wanted neither him nor the brandy; he sent his horse to the stable, and went indoors: all in a confused state of agitation, as if he scarcely knew what he was about.

Dinner was ready; the servants were perplexed at no one's coming in for it, and they asked if the Squire would sit down to it without Madam. *He* sit down to dinner—in that awful uncertainty? No; rather would he steal out and poke and pry about until he had learned something.

He left the house and plunged into the fields. He did not go back down the avenue, go openly past the lodge into the

road: cowards, with their fear upon them, prowl about stealthily —as Chattaway was doing now. Very grievously was the fear upon him.

He walked hither and hither: he stood for some minutes in the field which had once been so fatal to poor Mr. Ryle; his arms were folded, his head was bent, his newly-awakened imagination was in full play. He crept to the outer field, and walked under cover of its hedge until he came opposite all that hubbub and confusion. There he halted, and found himself a peep-hole, and took in by degrees all that was to be seen: the razor-grinder and his machine, the dog-cart and its dilapidations, and the mob. Eagerly, anxiously did his restless eyes scan that mob; but he, upon whom they hoped to rest, was not amongst them. For you may be sure that Mr. Chattaway was searching after none but the dreaded stranger. Miserly as he was, he would have given a ten-pound note out of his pocket to obtain only a moment's look at him. He had been telling over all the enemies he had ever made, as far as he could remember them. Was it one of those?—some one who might owe him a grudge, and was taking this way of paying it out? Or was it a danger coming from a totally unknown quarter? Ten pounds! Chattaway would have given fifty then for a good view of the stranger; and his eyes were unmindful of the unfriendly thorns, in their feverish anxiety to penetrate to the very last of that lazy throng, idling away the summer's afternoon.

The stranger was certainly not amongst them. Chattaway knew every chattering soul of the whole lot. Some of his unconscious labourers made a part, and he only wished he dared appear and send them flying. But he did not care to do so. If ever there was a cautious man where he and his interests were concerned, it was Chattaway; and he would not run the risk of meeting this man face to face. No, no; rather let him get a bird's-eye view of him first, that he might be upon his guard.

It was no use looking any longer at the *débris* in the road and the gatherers around it. The state of the dog-cart did not by any means tend to soothe his feelings; neither did the sight of George Ryle, who passed through the crowd in the direction of his own home. He could see what a pretty penny it would take to repair the one; he knew not how many pence it might take to set right any mischief being hatched by the other. Mr. Chattaway turned away. He bore along noiselessly by the side