

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

THE DANGER COMING VERY CLOSE.

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

of the hedge, and then over a stile into a lower field, and then into another. That brought him in view of Trevlyn Farm, and—and—what did his restless eyes catch sight of?

Leaning on the fold-yard gate, dressed up in a style that was not often seen, stood Nora Dickson; on the other side was George Ryle, and with him one who might be recognized at the first glance—the strange-looking man, with his white hair, his red umbrella, and his queer hat, as described by old Canham. There could be no mistake about it; he it was: and the perspiration poured off the master of Trevlyn Hold in his mortal fear.

What were they hatching, those three? What *were* they hatching? That it did look suspicious must be confessed, to one whose fears were awakened, as were Chattaway's; for their heads were in close contact, and their attention was absorbed. Was he stopping at Trevlyn Farm, this man of treason? Undoubtedly he was: else why should Nora Dickson be decked out in company attire? Chattaway had always believed George Ryle to be a rogue, but now he knew him to be one.

It was a pity that Chattaway could not be listening as well as peeping. He would only have heard the gentleman explain to George Ryle who he was; his name, his calling, and where he was visiting in Barbrook. So far, Chattaway's doubts would have been at rest; but he would have heard no worse. George was less impulsive than Nora, and would not be likely to enter on the discussion of the claims of Rupert Trevlyn *versus* Chattaway, with a new acquaintance.

A very few minutes, and they separated. The conversation had been general since George came up; not a word having been said that could have alarmed intruding ears. Nora hastened indoors; George turned off to his rick-yard; and the stranger stood in the road and gazed leisurely about him, as if he were considering the points for a sketch in water-colours. Presently he disappeared from Chattaway's view.

That gentleman, taking a short time to recover himself, came to the conclusion that he might as well disappear also, in the direction of his home; where no doubt dinner was arrested, and its hungry candidates speculating upon what could have become of the master. It was of no use his remaining where he was. He had ascertained one point—that the dreaded enemy was an utter stranger to him. More than that he did not see that he could ascertain, in this early stage. He could not go boldly up to Nora or to George Ryle, tax them with

their treachery, and demand who and what the stranger was; he could still less go to the man himself. Cunning must be met with cunning; and the owner of Trevlyn Hold would no more have confessed to any fear or doubt that he should lose Trevlyn Hold, than he would voluntarily have resigned that desirable possession.

He wiped his damp face and set forth on his walk home, stepping out pretty briskly. It was as undesirable that suspicion should be directed towards his fear by those at home, as by outsiders. Were only an inkling of his fear to get abroad, it seemed to Chattaway that it would be half the business towards wresting Trevlyn Hold from him: he would not have it known that he feared it *could* be wrested from him. Therefore he walked on briskly, concocting a tale to account for his delay—that he had been to see a cow that was ill.

With the motion of walking, his courage partially came back to him; so exhilarating is bodily exertion on the human mind. The reaction once set in, his hopes went up, until he almost began to despise his recent terrible fear. It was absurd, he reasoned with himself; absurd to suppose this stranger could have anything to do with himself and Rupert Trevlyn. He was only some inquisitive traveller looking about the place for his amusement, and in so doing had picked up bits of gossip, and was seeking further information about them—all to while away an idle hour. Besides, the will *was* the Squire's will, and it could not be set aside; in our well-ordered country, a dead man's will, legally made, was held inviolate. If all the old women philanthropists of the kingdom ranged themselves into a body and took up the cause of Rupert Trevlyn, they could not act against that will. What a fool he had been to put himself in a fever on account of the man!

These consoling thoughts drowning the mind's latent dread—or rather making pretence to do so, for that the dread was there still, and would not be drowned, Chattaway was miserably conscious—he went on increasing his speed. At last, in turning into another field, he nearly knocked down a man running in the same direction, who had come up at right angles: a labourer named Hatch, who worked on his farm.

It was a good opportunity for Mr. Chattaway to let off a little of his ill-humour, and he demanded where the man had been skulking, and why he was away from his work. Hatch answered that, hearing of the accident to Madam and the young

Squire, he and his fellow-labourers had been induced to run to the spot in the hope of affording help.

"Hold your tongue," said Mr. Chattaway. "Help! You went off to see what there was to be seen, and for nothing else, leaving the rick half made. I have a great mind to dock you of a half-day's pay. What? Not been away five minutes? Why, it's——"

He came to a momentary pause. He could not say, as he was about to do: "It's a good twenty since I saw you there," for that would have betrayed more than he wished to betray. He changed the words.

"You have been there ever so long; you know you have. Is there so much to look at in a broken dog-cart, that you and the rest of you must neglect my work?"

The man took off his straw hat and rubbed his head gently: his common resort when in a quandary. They *had* hindered a great deal more time than was necessary, even allowing that going to the scene of action was at all essential; and they had certainly not bargained for its coming to the knowledge of the Squire. Hatch, too simple or too honest to invent excuses, could only make the best of the facts as they stood.

"'Twarn't looking at the dog-cart what kep' us, Squire. 'Twere listening to a strange-looking gentleman what were there: a man with a white beard and a red umberellar. He were talking about this here place, Trevlyn Hold, a-saying as it belonged to Master Rupert, and he were a-going to help him to it."

Chattaway turned away his face. Instinct taught him that even this stolid serf should not see the cold moisture that suddenly oozed from its every pore. "*What* did he say?" he cried, commanding his voice to an accent of scorn.

Hatch considered. And you—who heard what the man with the white beard really did say—must not too greatly blame the exaggerated reply. Hatch did not purposely deceive his master; but he did what a great many of us are apt to do—he answered according to the impression made on his imagination. He and the rest of the listeners had drawn their own conclusions, and it was in accordance with those conclusions he now spoke, rather than with the actual words he had heard. Had any one told Hatch he was telling untruths, he would have stared in amazement.

"He said for one thing, Squire, as he didn't like you. It were——"

"How does he know me?" broke from Mr. Chattaway, in his impulsiveness.

"Nora Dickson—'twere she he were talking to—asked him, but he wouldn't answer. He's a lawyer, he is, and——"

"How do you know that he's a lawyer?" again interrupted Mr. Chattaway.

"'Cause he said it," was the prompt reply of Hatch. And the man had no idea that it was an untruthful one. He as much believed the white-bearded stranger to be a lawyer as that he himself was a day-labourer. "He said as he had come here to help Master Rupert to his rights; he said as he had come to displace you from 'em. Our hairs stood all on end to hear him, Squire."

"Who is he?—where does he come from?" And to save his very life Chattaway could not have helped the words issuing forth in gasps.

"He never said where he come from—save that he hadn't been in England for a many year. We was a wondering among ourselves where he come from, after he walked off with Nora Dickson."

"Does she know?"

"No, that her don't, Squire. He come up while she were a standing there, and she wondered who he were, like we did. 'Twere through her asking of him questions that he said so much."

"But—what has he to do with my affairs?—what has he to do with Rupert Trevlyn?" passionately rejoined Mr. Chattaway.

It was a query that Hatch was unable to answer. "He said as he were a friend of the dead heir, Mr. Joe—I mind well he said that—and he said as he had come to this here place partly to see Master Rupert. He didn't seem to have knowed afore as Master Rupert had not got the Hold, and Nora Dickson—she's free of tongue, she is—asked if he'd lived in a wood not to ha' knowed that. So then he said as he should help him to his rights, and Nora she said, 'What! and displace Chattaway?' and he said, 'Yes.' We was so took aback, Squire, that we stopped a bit longer maybe nor we ought, and that's what it was as kep' us from the rick."

Every pulse of his heart beating, every drop of blood coursing in fiery heat, the master of Trevlyn Hold reached his home. He went in, and left his hat in the hall, and entered the dining-room, as a man in some awful dream. A friend of Joe

Trevlyn's!—come to help Rupert to his rights!—to displace *him!* The words rang their changes on his brain.

They had not waited dinner. It had been Miss Diana's pleasure that it should be commenced, and Mr. Chattaway took a seat mechanically. Mechanically he heard that his wife had declined partaking of it—had been ill when she reached home; that Rupert, after a hasty meal, had gone upstairs to lie down, at the recommendation of Miss Diana; that Cris had now gone off to the damaged dog-cart. He was as a man stunned. Miss Diana, who in his absence had taken the head of the table, called for a warm plate, and sent some meat to Mr. Chattaway. He took a mouthful of it, but found he could not swallow it.

"Have you dined?" inquired Miss Diana, perceiving that he laid down his knife and fork.

"No; but I am not hungry. I'll have a drop of brandy-and-water, I think. Get some hot water, James," he added to the servant.

The man brought the water, and Maude rose from her seat and mixed it. She placed the glass before him, and hastened to bring some biscuits. "They are very nice," she said, in a timid voice. "Fresh made to-day." It was impossible for Maude Trevlyn to speak otherwise than timidly to Mr. Chattaway.

"No, my dear, thank you. I can't eat them now."

Was it *Chattaway* speaking in that gentle tone—in those affectionate words? Maude blushed with the novelty, and Octave looked up in amazement. Octave came to the conclusion that her papa believed he had been speaking to her. Octave Chattaway had yet to learn that there is nothing like the anticipation of some dreadful evil for taking the spirit out of man or woman. Chattaway felt utterly unnerved.

The cloth was removed and the dessert placed upon the table. After taking a little fruit, the younger ones dispersed; Maude went upstairs to see how Mrs. Chattaway was; the rest to the drawing-room. The master of Trevlyn Hold paced the carpet, lost in thought. The silence was broken by Miss Diana.

"Squire, I am not satisfied with the appearance of Rupert Trevlyn. I fear he may be falling into worse health than usual. It must be looked to, and more care taken of him. I intend to buy him a pony to ride to and fro between here and Blackstone."

Had Miss Diana expressed her intention of purchasing ten ponies for Rupert, it would have made no impression then on Chattaway. In his terrible suspense and fear, a pony more or less was as an insignificant thing, and he received the announcement in silence, to the intense surprise of Miss Diana, who had expected to see him turn round in a blaze of anger.

"Are you not well?" she asked.

"Well? Quite well. I—I heated myself with riding, and—and feel quite chilly now. What should hinder my being well?" he continued, resentfully.

"I say I shall buy a pony for Rupert. Those walks backwards and forwards to Blackstone are too much for him. I think it must be that which is making him feel so ill; so I shall buy a pony for him."

"I wish you'd not bother me!" peevishly rejoined Chattaway. "Buy it, if you like. What do I care?"

"I'll thank you to be civil to *me*, Mr. Chattaway," said Miss Diana, with emphasis. "It is of no use your being put out about this business of Cris and the accident; and that's what you are, I suppose. Fretting over it won't mend it."

Mr. Chattaway caught at the mistake, eagerly favouring it. "It was such an idiotic trick, to put an untried horse into harness, and to let it smash the dog-cart!" he cried. "Cris did it in direct disobedience, too. I had told him he should not buy that horse."

"Cris does many things in disobedience," calmly rejoined Miss Diana. "I hope it has not injured Edith."

"She must have been foolish——"

A ring at the hall-bell—a loud, long, imperative ring—and Mr. Chattaway's voice abruptly stopped. *He* stopped: stopped in his walk, and stood stock still in the midst of the carpet, his eyes and ears alike open, his head bent forward, his whole senses on the alert. A premonition rushed over him that the messenger of evil had come.

"Are you expecting any one?" inquired Miss Diana.

"Be still, can't you?" almost shrieked Chattaway, throwing his hands up as in imploring agony. Her voice hindered his listening.

They were opening the hall-door then, and Chattaway's face was turning livid. There ensued a colloquy, and then James came into the room.

"A gentleman, sir, is asking to see Mr. Rupert."

"What gentleman?" interposed Miss Diana, before Chattaway could move or look.

"I don't know him, ma'am," replied James. "He seems strange to the place. He has a white beard, and looks foreign." "He wants Mr. Rupert, did you say?"

"When I opened the door, first, ma'am, he asked if he could see young Squire Trevlyn; so I wanted to know who he meant, and said my master, Mr. Chattaway, was the Squire, and he replied that he meant the rightful Squire, Master Rupert, the son of Squire Trevlyn's heir, Mr. Joe, who had died abroad. He is waiting, ma'am."

Chattaway turned his white face upon the man. His trembling hands, his stealthy movements, showed his abject terror; even his very voice, which had dropped to the lowest whisper.

"Mr. Rupert's in bed, and can't be seen, James. Go and say so."

Miss Diana had stood in utter amazement—first, at the words repeated by James; secondly, at Mr. Chattaway's strange demeanour. "Why, who is it?" she cried to the servant.

"He didn't say his name, ma'am. He——"

"Will you go, James?" hoarsely cried Mr. Chattaway. "Go—go? Get rid of the man?"

"But he shall not get rid of him," interrupted Miss Diana. "I shall see the man. It is the strangest message I ever heard in my life. What are you thinking of, Squire?"

"Be still! Stop where you are!" returned Mr. Chattaway, arresting Miss Diana's progress to the door. "Do you hear, James? Go and get rid of this man. Turn him out, at any cost."

Did Mr. Chattaway fear that the visitor had come to take possession of the house in Rupert's name? Miss Diana could only look at him in wonderment. His face wore the hue of death; drops of water were gathering on it; he was evidently almost beside himself with some wild terror. For once in her life she did not assert her will, but suffered James to leave the room and "get rid" of the visitor in obedience to Mr. Chattaway.

He appeared to have no trouble in accomplishing it. A moment, and the hall-door was heard to close upon him. Chattaway opened that of the dining-room.

"What did he say?"

"He said nothing, sir, except that he'd call again."

"James, does he—does he look like a madman?" cried Mr.

Chattaway, his tone changing to what might almost be called entreaty. "Is he insane, do you think? I could not let a madman enter the house, you know."

"I don't know, sir, I'm sure. His words were very odd, but he didn't seem mad."

Mr. Chattaway closed the door on the servant, and turned to his sister-in-law, who was regarding him in doubt, more puzzled than she had ever been in her life.

"I think it is you who are mad, Chattaway."

"Hush, Diana! I have heard of this man before. Sit down, and I will tell you about him."

He had come to a rapid conclusion that it would be better to tell her; to make her the confidant of the terrible news come to light. Not of his own fears, or of the dread which had lain deep in his heart: only of this that he had heard.

We have seen how the words of the stranger had been exaggerated by Hatch to Mr. Chattaway, and perhaps he now unconsciously exaggerated Hatch's words to him. Miss Diana listened in consternation. A lawyer!—come down here to depose them from Trevlyn Hold, and institute Rupert in it! "I never heard of such a thing!" she exclaimed. "He can't do it, you know, Chattaway."

Chattaway coughed ruefully. "Of course he can't. At least I don't see how he can, or how any one else can. My opinion is that the man *is* mad."

Diana Trevlyn was falling into thought. "A friend of Joe's?" she mused aloud. "Chattaway, could Joe have left a will?"

"Nonsense!" said Chattaway. He had thought the case over and over in all its bearings, and knew no harm could come from that quarter. "If Joe Trevlyn did leave a will, it would be null and void," he said. "He died in his father's lifetime, and the property was not his to leave."

"True. There can be no possibility of danger," she added, after a pause. "We may dismiss all fear as the idle wind."

"I wonder whether Rupert knows anything of this?"

"Rupert! What should he know of it?"

"I can't say," returned Mr. Chattaway, significantly. "I think I'll go up and ask him," he added, in a sort of feverish impulse.

Without a moment's pause, not waiting to hear what Miss Diana was saying, he hastened upstairs to Rupert's room. But the room was empty!

Mr. Chattaway stood transfixed. He had fully believed Rupert to be in bed, and the silent bed, unpressed, seemed to mock him. A strangely wild fear came over him that Rupert's pretence of going to bed had been but a *ruse*—that he had gone out to meet that dangerous stranger.

He flew down the stairs as one possessed; he dashed into rooms, shouting "Rupert! Rupert!" The household stole forth to look at him, and the walls echoed the name, "Rupert! Rupert!" But from Rupert himself there came no answer. He was not in the Hold.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A MEETING AT MARK CANHAM'S.

RUPERT'S leaving the Hold, however, had been a very innocent matter. The evening sun was setting gloriously, and he thought he would stroll out for a few minutes before going to his chamber. When he reached the lodge he went in and flung himself on the settle, opposite old Canham and his pipe. "How's Madam?" asked the old man. "What an accident it might have been!"

"So it might," assented Rupert. "Madam will be better after a night's rest. Cris might have killed her. I wonder how he'd have felt then?"

When Rupert came to an anchor, no matter where, he was somewhat unwilling to move from it. The settle was not a comfortable seat; rather the contrary; but Rupert kept to it, talking and laughing with old Canham. Ann was at the window, catching what remained of the fading light for her sewing.

"Here's that strange gentleman again, father!" she suddenly exclaimed in a whisper.

Old Canham turned his head, and Rupert turned his. The gentleman with the beard was going by in the direction of Trevlyn Hold, as if about to make a call there.

"Ay, that's him," cried old Canham.

"What a queer-looking chap!" exclaimed Rupert. "Who is he?"

"I can't make out," was old Canham's reply. "Me and Ann have been a-talking of him. He came strolling inside the

gates this afternoon with a red umberellar, a-looking here and a-looking there, and at last he see us, and come up and asked what place this was; and when I told him it was Trevlyn Hold, he said Trevlyn Hold was what he had been seeking for, and he stood there talking, a matter o' twenty minutes, leaning his arms on the winder-sill. He thought you was the Squire, Master Rupert. He had a red umberellar," repeated old Canham, as if the fact were remarkable.

Rupert glanced up in surprise. "Thought I was the Squire?"

"He came into this neighbourhood, he said, believing nothing less but that you were the rightful Squire, and he couldn't make out yet why you were not: he had been away from England a many years, he said, and had been believing it all the while. He said you *were* the true Squire, and you should be helped to your rights."

"Why! who can he be?" exclaimed Rupert, in excitement.

"Ah, that's it—who can he be," returned old Canham.

"Me and Ann have been a-marvelling. He said—leastways, he as good as said—that he used to be a friend of the dead heir, Mr. Joe. Master Rupert, who knows but he may be somebody come to place you in the Hold?"

Rupert was leaning forward on the settle, his elbow on his knee, his eyes fixed on old Canham.

"How could he do that?" he asked after a pause. "How could any one do it?"

"It's not for us to say how, Master Rupert. If anybody in these parts could have said how it could be done, maybe you'd have been in it long afore this. That there stranger is a 'cute 'un, I know. White beards always is a sign of wisdom."

Rupert laughed. "I suppose you are thinking of the patriarchs; and we are apt to attribute wisdom to them. That man, now gone by, struck me as not a bad representation of our ideas of a patriarch. Only——"

"He ain't broad enough," interrupted old Canham; and Rupert laughed again at the earnest tone. "Look at them patriarchs on the east winder at church, Master Rupert; what fine broad men they be! This one's a lawyer, as it strikes me, and if he *is* come to help you to your rights, we shall all bless him for 't."

"Look here, Mark. It is no good going over that ground again. I have heard about my 'rights' until I am tired. The