nothing about his absence to any one. The children are unruly if they know he is away. I suppose he will be home to-morrow."

But Mr. Chattaway was not home on the morrow. Miss Diana was burning with impatience for his return; that explanation was being waited for, and she was one who brooked not delay: but she was obliged to submit to it now. Day after day passed on, Mr. Chattaway was still absent from Trevlyn Hold.

"What a time he is away!" quoth the servants in their familiar intercourse with each other. "He might be buying up all the hops in Nettleby."

CHAPTER XXVII.

A WALK BY STARLIGHT.

A HARVEST-HOME used to be a great *fête* in farmhouses; chiefly so, as you are aware, for its servants and labourers. It is so in some houses still. A rustic, homely, social gathering; with plenty, in a plain way, to eat and drink, and where the masters and mistresses and their guests enjoy themselves as freely as their dependents.

Trevlyn Farm was lighted up to-night. The best kitchen, that large entrance room where you have seen Nora sitting sometimes, and which was never used for kitchen purposes, was set out with a long table as for dinner. Cold beef and ham, substantial and savoury meat pies, fruit pies, cakes, cheese, ale and cider, were being placed on it. Seats, chiefly benches, lined the walls, and the rustic labourers were coming sheepishly in. Some of them had the privilege of bringing their wives, who came in a great deal less sheepishly than the men.

Nanny was in full attire, a new green stuff gown and white apron; Molly from the parsonage was flaunting in a round cap, which the fashionable servants wore in Barmester, with red streamers hanging down; Ann Canham had a new Scotch plaid kerchief, white and purple, crossed on her shoulders; and Jim Sanders's mother, being rather poorly off for smart caps, wore a bonnet. These four were to do the waiting; and Nora was casting over them all the superintending eye of a

mistress. George Ryle liked to make his harvest-homes liberal and comfortable, and Mrs. Ryle seconded it. She was of the open-handed nature of the Trevlyns.

What Mrs. Ryle would have done, but for Nora Dickson, it was impossible to say. She really took little more management in the house than a visitor would take. Her will, it is true, was law: she gave orders, often in minute details; but she left the execution of them to others. Though she had married Thomas Ryle, the tenant of Trevlyn Farm, she never forgot that she was the daughter of Trevlyn Hold.

She sat in the small room opening from the supper-room—small in comparison with the drawing-room, but still commodious. On the harvest-home night, the visitors—Mrs. Ryle's visitors—were received in that ordinary room and sat there, forming, it may be said, part of the supper-room company, for the door was kept wide, and the great people went in and out, mixing with the small. George Ryle and the parson, Mr. Freeman, would be more in the supper-room than in the other; they were two who liked to see the hard-working people happy now and then.

Mrs. Ryle had taken up her place in the sitting-room; her gown of rich black silk and her real lace cap contrasting with the more showy attire of Mrs. Apperley, who sat next her. Mrs. Apperley was in a stiff brocade, yellow satin stripes flanking wavy lines of flowers. It had been her gala robe for years and years, and looked new yet. A wonderfully handsome silk, had it not been out of date. Mrs. Apperley's two daughters, in cherry-coloured ribbons and cherry-coloured hair-nets, were as gay as she was; they were whispering to Caroline Ryle, a graceful girl in dark-blue silk, with the blue eyes and the fair hair of her deceased father. Farmer Apperley, in top-boots, was holding an argument on the state of the country with a young gentleman who sat carelessly on the arm of the old-fashioned sofa, a young man of middle height and dark hair, stout for his years. It was Trevlyn Ryle. George had set his back against the wall, and was laughingly quizzing the Miss Apperleys, of which they were blushingly conscious. Were you to believe Nora, there was scarcely a young lady within the circuit of a couple of leagues but was privately setting her cap at handsome George.

A bustle in the outer room, and Nanny appeared with an announcement: "Parson and Mrs. Freeman." I am not responsible for the style of the introduction: you may hear it for

yourselves if you choose to penetrate to some of our rural districts.

Parson and Mrs. Freeman came in without ceremony; the parson with his hat and walking-stick, Mrs. Freeman in a green calico wadded hood and an old cloak. George, with laughing gallantry, helped her to take them off, and handed them to Nanny, and Mrs. Freeman went up to the pier-glass and settled the white bows in her cap to greater effect.

"But I thought you were to have brought your friend," said Mrs. Ryle.

"He will come in presently," replied the parson. "A letter arrived for him by this evening's post, and he wished to answer it."

Farmer Apperley turned from his colloquy with Trevlyn. "D'ye mean that droll-looking man who walks about with a red umbrella and a goat's beard, parson?"

"The same," said Mr. Freeman, settling his double chin more comfortably in his cravat, which was white this evening. "He has been staying with us for a week past."

"Ay. Some foreign folk, isn't he, named Daw? There's all sorts of tales abroad in the neighbourhood, as to what he is stopping down here for. I don't know whether they be correct."

"I don't know much about it myself, either," said Mr. Freeman. "I am glad to entertain him as an old friend, but for any private affairs or views of his, I don't meddle with them."

"Best plan," nodded the farmer in approval. And the subject, thus indistinctly hinted at, was allowed to drop, owing probably to the presence of Mrs. Ryle.

"The Chattaways are coming here to-night," suddenly exclaimed Caroline Ryle. She spoke only to Mary Apperley, but there was a pause in the general conversation just then, and the remark was audible to the room. Mr. Apperley took it up.

"Who's coming? The Chattaways! Which of the Chattaways?" he said in some surprise, knowing that they had never been in the habit of paying evening visits to Trevlyn Farm.

"All the girls, and Maude," replied Caroline. "I don't know whether Rupert will come; and I don't think Cris was asked."

"Eh, but that's a new move," cried Farmer Apperley, his long intimacy with the Farm justifying the freedom. "Did you invite them?"

"In point of fact, they invited themselves," interposed Mrs. Ryle, before George, to whom the question had been addressed,

could speak. "At least, Octave did so: and then George, I believe, asked the rest of the girls."

"They won't come," said Farmer Apperley.

"Not come!" interrupted Nora, sharply, who kept going in and out between the two rooms. "That's all you know about it, Mr. Apperley. Octave Chattaway is as sure to come here to-night——"

"Nora!"

The interruption came from George. Was he afraid of what she might say in her heat? Or did he see, coming in then at the outer door, Octave herself? Octave was coming in—as if to refute the opinion of Mr. Apperley.

But only Amelia was with her. A tall girl with a large mouth and very light hair, ever on the giggle. "Where are the rest?" impulsively asked George, his accent too unguarded to conceal its disappointment.

Octave detected it. She had thrown off her cloak and stood forth in attire scarcely suited to the occasion—a pale blue evening dress of damask, a silver necklace, silver bracelets, and a wreath of silver flowers in her hair. Nanny could hardly take the cloak for staring. "What 'rest?'" asked Octave.

"Your sisters and Maude. They promised to come.'

Octave tossed her head good-humouredly. "*Do* you think we could inflict the whole string on Mrs. Ryle? Two of us will be sufficient to represent the family."

"Inflict! On a harvest-home night!" called out Trevlyn. "You know, Octave, the more the merrier, then."

"Why, I really believe that's Treve!" exclaimed Octave. "When did you come?"

"This morning. You have grown thinner, Octave."

"It is nothing to you if I have," retorted Octave, offended at the remark. The point was a sore one; Octave being unpleasantly conscious that she was thin to ugliness. "*You* have got plump enough, at any rate."

"To be sure," said Treve. "I'm always jolly. It was too bad of you, Octave, not to bring the rest."

"So it was," said Amelia. "They had dressed for it, and at the last moment Octave made them stay at home."

But George was not going to take this quietly. Saying nothing, he left the room and made the best of his way to Trevlyn Hold. But the rooms seemed deserted. At length he found Maude in the schoolroom; ostensibly correcting exercises; in reality crying. After they had dressed for the

visit, Octavia had placed her veto upon it, and Emily and Edith had retired to bed in very vexation. Miss Diana was not at home; she was spending the evening out with Mrs. Chattaway, and Octave had had it all her own way.

"I have come for you, Maude," said George.

Maude's heart beat with the anticipation. "I do not know whether I may dare to go," she said, glancing shyly at him.

"Has any one forbidden you except Octave?"

"Only Octave."

Lying on a chair, George saw a bonnet and a cloak which he recognized as Maude's. In point of fact, she had thrown them off when forbidden the visit by Miss Chattaway. His only answer was to fold the cloak around her. And she put on the bonnet, and went out with him, shocked at her own temerity, but unable to resist the temptation.

"You are trembling, Maude," he cried, drawing her closer to him as he bent his head.

"I am afraid of Octave. I know she will be so angry. What if she should meet me with insulting words?"

"Then—Maude—you will give me leave to answer her?"

"Yes. Oh yes."

"It will involve more than you are thinking of," said George, laughing at her eager tone. "I must tell her, if necessary, that I have a right to defend you."

Maude stopped in her surprise, and half drew her arm from his as she looked up at him in the starlight. His pointed tone stirred all the pulses in her heart.

"You cannot have mistaken me, Maude, for this long while past," he quietly said. "If I have not spoken to you more openly; if I do not yet speak out to the world, it is that I see at present little prospect before us. I would prefer not to speak to others until that shall be more assured."

Maude, in spite of the intense feeling of happiness which was rising within her with a force not to be suppressed, felt half sick with fear. What of the powers of Trevlyn Hold?

"Yes, there might be opposition there," said George, divining her thoughts, "and the result—great unpleasantness altogether. I am independent enough to defy them, but you are not, Maude. For that reason I will not speak if I can help it. I hope Octave will not too greatly provoke me."

Maude started, as a thought flashed over her, and she looked up at George, a terrified expression in her face. "You *must*

not speak, George; you must not, for my sake. Were Octave only to suspect this, she—she——"

"Might treat you to a bowl of poison—after the stage fashion in what they call the good old days," he said, laughing. "Child, do you think I have been blind? I understand."

"You will be silent, then?"

"Yes," he answered, after a pause. "I will, at present, Maude."

They had taken the way through the fields—it was the nearest way—and George spoke of his affairs as he walked; more confidentially than he had ever in his life entered upon them to any one. That he had been in a manner sacrificed to the interests of Treve, there was no denying, and though he did not allude to it in so many words, it was impossible to ignore the fact entirely to Maude. A short while, one more term to keep at Oxford, and Treve was to enter officially upon his occupation of Trevlyn Farm. The lease would be transferred to his name; he would be its sole master; and George must look out for another home: but until then he was bound to the farm—and bound most unprofitably. To the young, however, all things wear a hopeful hue. What would some of us give in after-life for the *couleur-de-rose* which almost invariably imbues its threshold!

"By the spring I may be settled in a farm of my own, Maude. I have been casting a longing eye to the Upland. Its lease will be out at Lady-day, and Carteret leaves it. An unwise man in my opinion, he: to leave a certainty of competency here, for uncertain riches in the New World. But that is his business; not mine. I should like the Upland Farm."

Maude's breath was nearly taken away. It was the only large farm on the Trevlyn estate. "You surely would not risk that, George! What an undertaking!"

"Especially with Chattaway for a landlord, you would say. I shall take it if I can get it. The worst is, I should have to borrow money," he added, in a very serious tone. "And borrowed money weighs one down like an incubus. Witness what it did for my father. But I dare say we should manage to get along."

Maude opened her lips. She was wishing to say something that she did not quite well know how to say. I—I fear——" and there she stopped in timidity.

"What do you fear, Maude?"

"I don't know how I should ever manage in a farm," she said, feeling that she ought to speak out her doubts, but blushing vividly under cover of the dark night at having to do it. "I have been brought up so—so—uselessly—as regards domestic duties."

"Maude," he gravely said, "if I thought I should marry a wife only to make her work, I should not marry at all. We will manage better than that. You have been brought up a lady; and, if I may avow the truth, I should not care for my wife to be anything else. My mother—I mean Mrs. Ryle—has never done anything of the sort, you know, thanks to good Nora. And there are more Noras in the world. Shall I tell you a favourite scheme of mine, one that has been in my mind for some time now?"

She turned—waiting to hear it.

"To give a shelter to Rupert. You and I. To welcome him to our home. We could contrive to make him happier than he is made now."

Maude's heart leaped at the vision. "Oh, George! if it could be! How good you are! Rupert——"

"Hush, Maude!" The sudden check was not spoken to interrupt any expression touching his "goodness;" George would only have laughed at that; but because he had become conscious of the proximity of others walking and talking like themselves. Two voices were in contention with each other; or, if not in contention, speaking as if their opinions did not precisely coincide: and to George's intense astonishment, he recognized one of the voices as Mr. Chattaway's. He uttered a suppressed exclamation.

"It cannot be, George," she whispered. "He is miles and miles away. Even allowing that he had returned, what should bring him here?—he would have gone direct to the Hold."

But George was positive that it was Chattaway's voice. They—the people to whom the voices belonged—were advancing down the path on the other side the hedge, and would probably be coming through the gate, right in front of George and Maude. To meet Chattaway was not particularly coveted by either of them, even at the most convenient of opportunities, and at the present time it was not at all convenient. George drew Maude under one of the great elm trees, which overshadowed the hedge on this side.

"Just for a moment, Maude, until they shall have passed. I am certain it is Chattaway!"

The gate swung open and somebody came through it. Only one. Sure enough it was Chattaway. He strode onwards, muttering to himself, a brown paper parcel in his hand. But ere he had gone many steps, he halted, turned, came creeping back, and stood peering over the gate at the man who was walking away. A little movement of his head to the right, and Mr. Chattaway might have seen George and Maude standing there.

But he did not. He was grinding his teeth and working his disengaged hand, and was altogether too much occupied with the departing man, to pay undesirable attention to what might be around himself. Finally, his display of anger somewhat cooling down, he turned again and continued his way towards Trevlyn Hold.

"Who can it be that he is so angry with?" whispered Maude.

"Hush!" cautioned George. "His ears are sharp."

Very still they remained until he was at a safe distance, and then they went through the gate. Almost beyond their view a tall man was pacing slowly along in the direction of Trevlyn Farm, a red umbrella (but in truth George guessed at its colour in the light night, rather than distinguished it) whirling round and round in his hand.

"Ah, just as I thought," was George's comment to himself.

"Who is it, George?"

"That stranger who is visiting at the parsonage."

"He seemed to be quarrelling with Mr. Chattaway."

"I don't know. Their voices were loud. I wonder if Rupert has found his way to the Farm?"

"Octave forbade him to go."

"Were I Ru I should break through *her* trammels at any rate, and show myself a man," remarked George. "He may have done so to-night."

They turned in at the garden-gate, and gained the porch. All signs of the stranger had disappeared, and sounds of merriment came from within.

George turned Maude's face to his. "You will not forget, my love?"

"Forget what?" she shyly answered.

"That from this night we begin a new life. Henceforth, we belong to each other. Maude, Maude! you will not forget!" he feverishly continued.

"I shall not forget," she softly whispered.

And, possibly by way of a reminder, Mr. George, under cover of the shaded and silent porch, took his first lover's kiss from her lips.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

VISIT TO DOCTORS' COMMONS.

BUT where had Mr. Chattaway been all that time? And how came it that he was seen by George Ryle and Maude hovering about his own ground at night, when he was supposed to be miles away? The explanation can be given.

Mr. Chattaway found, as many of us do, that lets and hindrances intrude themselves into the most simple plans. When he took the sudden resolution that morning, now some days ago, to run up to London from Barmester after Flood the lawyer, and sent his horse home, and also a word of communication to Miss Diana Trevlyn, to the effect that he should be home on the morrow, he never supposed that his journey would be a prolonged one. Nothing more easy, as it appeared, than to catch Flood at his hotel, get a quarter-of-an-hour's conversation with him, hear his advice, and be home again. But a check intervened.

Upon arriving at the London terminus, Mr. Chattaway got into a cab, and drove to the hotel ordinarily used by Mr. Flood. After a dispute with the cab-driver—and Mr. Chattaway was one who generally did have disputes with cab-drivers—he entered the hotel, and asked to see Mr. Flood.

"Mr. Flood?—Mr. Flood?" repeated the waiter whom he had accosted. "There's no gentleman of that name staying here, sir."

"I mean Mr. Flood of Barmester," irritably rejoined the master of Trevlyn Hold. "Perhaps you don't know him personally. He came up this morning an hour or two ago."

The waiter was a fresh one, and did not know Mr. Flood personally. He went to another waiter, and the latter came forward to Mr. Chattaway. But the man's information was correct; Mr. Flood of Barmester had not arrived.

"He travelled by the eight-o'clock train." persisted Mr. Chattaway, as if he found the denial difficult to reconcile with that fact. "He must be in London."

"All I can say, sir, is that he has not come here," returned the head-waiter.

Mr. Chattaway was considerably put out. In his impatience, the delay seemed most irritating. He quitted the hotel, and bent his steps towards Essex Street, where the agents of Mr. Flood lived. Chattaway went in eagerly, fully hoping, and consequently expecting, that the first object his eyes should rest on would be his confidential adviser.

His eyes did not receive that satisfaction. Some clerks were in the room, also one or two persons who appeared to be strangers; clients, probably; but there was no Mr. Flood, and the clerks could give no information of him. One of the firm, a Mr. Newby, appeared and shook hands with Mr. Chattaway, whom he had once or twice seen.

"Flood? Yes. We had a note from Flood yesterday morning, telling us to get some accounts prepared, as he should be in town in the course of a day or two. He has not come yet; be up to-morrow perhaps."

"But he has come," reiterated Chattaway. "I have followed him up to town. I want to see him upon a matter of importance."

"Oh, come, has he?" carelessly replied Mr. Newby, and the indifferent manner appeared almost like an insult to Chattaway in that gentleman's impatient frame of mind. "He'll be in later, then."

"He is sure to come here?" inquired Mr. Chattaway.

"Quite sure. We shall have a good bit of business to transact with him this time."

"Then, if you'll allow me, I'll wait here. I must see him, and I want to get back to Barbrook as soon as possible."

Mr. Chattaway was told that he was welcome to wait, if it pleased him to do so, and a chair was handed him in the entrance room, where the clerks were writing, and he took his seat in it. He sat there until he was well-nigh driven wild with impatience. The room was in a continual bustle; persons constantly coming in and going out. For the first hour or so, to watch the swaying door afforded Chattaway a sort of relief; for in every fresh visitor (until he came into view) he expected to see Mr. Flood. But this grew tedious at last, and the ever-recurring disappointment told upon his temper.

Evening came, the hour for closing the office, and the