

CHAPTER XXXI.

WHO WAS DOWN THE SHAFT?

It was only too true. Whether from fire-damp, the rushing in of water, or some other cause of mischief to which coal-pits are liable, was as yet scarcely known: nothing was certain except the terrible calamity itself. Of the men who had gone down the mine that morning, some were dead, others dying. Mogg Pennet echoed the shrieks of the women as she flew forward and pushed herself through the crowd collected round the mouth of the pit. The same confusion prevailed there that prevails in similar scenes of distress and disaster elsewhere.

"And Mr. Chattaway himself was down the shaft, you say? He went down this morning? My friends, it is altogether an awful calamity."

The woman pushed in yet further and confronted the speaker, with her white face, its lips drawn with mental anguish. He was the minister of a dissenting chapel near, a Mr. Lloyd, and was well known to the miners, some of whom went regularly to hear him preach.

"No, sir; Chattaway was na down the shaft; he is na one of the dead, more luck to him," she said, her words brought out brokenly, her bosom heaving. "Chattaway have this morning made me a widda and my young children fatherless. My man was stiff with rheumatiz, he was—no more fit to go to work nor I be to go down that shaft and carry up his poor murdered body. I knowed his errand as soon as I heerd his horse's feet. He made him get off the settle, and he druv him out to work as he'd drive a dog; and when I told him of his hardness, he lifted up his whip agin me. Yes! Pennet's down with the rest of 'em; sent by him: and I be a lone widda."

"Her says right," interposed a voice, breaking the pause which the words had caused. "It wasn't the master as went down the shaft; it were young Rupert Trevlyn."

"Rupert Trevlyn," uttered the minister in startled tones. "I hope he is not down."

"Yes, he's down, sir."

"But where can Mr. Chattaway be?" exclaimed Ford the clerk, who made one of the throng. "Do you know, Mogg Pennet?"

"He's where ill-luck have overtook him for his cruelty to us," answered Mogg Pennet, flinging her hair from her sorrowful face. "I telled him the ill he forced on others might happen come home to him—that he might soon be lying in his pain, for aught he knew. And he went right off to the ill then and there—and he's a-lying in it."

The sympathies of the hearers were certainly not given to Mr. Chattaway. He was no favourite with his poor dependents at Blackstone, any more than he was with his neighbours around the Hold. But the woman's words were strange, and they pressed for an explanation.

"He be lying under the wall o' the old ruin," was her reply. "I come upon him there, and I guess his brave horse had flung him. When I'd ha' lifted him, he cried out with pain—as my poor man was a-crying in the night with his back—and I saw him lay hisself down again after I'd left him. And Chattaway, he swore at me for my help—and you can go to him and be sworn at too! Happen his leg be broke."

The minister turned away to seek Mr. Chattaway. Unless completely disabled, it was necessary that he should be at the scene; no one of any particular authority was there to give orders; and the inevitable confusion attendant on such a calamity was thereby much increased. Ford the clerk sped after Mr. Lloyd, and one or two stragglers followed him; but the rest were chained to the more exciting scene of the disaster.

Mr. Chattaway had raised himself when they reached him, and was holding on by the wall. He broke into a storm of explanation and grumbling, especially at Ford, and asked why he could not have found him out sooner. As if Ford could divine what had befallen him! Mr. Lloyd stooped and touched the ankle, which was a good deal swollen. It was sprained, Chattaway said; but he thought he could manage to get on his horse with their assistance. He abused the beggar unmercifully, and expressed his intention of calling a meeting of his brother-magistrates, that measures might be taken to rid the country of tramps and razor-grinders; and he finished up in the heat of argument by calling the accident which had befallen him a cursed misfortune.

"Hush!" quietly interrupted Mr. Lloyd. "I should call it a blessing."

Chattaway stared at him, and deemed that he was carrying religion rather too far. As he looked, it struck him that both

of his rescuers wore very sad countenances; Ford in particular was excessively crestfallen. A sarcastic smile crossed his face.

"A blessing! to have my ankle sprained, and to waste my morning in this fashion? Thank you, Mr. Lloyd! You gentlemen who have nothing better to do with your time than to preach it away may think little of such an interruption, but to men of business it is not agreeable. A blessing!"

"Yes, I believe it to have come to you as such—sent direct from God. Were you not going into the pit this morning?"

"Yes, I was," impatiently answered Mr. Chattaway. "I should be there now, but for this—blessing! I wish you would not—"

"Just so," interrupted Mr. Lloyd, calmly. "And this fall has no doubt saved your life. There has been an accident in the pit, and the poor fellows who went down a few hours ago full of health and life, are about to be carried up dead."

The words brought Mr. Chattaway to his senses. "An accident!" he repeated. "What accident?—of what nature?" he added, turning hastily to Ford.

"Fire-damp, I believe, sir."

"Who was down?" was the next eager question.

"The usual men, sir. And—and—Mr. Rupert Trevlyn."

Chattaway with some difficulty repressed a shout. Idea after idea crowded upon his brain, one chasing another. Foremost amongst them rose distinctly the one thought of the morning from which he had striven to escape and could not: "Nothing can bring me security save the death of Rupert." Had the thought, the half-encouraged wish, brought on its realization?

"Rupert Trevlyn down the shaft!" he repeated, the moisture breaking from every pore of his face. "I know he went down; I sent him; but—but—did he not come up again?"

"No," gloomily replied Ford, who really liked Rupert; "he is down now. There's no hope that he'll come up alive."

Whether in his consternation he did not feel the ailments of body, or that his ankle, from the rest it had had, was really less painful than at first, Mr. Chattaway contrived to get pretty comfortably to the scene of action. The crowd had increased; people were coming up from far and near. Medical men had arrived, ready to give their services in case any sufferers were brought up alive. One of them examined Mr. Chattaway's ankle, and bound it up; the hurt, he said, was only a temporary one.

He, the owner of that pit, sat down on the side of a hand-

barrow, for he could not stand, and issued his orders in a sharp, concise tone; and the bodies began to be brought to the surface. One of the first to appear was that of the unfortunate man, Bean, to whom he had sent the message by Rupert. Chattaway looked on, half dazed. Would Rupert's body be the next? He could not realize the fact that he, from whom he had dreaded he knew not what, should soon be laid at his feet, cold and lifeless. Was he glad or sorry? Did grief for Rupert predominate? That there should be some sort of grief for him who had grown up in his house was only natural, even from Chattaway. Or did the intense relief that the death must bring overpower any warmer feeling? Perhaps Mr. Chattaway could not yet tell.

They were being brought up pretty quickly now, and were laid on the ground beside him, to be recognized by the unhappy relatives. The men to whom Chattaway had spoken that morning were amongst them: he had ordered them down as he rode off, and one and all had obeyed the mandate. Did he regret their fate? Did he compassionate the weeping wives and children? In a degree, perhaps, yes; but not as most men would have done.

A tall form interposed between him and the mouth of the pit—that of Mogg Pennet. She had been watching for a body which had not yet been brought up. Suddenly she turned to Mr. Chattaway.

"You have killed him, master; you have made my children orphans. But for your coming on in your hardness to drive him out when he warn't fit to go, we should ha' had somebody still to work for us. Happen you may have heered of a curse? I'd like to give ye one now."

"Somebody take this woman away," cried Mr. Chattaway. "She'll be better at home."

"Ay, take her away," retorted Mogg; "don't let her complaints be heered, lest folk might say they be just. Send her home to her fatherless children, and send her dead man after her to lie among 'em till he's buried. Happen, when you come to your death, Mr. Chattaway, you'll have us all afore your mind, to comfort you!"

She stopped. Another ill-fated man was being drawn up, and she turned to wait for it, her hands clenched, her face white and haggard in its intensity. The burden came, and was laid near the rest; but it was not the one for which she was waiting. Another woman darted forward; *she* knew it too well;

and she clasped her hands round it, and sobbed in agony. Mogg Pennet turned resolutely to the mouth of the pit again, watching still.

"Be they all dead? How many was down?"

The voice came from behind Mogg Pennet, and she screamed and started round. There stood her husband. How had he escaped from the pit?

"I haven't been a-nigh it," he answered. "I couldn't get down to the pit, try as I would, without a rest, and I halted at Green's. Who's dead among 'em, and who's alive?"

"God be thanked!" exclaimed Mogg Pennet, with a sob.

All Mr. Chattaway's faculties were strained on the mouth of that yawning pit, and what it might yield up. As body after body was brought to the surface—seven of them were up now—he cast his anxious looks upon it, expecting to recognize the fair face, the silken hair of Rupert Trevlyn. Expecting and yet dreading—don't think him worse than he was; with the frightened, half-shrinking dread ordinarily experienced by women, or by men of nervous and timid temperament. So utterly did this suspense absorb him as to make him almost oblivious to the painful features of the scene, the wails of woe, the bursts of lamentation.

Happening for a minute to turn his eyes from the pit, he saw in the distance a pony-carriage approaching, which looked uncommonly like that of Miss Diana Trevlyn. Instinct told him that the two figures seated in it were his wife and Miss Diana, although as yet he could not see whether they were women or men. It was slowly winding down a distant hill, and would have to ascend another and come over the flat stretch of country ere it could reach them. He beckoned his clerk Ford to him in a sort of terror.

"Run, Ford! Make all speed. I think I see Miss Trevlyn's pony-carriage yonder with the ladies in it. Don't let them approach. Tell them to turn aside, to the office, and I'll come to them. Anywhere; anywhere but here."

Ford ran with all his might. He met the carriage just at the top of the nearest hill, and unceremoniously laid his hand upon the pony, giving Mr. Chattaway's message as well as his breathless state would allow—begging that they would turn aside and not approach the pit.

It was evident that they were strangers as yet to the news, but the crowd and excitement round the pit had been causing them apprehension and a foreshadowing of the truth. Miss

Diana, paying, as it appeared, little heed to the message, extended her whip in the direction of the scene.

"I see what it is, Ford. Don't beat about the bush. How many were down the shaft?"

"A great many, ma'am," was Ford's reply. "The pit was in full work to-day."

"Was it fire-damp?"

"I believe so."

"Mr. Chattaway's safe, you say? He was not down? I suppose he was not likely to be down?"

"No," answered Ford. But the thought of Mr. Chattaway's accident from another source, which he did not know whether to disclose or not, and the consciousness of a worse calamity, caused him to speak hesitatingly. Miss Diana was quick of apprehension, and it awoke it.

"Was any one down the shaft besides the men? Was—where's Rupert Trevlyn?"

Ford looked as if he dared not answer.

Mrs. Chattaway caught the alarm. She half rose in the low carriage, and stretched out her hands in a pleading attitude; as though Ford held the issues of life and death.

"Oh, speak, speak! He was not down the shaft! Surely Rupert was not down the shaft!"

"He had gone down but a short time before," said the young man in a whisper—for where was the use of denying the fact, now that they had guessed it? "We shall all mourn him, ma'am. I had almost as soon it had been me."

"Gone down the shaft but a short time before!" mechanically repeated Miss Diana in her horror. But she was interrupted by a cry from Ford. Mrs. Chattaway had fallen back on her seat in a fainting-fit.

CHAPTER XXXII.

A SHOCK FOR MR. CHATTAWAY.

THE brightness of the day was turning to gloom, as if the heavens sympathized with the melancholy scene upon earth. Quietly pushing his way through the confusion, the moans and lamentations, the dense mass of human beings surrounding the mouth of the pit, was a tall individual whose acquaintance you