

he very much condemned the extreme chastisement inflicted by Mr. Chattaway. He did not go so far as to deem it an excuse, as Nora did—scarcely, perhaps, a palliation—for the mad act of Rupert; but it is certain he did not condemn it as he would have condemned it in another, or if committed under different circumstances. He felt grieved and uncomfortable; he was conscious of a sore feeling in his mind; and he heartily wished the whole night's work could be blotted out from the record of deeds done, and that Rupert was free again and guiltless.

"Well, lad, it's a bad job altogether," he observed; "but you don't seem to have been to blame except for taking a lighted torch into a rick-yard. Never you do such a thing again. You see what has come of it."

"We warn't anigh the ricks when I lighted the torch," pleaded Jim. "We was yards off 'em."

"That don't matter. There's always danger. I'd turn off the best man I have on my farm, if I saw him venture into the rick-yard with a torch. Don't you be such a fool again. Where are you off to now?" he added; for Jim, with a touch of his hat, was passing on.

"Up to the Hold, sir. I'm a-going help put out the fire."

"The fire's out—or nigh upon it; and you'd best stop where you are. If you show your face there, you'll get taken up by the police—they are looking out for you. And I don't see that you've done anything to merit a night's lodging in the lock-up," added the farmer, in his sense of justice. "Better pass it in your bed. You'll be wanted before the Bench tomorrow; but it's as good to go before them a free lad, as a prisoner. The prisoner they have already taken, Rupert Trevlyn, is enough. Never you take a torch anigh ricks again."

With this reiterated piece of advice, Mr. Apperley departed. Jim stood in indecision, revolving in a dazed kind of way the various pieces of information gratuitously bestowed upon him. He himself suspected; in danger of being took up by them perlice!—and Mr. Rupert a prisoner! and the fire out, or a'most out! It might be better, perhaps, that he went in to his cottage hard by, and got to sleep as Mr. Apperley advised, if he was not too over-tired to sleep.

But before Jim saw his way clearly out of the maze, or had come to any decision, he found himself seized from behind with a grasp fast and firm as had been Mr. Apperley's. A vision of

a file of policemen brought a rush of fear to Jim's mind, of hot blood to his face. But the arms proved to be only Nora Dickson's, and a soft, gentle voice of entreaty was whispering a prayer into his ear, almost as the prayer of an angel. Jim started in amazement, and looked round.

"Lawk a mercy!" ejaculated he. "Why, it's Madam Chattaway!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

ANOTHER VISITOR FOR MRS. SANDERS.

A FEW minutes after his encounter with Jim Sanders, to which interview Mrs. Chattaway and Nora had been unseen witnesses, Farmer Apperley met Policeman Dumps, to whom, if you remember, the superintendent had referred as having been despatched in search of Jim. He came up from the direction of Barbrook.

"I can't find him nowhere," was his salutation to Mr. Apperley. "I have been a'most all over the lands of Mr. Ryle, and in every hole and corner of Barbrook, and he ain't nowhere. I'm a-going on now to his own home, just for form's sake; but that's about the last place he'd hide in."

"Are you speaking of Rupert Trevlyn?" asked Mr. Apperley, who knew nothing of the man's having been sent in search of the other.

"No, sir, not him. That there Jim Sanders."

"Oh, you need not look after him," relied the farmer. "I have just met him. Jim's all right. It was not he who did the mischief. He has been after all the fire-engines on foot, and is just come back, dead-beat. He was going on to the Hold to help put out the fire, but I told him it was all but out, and that he could go home. There's not the least necessity to look after Jim."

Mr. Dumps—whose clear-sightedness was certainly not enough to set the Thames on fire, policeman though he was—received the news without any qualm of doubt. "I thought it a odd thing for Jim Sanders to do. He haven't got daring enough," he remarked. "That there kitchenmaid was right, I'll be bound, as to its being Mr. Rupert in his passion. Gone in home, did you say, sir?"

"In his bed by this time, I should say," replied the farmer. "They have got Mr. Rupert, Dumps."

"Have they?" returned Dumps, in a sort of admiration given to the success of his brother-officers. "But it's a nasty charge," he concluded, after a pause. "I shouldn't be sorry that he got off it."

The farmer continued his road towards Barbrook: the policeman went the other way. As he came to the cottage inhabited by the Sanders family, it occurred to him that he might as well ascertain the fact of Jim's safety, and he went to the door and knocked at its panels; a moderate knock, neither loud nor gentle. Mrs. Sanders opened it instantly, believing that it was the wanderer. When she saw policeman Dumps standing there, she thought she should have died with fright.

"Your son has just come in all right, I hear, Meg Sanders. Farmer Apperley have told me."

"Yes, sir," replied she, dropping a curtsy. The untruthful reply came from her in her terror, almost unconsciously; but there may have been some latent thought in her heart to *mislead* the policeman.

"Is he gone to bed? I don't want to disturb him if he is."

"Yes, sir," again replied she, trembling enough to give Mr. Dumps his suspicions, had he been of a suspicious nature, and the doorway not quite so dark.

"Well, they have got Mr. Rupert Trevlyn, so the examination will take place to-morrow morning. Your son had better go right over to Barmester the first thing after breakfast: tell him to make for the police-station, and stop there till he sees me. He'll have to give evidence, you know."

"Very well, sir," repeated the woman, in an agony of fear lest Jim should make his unfortunate appearance. "Jim ain't guilty, sir: he'd not harm a fly."

"No, he ain't guilty; but somebody else is, I suppose; and Jim must tell what he knows. You mind he sets off in time. Or—stop. Perhaps he had better come to the little station at Barbrook, and go over with us. Yes; that'll be best."

"To-night, sir?" asked she, timidly, not knowing what else to say.

"To-night?—no. What should we do with him to-night? He must be there at eight o'clock in the morning; or a little afore it. Good night."

"Good night, sir."

She watched him off, quite unable to understand the case;

for she had seen nothing of Jim, and Nora Dickson had not long gone. Mr. Dumps made his way to the head-quarters at Barbrook. They consisted of a moderately sized house, to get into which you had to dive down three steps; and when, later on, Bowen came in with his prisoner, Rupert Trevlyn, Dumps informed him that Jim Sanders was all right, and would be there by eight o'clock.

"Have you got him—all safe?"

"I haven't got him," replied Dumps. "There warn't no need for that. And he was abed and asleep," he added, improving upon his information. "It was him that went for all the injines, and he was dead tired."

"Your orders were to take him," curtly returned Bowen. He believed in the innocence of Jim as much as Dumps did, but he was not tolerant to the disobedience of orders. "He was seen with a lighted torch in the rick-yard, and that's enough."

Rupert Trevlyn looked round quickly. This conversation had occurred as Bowen was going through the room with his prisoner to consign the latter to a more secure one. "Jim Sanders did no harm with the torch, Bowen. He lighted it to show me a little puppy of his; nothing more. There is no need to accuse Jim. He——"

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Trevlyn, but I'd rather not hear anything from you one way or the other," interrupted Bowen. "Don't you as much as open your mouth about it, sir, unless you're obliged; and I speak in your interest when I give you this advice. Many a prisoner has brought home the guilt to himself through his own tongue, and which else never might have been brought home to him."

Rupert took the hint, and subsided into silence. He was consigned to his quarters for the night, and no doubt passed it as agreeably as was consistent with the circumstances.

The fire had not spread beyond a rick or two. It was quite out before midnight; and the engines, which had done effectual service, were on their way home again. At eight o'clock the following morning a fly was at the door to convey Rupert Trevlyn to Barmester. Mr. Bowen, a cautious man, deemed it well that the chief witness—it may be said, the only witness to any purpose—should be transported thither by the same conveyance. But that witness, Mr. Jim Sanders, delayed his appearance unwarrantably, and Dumps, in much wrath, started after him on the run. Back he came panting—

it was not more than a quarter-of-a-mile to the mother's cottage.

"He is gone on, the stupid blunderer," cried he to Bowen; "Mrs. Sanders says he's at Barmester by this time. He'll be at the station there, no doubt."

So the party started in state: Mr. Bowen, and Dumps, and Rupert Trevlyn inside; and he who had been sent to capture him, Mr. Chigwell, on the box. There was just as much necessity for the two men to go as there was for you or for me; but they would not have missed the day's excitement for the world: and Bowen did not interpose his veto.

The noise and bustle at the fire had been great, but it was scarcely greater than that which prevailed that morning at Barmester. Excitement had not often obtained so exclusive a place, and men and women of all grades and classes thronged the streets, eagerly asking for fresh details of the previous night's great event.

As a matter of course, various and most contradictory versions were afloat; it is invariably the case. All that was certainly known were the bare facts; Mr. Chattaway had horsewhipped Rupert Trevlyn; a fire had almost immediately burst out in the rick-yard; and Rupert was in custody on the charge of wilfully causing it.

Belief in Rupert's guilt was accorded a very limited degree. People could not forget the ill-feeling supposed to exist towards him in the breast of Mr. Chattaway; and the flying reports that it was Jim Sanders who had been the culprit, accidentally, if not wilfully, obtained far more credence than the other. The curious populace would have subscribed a good round sum to be allowed to question Jim to their hearts' content.

But a growing rumour, freezing the very marrow in the bones of their curiosity, had come abroad. It was said that Jim had disappeared; was not to be seen under the local skies; and it was this that caused the chief portion of the public excitement. For in point of fact, when Bowen and the rest arrived at Barmester, Jim Sanders could not be found or heard of. Dumps was despatched back to Barbrook in search of him.

The hearing was fixed for ten o'clock; and before that hour struck, the magistrates, a full bench of them—had taken their places. Many familiar faces were to be seen in the crowded court—I mean familiar to you, my readers; for the local world was alive with interest and curiosity. Rich and poor, friends

and foes, all had pressed in as long as there was a place unoccupied. In one part of the crowd might be seen the face of George Ryle, grave and subdued; in another, the dark flashing eyes of Nora Dickson; yonder were the red cheeks of Mr. Apperley; nearer, the pale and concerned countenance of the Reverend Mr. Freeman. Just before the commencement of the proceedings, the carriage from Trevlyn Hold drove up, and there descended from it Mr. and Madam Chattaway, and Miss Diana Trevlyn. A strange fashion, you will say, that they (the ladies) should appear; but it was not deemed strange in the locality. Miss Diana had asserted her determination to be present in a tone quite beyond the power of Mr. Chattaway to contradict, even had he wished to do so; and thus he had no plea for refusing his wife. How ill she looked! Scarcely a heart but ached for her. The two ladies sat in a retired spot, and Mr. Chattaway—who was in the commission of the peace, but did not exercise the privilege once in a dozen years—took his place on the bench.

Then the prisoner was brought in, civilly conducted by Superintendent Bowen. He had the handsome Trevlyn features, but tempered with the same delicacy which had characterized his father's—a delicacy he, Joe, had inherited from his mother, the Squire's lost wife; he, Rupert, had the bright blue eyes and the silky curls which distinguished Mrs. Chattaway. He looked pale, subdued, meek, gentlemanly—not in the least like one who would set fire to a hay-rick.

"Have you all your witnesses, Bowen?" inquired the presiding magistrate.

"All but one, sir, and I expect him here directly; I have sent to see after him," was the reply of Bowen. "In fact, I'm not sure but he *is* here," added the man, standing on tiptoe, and stretching his neck upwards; "the crowd's so great one can't see who's here and who isn't. If he can be heard first, his evidence may be conclusive, and save the trouble of examining the others."

"You can call him," observed the magistrate. "If he is here, he will answer. What's the name?"

"James Sanders, your worship."

"Call James Sanders," returned his worship, exalting his voice.

The call was made in obedience, and "James Sanders! James Sanders!" went ringing through the court, and the walls and roof echoed the cry.

But there was no other answer.