

"I don't know, sir. I come off then, and got into mother's. I didn't dare tell her it was Chattaway killed him. I wouldn't tell it now, only you force me."

Bowen was revolving things in his mind, this and that. "It's not five minutes ago that Chattaway gave me orders to have Rupert Trevlyn searched for and taken up to-day," he muttered, more in soliloquy than to Mr. Ryle. "He knew that he was skulking somewhere in the neighbourhood, he said; skulking, that was the word. I don't know what to think of this."

Neither did his hearers know what to think of it, Mr. Jim Sanders possibly excepted. "I wonder—I wonder," slowly resumed Bowen, a curious light coming into his eyes, "I wonder what brought those scratches on the face of Mr. Chattaway?"

CHAPTER XLIV.

FERMENT.

STRANGE rumours went abroad in the neighbourhood of Trevlyn Hold, and the excitement increased hourly. Mr. Chattaway had killed Rupert Trevlyn—so ran the gossip—and Jim Sanders was in custody with the handcuffs on. Before the night of the day on which you saw Jim in the police-station, these reports, with many wild and almost impossible additions, were current, and spreading largely.

With the exception of the accusation made by Jim Sanders, the only corroboration to the tale appeared to rest in the fact that Rupert Trevlyn was not to be found. Dumps and his brother-policeman scoured the locality high and low, and could find no traces whatever of him. Sober lookers-on (but it is rare to find sober ones in a time of great excitement) regarded this fact as favourable. Had Rupert really been murdered, or even accidentally killed by a chance blow from Mr. Chattaway, surely his body would be forthcoming to confirm the tale. But there were not wanting others who believed, and who did not shrink from the avowal, that Mr. Chattaway was quite capable of suppressing all signs of the affray, including the dead body itself; though by what sleight-of-hand the act could have been accomplished seemed likely to remain a mystery.

Before Mr. Chattaway got home from Blackstone in the evening, all the rumours, good and bad—all the facts, what few there were—were known at Trevlyn Hold.

Mr. Chattaway was not unprepared to find this the case. In returning, he had turned his horse to the police-station, and reined in. Bowen, who saw him, came out.

"Has he been taken?" demanded Mr. Chattaway.

He put the question in an earnestness of tone, some impatience dashed with it, that was apparently genuine. "No, he has not," replied Bowen, stroking his chin, taking note of Mr. Chattaway's face—its expression and its scratches, and anything else that was remarkable about it. "Dumps and Chigwell have been at it all day; are at it still; but as yet without result."

"Then they are laggards at their work!" retorted Mr. Chattaway, his countenance darkening. "He was wandering about the place last night, Bowen, and he's sure to be not far off it to-day. By Heaven, he shall be unearthed! If there's any trick being played, any screening going on, as I know there was yesterday with regard to that Jim Sanders, I'll have the actors in it brought to justice!"

Bowen came out of a reverie. "Would you be so good as to step inside for a few minutes, Mr. Chattaway? I have a word to say to you."

Mr. Chattaway got off his horse, hooked the bridle to the rails, as he had hooked it in the morning, and followed Bowen in. The man saw that the doors were closed, and then spoke.

"There's a tale flying about, Mr. Chattaway, that Rupert Trevlyn has come to some harm. Do you know anything of it?"

"Not I," slightly answered Mr. Chattaway. "What harm should come to him?"

"It is said that you and he met last night, had some sort of encounter by moonlight, and that Rupert was—was—in short, that some violence was done him."

For a full minute they remained looking at each other. The policeman appeared intent on biting the feathers of his pen; in reality, he was studying the face of Mr. Chattaway with a comprehensive and critical acumen that his apparently careless demeanour imparted little idea of. He saw the blood mount up under the dark skin; he saw the eye lighten with emotion: but the emotion was more like that called forth by anger than

by guilt. At least, so the police officer judged; and habit had rendered him a pretty correct observer. Mr. Chattaway was the first to speak.

"How do you know that anything of the sort took place?—any interview?"

"It was watched—that is, accidentally seen. A person was passing at the time, and has mentioned it to-day."

"Who was the person?"

Bowen did not reply to the question. The omission may have been accidental, since he was hastening to put one on his own account.

"Do you deny this, Mr. Chattaway?"

"No. I wish I had the opportunity of acknowledging it to Mr. Rupert Trevlyn in the manner he deserves," continued Mr. Chattaway, in what looked like a blaze of anger.

"It is said that after the—the encounter, Rupert Trevlyn was left as one dead," cautiously resumed Bowen.

"Psha!" was the scornful retort. "Dead! He got up and ran away."

A very different account from that of Jim Sanders. Bowen was silent for a minute, endeavouring, most likely, to reconcile the two. "Have you any objection to state to me what took place, sir?"

"I don't know that I have," was the reply, somewhat sullenly delivered. "But I can't see what business it is of yours."

"People are taking up odd notions about it," said Bowen.

"People may be hanged! It's no concern of theirs."

"But if they come to me and oblige me to make it my concern?" returned the officer, in significant tones. "If it's all fair and above-board, you had better tell me, Mr. Chattaway. If it's not, perhaps the less you say the better."

It was a hint not calculated to conciliate a chafed spirit, and Mr. Chattaway resented it. "How dare you, Bowen, presume to throw out insinuations to me?" he cried, snatching his riding-whip off the counter, or desk, where he had laid it, and stalking towards the door. "I'll tell you nothing; and you may make the best and the worst of it. Find Rupert Trevlyn, if you must know it, and get it out of him. I ask you who has been spreading the rumour that I met Rupert Trevlyn last night?"

Bowen saw no reason why he should not disclose it. "It was Jim Sanders," he replied.

"Psha!" contemptuously ejaculated Mr. Chattaway: and he mounted his horse and rode away.

So that after this colloquy, Mr. Chattaway was in a degree prepared to find that unpleasant rumours had penetrated to the Hold. When he entered he could not avoid seeing the shrinking, timid looks cast on him by his children; the haughty, questioning face, of Miss Diana; the horror in that of Mrs. Chattaway. He took the same sullen, defiant tone with them that he had taken with Bowen, denying the thing by implication, more than by direct assertions. He asked them all whether they had gone out of their minds, that they should listen to senseless tales; and he threatened the most dire revenge against Rupert when he should be found.

Thus matters went on for a few days. But the rumours did not die away: on the contrary, they gathered strength and plausibility. Things were in a most uncomfortable state at the Hold: the family were tortured by dread and doubt that they dared not give utterance to, and strove to hide; the very servants went about with stealthy footsteps, casting covert glances at their master from dark corners, and running away to avoid a direct meeting with him. Mr. Chattaway could not help seeing all this, and it did not tend to give him equanimity.

The only thing, in the present temper of the public, that could clear up this miserable doubt, was the finding Rupert. But Rupert was not found. Friends and foes, police and public, put out their best endeavours to accomplish it; but no more trace could be discovered of Rupert than if he had never existed—or than if, as many openly said, he were buried in some quiet corner of Mr. Chattaway's grounds. To do Mr. Chattaway justice, he appeared the most anxious of any for Rupert's discovery: not with a view to clearing himself from any vile suspicion; *that* he cast completely into the shade, trampled it under his foot, as it were; but that Rupert might be brought to justice for the burning of the ricks.

Perhaps Mr. Chattaway's enemies may be pardoned for their suspicions. It cannot be denied that there were apparent grounds for them: many a man has been officially accused of murder upon less. There was the well-known ill-feeling which had long existed on Mr. Chattaway's part to Rupert; there was the fresh dread of being displaced by him, which had latterly arisen through the visit and boastings of Mr. Daw; there was the sore feeling excited on both sides by the business of the rick-yard and the subsequent examination; there was the night

contest spoken of by Jim Sanders, and which Mr. Chattaway did not deny; there were the scratches and bruise visible on that gentleman's face; and there was the total disappearance of Rupert. People could remember the blank look of disappointment which had passed over Mr. Chattaway's countenance when Rupert ran into the circle gathered round the pit at Blackstone. "He'd ha' bin glad that he were dead," they had murmured then one to another. "And happen he have put him out o' the way," they murmured now.

Perhaps they did not all go so far as to suspect Mr. Chattaway of the great crime of wilful, deliberate, premeditated murder: he might have killed him wilfully in the passion of the moment; he might have killed him accidentally by an unlucky blow that had done its work more effectually than had been intended. The fruitless search for Rupert—dead—was no barrier to these suspicions; murdered men had been hidden away before, and would be again.

I have not yet mentioned the last point of suspicion, but it was one much dwelt upon—the late return of Mr. Chattaway to his home on the night in question. The servants had not failed to talk of this, and the enemies outside took it up and discussed it eagerly. It was most unusual for Mr. Chattaway to be away from home at night. An unsociable man by nature, and a man whose company was not sought by his neighbours—for they disliked him—it was a rare thing for Mr. Chattaway to spend his evenings out. He attended evening parties now and then in the company of his wife and Miss Trevlyn, but it was not once a year that he was invited out alone. His absence therefore on this night, coupled with his late entrance, close upon midnight, was the more remarkable. Where had he been until that hour? Every one wondered: every one asked it. Mr. Chattaway carelessly answered his wife and Miss Diana that he had been on business at Barbrook; but he condescended to give no reply or satisfaction whatever to any other living mortal amongst the wonderers. In revenge, they jumped to a very sensational, melodramatic, and unlikely conclusion—"happen he were diggin' a grave." Some, of more audacity than the rest, endeavoured to impress this conclusion on Superintendent Bowen, but that wise officer shook his head, and thought it very improbable.

Altogether affairs were in anything but a calm or satisfactory state. Public feeling was growing more excited, and it was openly said that an investigation must take place. The narrow

grove of trees was haunted by idlers, looking after traces of any recent disturbance of the ground there: they stamped on the path to test its sound, they wound themselves in and out amidst the trunks, they peered curiously into the neighbouring grass.

Things could not remain as they were. They must fall to a calm, or rise to an explosion. As the days went on without news of Rupert, Mr. Chattaway expressed a conviction that Rupert had made his way to Mr. Daw, and was being sheltered there. A most unsatisfactory conviction for Mr. Chattaway, if he really and genuinely had come to it. With those two together to hatch their plots against him, he could never know a moment's peace. He was most explosive against Rupert; at home and abroad he never ceased to utter his threats of prosecuting him for the crime of which he had been guilty. He rode every other day to the station, worrying Bowen, asking whether any trace of the felon had turned up. He urged—this was in the first day or so of the disappearance—that houses and cottages should be visited and searched. Bowen quite laughed at the suggestion. If Mr. Chattaway had cause to suspect any particular house or cottage, they might perhaps go the length of getting a warrant to search it; but to enter dwellings indiscriminately would be a procedure intolerable and unjustifiable.

Mr. Chattaway was unable to say that he had cause especially to suspect any house or cottage: unless, he added in his temper, it might be Trevlyn Farm. It appeared Jim Sanders had been hiding there in an outbuilding: why not Rupert Trevlyn? But Bowen saw and knew that it was only in his exasperation that Mr. Chattaway had spoken. Trevlyn Farm was no more likely to conceal Rupert Trevlyn than any other house of its standing—in fact less likely; for Mrs. Ryle would not have permitted it to be done. Her dislike to any sort of underhand dealing was so great, that she would not have concealed Rupert, or countenanced his being concealed, had it been to save him from hanging. In that she resembled Miss Diana Trevlyn. Miss Diana would have spent her last shilling nobly to defend Rupert on his trial—had it come to a trial—but ignominiously to conceal him from the reach of the law, *that* she would never have done. The remark of Chattaway's travelled to George Ryle: George happened to meet Bowen the same day, not an hour after, and he spoke of it. He told Bowen that the bare idea of Rupert's being concealed on their premises was absurd,

and he said, on his word of honour, not only that he did not know where Rupert was, but where he was likely to be: the thing was to him a complete mystery. Bowed nodded. In Bowen's opinion the notion of his being concealed in any house was all moonshine.

The days went on and on, and it did appear very mysterious where Rupert could be, or what had been his fate. His clothes, his effects, all remained unclaimed and uncalled for at Trevlyn Hold. When Mrs. Chattaway came unexpectedly upon anything that had belonged to him, she turned quite sick with the fears that darted across her heart. A faint hope arose within her at times, that Rupert had gone, as Mr. Chattaway loudly, and perhaps others more secretly, surmised, to Mr. Daw in his far-off home in the Pyrenees, but it was rejected almost as soon as felt. She knew, none better, that Rupert had no means, no money to carry him thither. Oh, how often, how often did she wish in her heart of hearts, that they had never usurped Trevlyn Hold! It seemed that they were beginning to reap all the bitter fruits, which had been so long ripening.

But this supposition was soon to be set aside. Two letters arrived from Mr. Daw: one to Mr. Freeman, the other to Rupert himself; and they completely did away with the idea that had been obtaining—that Rupert Trevlyn had found his way thither.

It appeared that Rupert had written an account to Mr. Daw of these unhappy circumstances; of his setting the rick on fire in his passion, and his being arrested for it. He had written it on the evening of the day he was discharged from custody. And by the contents of his letter, it was evident that he then contemplated returning to the Hold.

"These letters from Mr. Daw settle the question—that Rupert has not gone there," observed Mr. Freeman. "But they make the mystery, of where he can be, greater."

Yes, they did. And the news went forth to the neighbourhood that Rupert Trevlyn had written a letter subsequent to the examination at Barmester, wherein he stated that he was going straight home to the Hold. Gossip never loses in the carrying, you know.

Jim Sanders, who had given his testimony as to what he saw of the setting of the rick on fire, and was discharged and at work again, became quite the lion of the day. He had never been made so much of in his life. Tea here, supper there, sups of ale everywhere. Everybody was asking Jim the particulars of

that later night, and Jim, nothing loth, gave them, with the addition of his own comments.

And the days went on, and the ferment and the doubts increased.

CHAPTER XLV.

AN APPLICATION TO A MAGISTRATE.

THE ferment increased. The arguments obtaining in the neighbourhood were worthy of being listened to, if only from a curiously logical point of view. If Rupert Trevlyn in his own handwriting had stated that he was going home to the Hold on the termination of the day's proceedings at Barmester; and if Rupert Trevlyn (as was evident) never did get to the Hold, clearly it was Mr. Chattaway who had killed and buried him. Absurd as the deduction may be to you, my calm readers, judging from a sensible, dispassionate point of view, to those excited gentry, the public, it appeared not only a feasible but a certain conclusion. The thing could not rest; interviews were held with Mr. Peterby, who was supposed to be the only person who could take up the matter on the part of the missing and ill-used Rupert; and that gentleman bestirred himself to make inquiries. Which he set about in secret.

One dark night, between eight and nine, the inmates of the lodge were disturbed by a knocking at their door—a loud imperative knocking, as if the applicant brought with him both impatience and authority. Ann Canham—trying her poor eyes over some dark sewing by the light of the small and solitary candle—started from her chair, and remarked that her heart had leaped into her mouth.

Which may have been a reason, possibly, for her standing still, face and hands uplifted in consternation, instead of answering the knock. It was repeated, and more imperatively.

Old Canham turned his head and looked at her. He was smoking his last evening pipe over the fire. "Thee must open it, Ann."

Ann, seeing no help for it, went meekly to the door, wringing her hands. What she expected might be at the door, or what she feared, was best known to herself; but in point of