

"It is more than I can tell you, Mr. Chattaway. We have received a communication from them ourselves this morning upon the subject. I was opening it when you were announced to me as being here."

He bent over the letters previously spoken of, selected one, and held it out to Mr. Chattaway. Instead of being written by the firm, it was a private letter from Mr. Ray to Mr. Peterby. It merely stated that the true heir of Squire Trevlyn, Rupert, was about shortly to take possession of his property, the Hold, and they (Connell, Connell, and Ray) should require Mr. Peterby to act as local solicitor in the proceedings, should a solicitor be necessary.

Mr. Chattaway began to feel cruelly uneasy. Rupert had committed that great fault, and was in danger of punishment for it—*would* be punished for it by his country's laws; but in this new uneasiness that important fact seemed to lose half its significance. "And you have not instructed them?" he repeated.

"Nonsense, Mr. Chattaway! it is not likely. I cannot make out what they mean, any more than you can. The nearest conclusion I can come to is, that they must be acting from instructions received from that half-parson who was here, that Mr. Daw."

"No," said Mr. Chattaway, "I think not. Miss Trevlyn heard from that man this morning, and he appears to know nothing of Rupert. He asks for news of him."

"Well, it is a curious thing altogether. I shall write by to-night's post to Ray, and inquire what he means."

Mr. Chattaway, suspicious Mr. Chattaway, pressed one more question. "Have you any notion at all where Rupert is likely to be? That he is in hiding, and accessible to some people, is evident from these letters from Connell's house."

"I have already informed you that I know nothing whatever of Rupert Trevlyn," was the lawyer's answer. "Whether he is alive or whether he is dead I know not. You cannot know less of him yourself than I do."

Mr. Chattaway was obliged to be contented with the answer. He went out and proceeded direct to Mr. Flood's, and laid the letter—his letter—before him. "What sort of thing do you call that?" he intemperately uttered, when it was read. "Connell and Connell must be infamous men to write it."

"Stop a bit," said Mr. Flood, who had his eyes strained on the letter. "There's more in this than meets the eye."

"You don't think it's a joke—done to annoy me?"

"A joke! Connell and Connell would not lend themselves to a joke. No, I don't think it's that."

"Then what do you think?"

Mr. Flood was several minutes before he replied, and his silence drove Mr. Chattaway to the verge of exasperation. "It is difficult to know what to think," said the lawyer presently. "I should be inclined to say they have been brought into personal communication with Rupert Trevlyn, or with somebody acting for him: perhaps the latter is the most probable. And I should also say they must have been convinced, by documentary or other evidence, of there existing a good foundation for Rupert's claims to the Hold. Mr. Chattaway—if I may speak the truth to you—I should dread this letter."

Mr. Chattaway felt as if a bucket of cold water had been suddenly flung over him, and was running down his back. "Why is it that you turn against me?"

"Turn against you! I don't know what you mean. I don't turn against you; quite the opposite. I am willing to act for you; to do anything I legally can to meet the fear."

"Why do you fear?"

"Because Connell, Connell, and Ray are keen and cautious practitioners as well as honourable men, and I do not think they would write a letter so decided as this, unless they knew they were fully justified in doing so, and were prepared to follow it out."

"You are a pretty Job's comforter," gasped Mr. Chattaway.

CHAPTER LII.

A DAY OF MISHAPS.

REBECCA the servant was true. She was true and crafty in her faithfulness to her mistress, and she contrived to get various dainties prepared and conveyed unsuspectingly under her apron, watching her opportunity, to the sitting-room of Madam, where they were hidden away in a closet, and the key turned upon them. So far, so good. But that was not all: the greatest difficulty lay in transporting them to Rupert.

The little tricks and ruses that the lodge and those in its

secret learnt to be expert in at this time, were worthy of the most private inquiry office going. Ann Canham, at some given hour named, would be standing at the open door of the lodge, apparently enjoying an interlude of idleness; and Mrs. Chattaway, with timid steps, and eyes that wandered everywhere lest witnesses were about, would come down the avenue: opposite the lodge door, by some sleight of hand, a parcel, or a basket, or a bottle would be transferred from under her large shawl to Ann Canham's hands. The latter would close the door and slip the bolt, while the lady would walk swiftly on through the gate, for the purpose of taking foot exercise in the road. Or perhaps it would be Maude that went through this little rehearsal, instead of Madam. But at the best it was all difficult to accomplish for many reasons, and might at any time be stopped. If only the extra cooking in the kitchen came to the knowledge of Miss Diana Trevlyn, it would be quite impossible to venture to continue that cooking, and next to impossible any longer to conceal the proximity of Rupert.

One day, which must surely have dawned under some unlucky star, a disastrous *contretemps* ensued. It happened that Miss Diana Trevlyn had arranged to take the Miss Chattaways to a morning concert at Barmester. Maude might have gone, but excused herself to Miss Diana: while Rupert's fate hung in the balance, it was scarcely seemly, she urged, that she should be seen at public festivals. Cris had gone out shooting that day; Mr. Chattaway, as was supposed, was at Barmester; and when dinner was served, only Mrs. Chattaway and Maude sat down to it. It was a plain dinner—a piece of roast beef; and during a momentary absence of James, who was waiting at table, Maude exclaimed in a low tone—

"Aunt Edith, if we could only get a slice of this to Rupert; hot as it is!"

"I was thinking of it," said Mrs. Chattaway. "If——"

The servant returned to the room, and the conversation was stopped. But his mistress, under some rather confused plea of there being so few at table, dismissed him, saying she would ring. And then the thought was carried out. A small friendly sauce-tureen which happened to be on the table was made the receptacle for some of the hot meat, and Maude put on her bonnet and stole away with it.

An unlucky venture. In her haste to reach the lodge unmolested, she spilt some of the gravy, and was stopping to wipe it with her handkerchief, when she was interrupted by Mr.

Chattaway. It was close to the lodge. Maude's heart, as the saying runs, came into her mouth.

"What's that? Where are you taking it to?" he demanded, for his eyes had caught the tureen before she could slip it under her mantle.

He peremptorily took it from her unresisting hand, raised the cover, and saw two tempting slices of hot roast beef, and part of a cauliflower. Had Maude witnessed the actual discovery of Rupert by Mr. Chattaway, she could not have felt more utterly sick: her face, in its dread, was a sight to look upon.

"I ask you, to whom were you taking this?"

His resolute face, his concentrated tones, coupled with her own terror, were more than poor Maude could brave. "To Mark Canham," she faltered. There was no one whatever, except him, whom she could mention with the least plausibility: and she could not pretend to be only taking a walk, and carrying a tureen of meat with her for pleasure.

"Was it Madam's doings to send this?"

Again she could only answer in the affirmative. She might not say it was a servant's, she might not say it was herself; there was only Mrs. Chattaway. Mr. Chattaway stalked off to the Hold, tureen in hand.

His wife sat at the dinner-table, and James was removing some pastry from it as he entered. Regardless of the man's presence, he gave vent to his anger, reproaching her in no measured terms for what she had done. Meat and vegetables from his own table to be supplied to that profitless, good-for-nothing man, Canham, who already enjoyed a house and half-a-crown a week for doing nothing! How dared she be guilty of extravagance so great, of wilful waste? And the master of Trevlyn Hold called for a warm plate, turned out the contents of the tureen, and actually began to eat them for his own dinner.

It was a very Benjamin's portion for any one's dinner; there was no doubt of that; more, in fact, than one man could eat, unless his appetite was remarkably good. This fact did not tend to lessen the anger or the astonishment of Mr. Chattaway. He stared at the meat, he turned it over and over; and he talked and reproached so fast that his poor wife, between mortification and terror, burst into tears; and James, who possessed more delicacy than his master, escaped from the room. Maude had not dared to re-enter it.

The scene came to an end; all such scenes do, it is to be

hoped; and the afternoon went on. Mr. Chattaway went out again, Cris had not come in, Miss Diana and the young ladies did not return, and Mrs. Chattaway and Maude were still alone. "I shall go down to see him, Maude," the former said in a low tone, breaking an unhappy silence. "And I shall take him something to eat; I will risk it. He has had nothing from us to-day."

Maude scarcely knew what to answer: her own fright was not yet over. Mrs. Chattaway dressed herself, took the little provision-basket—they dared not make it a large one—and went out. It was dusk—all but dark; Mrs. Chattaway was surprised to find it so dark, but the evening was a gloomy one. Scarcely daring to proceed, looking here, peering there, with slow and cautious steps she walked. Meeting no one, she gained the lodge, opened its door with a quick hand, and—stole away again silently and swiftly, with perhaps the greatest terror she had ever felt rushing over her heart.

For, the first figure she saw there was that of her husband, and the first voice she heard was his. She pushed her way amidst the trunks of the almost leafless trees, and concealed herself as she best could.

In returning that evening, it had struck Mr. Chattaway as he passed the lodge that he could not do better than favour old Canham with a piece of his mind, and forbid him, under pain of being instantly dismissed and discarded, to rob the Hold (it was so he phrased it) of so much as a scrap of bread. Old Canham, knowing what there was at stake, took it patiently, never denying that the beef (which Mr. Chattaway enlarged upon) might have been meant for him. Ann Canham stood on the upright staircase, against the closed chamber of Rupert, shivering and shaking; and poor Rupert himself, who had not failed to hear and recognize that loud voice, lay as one in agony.

Mr. Chattaway was in the midst of his last sentence of reproof, which became louder and harsher as the winding-up drew near, when the front-door was suddenly opened, and as suddenly shut again. He had his back to it, but he turned round just in time to catch a glimpse of somebody's petticoats before the door closed.

It was a somewhat singular proceeding, and Mr. Chattaway, always curious and suspicious, opened the door after a minute's pause, and looked out. He could see no one. He looked up the avenue—which was the way the petticoats had

seemed to turn—he looked down; he stepped out to the gate, and gazed up and down the road. Whoever it was, had disappeared.

"Did you see who it was that flung the door open in that manner?" he demanded of old Canham.

Old Canham had stood deferentially during the lecture, leaning on his stick. He had not seen who it was, and therefore could answer readily, but he strongly suspected it to be Mrs. Chattaway. "Maybe 'twere some 'ooman bringing sewing up for Ann, Squire. They mostly comes at dusk, not to hinder their own work."

"Then why couldn't they come in?" retorted Mr. Chattaway. "Why need they run away as if caught in some mischief?"

Old Canham wisely declined an answer: and Mr. Chattaway, after a further parting admonition, finally quitted the lodge, and took his way up the avenue towards the Hold. But for her dark attire, and the darker shades of evening, he might have detected his wife there, watching him pass.

It seemed an unlucky day. Mrs. Chattaway, her heart beating with its excitement and fear, came out of her hiding-place when the last echoes of his steps had died away and almost met the carriage as it thundered up the avenue, bringing her daughters and Miss Diana from Barmester. When she did reach the lodge, Ann Canham had the door open an inch or two, looking out for her. "Take it," she cried, giving the basket to Ann as she advanced to the stairs, "I have not a minute to stop. How is he to-night?"

"Madam," whispered Ann Canham, in her meek, unassuming voice, but somehow, meek though it was, there was that in its tone to-night which arrested the steps of Mrs. Chattaway, "if he continues to get worse and weaker, if he cannot be got away from here and from these perpet'al frights what come upon him, I fear me he'll die. He has never been as bad as he is to-night."

She untied her bonnet, and stole upstairs into Rupert's room. By the rushlight that burned there she could see the ravages of illness on his wasting features; features that seemed to have changed for the worse even since she had seen him that time last night. He turned his blue eyes, bright and wild with disease, bodily and mental, on her as she entered.

"Oh, Aunt Edith! Is he gone? I thought I should just have died with fright, here as I lay."

"He is gone, darling," she answered, bending over him, and speaking with reassuring tenderness. "You look worse to-night, Rupert."

"It is this stifling room, aunt; it is killing me. At least, it is giving me no chance to get better. If I had only a nice airy room at the Hold!—if I could lie there without fear, and be waited on—I might get better then. Aunt Edith, I wish the past few weeks could be blotted out! I wish I had not been overtaken by that fit of madness?"

Ah! he could not wish it as she did. Her tears silently fell on his hollow cheeks, and she began in the desperate need to debate in her own heart whether that, which they had deemed impossible, might not be accomplished—disarming the anger of Mr. Chattaway, and getting him to pardon Rupert. In that case only could he be brought home to the Hold, or moved from where he was. Perhaps—perhaps Diana might effect it? If she did not, no one could. As she thought of its utter hopelessness, there came to her recollection that recent letter from Connell and Connell, which had so upset the equanimity of Mr. Chattaway. She had not yet spoken of it to Rupert, but she mentioned it now. Her private opinion was, that Rupert must have written to the London lawyers for the purpose of vexing Mr. Chattaway.

"It is not right, Rupert dear," she whispered. "It cannot do you any good, but harm. If it does no other harm, it will increase Mr. Chattaway's angry feelings towards you. Indeed, Rupert, it was wrong."

He looked up in surprise from his pillow. "I don't know what you mean, Aunt Edith. Connell and Connell? What should I do, writing to Connell and Connell?"

She explained to him what there was in the letter, reciting its contents as accurately as she could remember them. Rupert only stared.

"Acting for me!—that I should soon take possession of the Hold! Well, I don't know anything about it," he wearily answered. "Why does not Mr. Chattaway go up and ask them what they mean? Connell and Connell don't know me, and I don't know them."

"It seemed to me the most unlikely thing in the world that you should have written to them, Rupert, for there was no end that it would answer; and besides, you were lying here too ill to write to any one. But then what else was I to think?"

"They'd better have written to say I was going to take pos-

session of the grave," he resumed; "there'd be more sense in that. Perhaps I am, Aunt Edith."

More sense in it? Ay, that there would be. Every pulse in Mrs. Chattaway's heart echoed the words. She did not answer, and there ensued a pause, broken only by the sound of his somewhat painful breathing.

"Do you think I shall die, Aunt Edith?"

"Oh, my boy, I hope not; I hope not! But it is all in God's will. Rupert, darling, it seems a sad thing, especially to the young, to leave this world; but do you know what I often think as I lie and sigh through my sleepless nights: that it would be a blessed change both for you and for me if God were to take us from it, and give us a place in heaven."

Another pause. "You can tell Mr. Chattaway that you feel sure I had nothing to do with the letter you speak of, Aunt Edith."

She shook her head. "No, Rupert; the less I say the better. It would not do: I should fear some chance word on my part might betray you: and all I could say would not make any impression on Mr. Chattaway."

"You are not going!" he exclaimed, as she rose from her seat on the bed.

"I must. I wish I could stay, but I dare not: indeed, it was not safe to-night to come in at all."

"Aunt Edith, if you could only stay! It is so lonely. Four-and-twenty hours before I shall see you or Maude again! It is like being left alone to die."

"Not to die, I trust," she said, the tears falling fast from her eyes. "We shall be together some time for ever, but I pray that we may have a little more happiness on earth first!"

Very full was her heart that night, and but for the fear that her red eyes would betray her, and questions be asked, she could have wept all the way home. Stealing in at the side door, she gained her room, and found that Mr. Chattaway, fortunately, had not discovered her absence.

A few minutes after she entered, the house was in a commotion. Cries were heard proceeding from the kitchen, and Mrs. Chattaway and others hastened towards it. One of the servants was badly scalded. Most unfortunately, it happened to be the cook, Rebecca. In taking some calf's-foot jelly from the fire, she had, by some inadvertence, turned the whole boiling liquid over her feet,

Miss Diana, who was worth a thousand of Mrs. Chattaway in an emergency, had the girl placed in a recumbent position, had her stockings cut off, and sent one of the grooms on horseback for Mr. King. But Miss Diana, while sparing nothing that could assist or relieve the sufferer, did not at all conceal her displeasure at the awkwardness. She cast her eyes on the pool near the kitchen grate, and saw the egg-shells and lemon-peel floating in it; saw it with astonishment.

"Was it *jelly* you were making, Rebecca?" she demanded, scarcely believing her senses.

Rebecca was lying back in a large chair, her feet raised. The young ladies, the servants, were crowding round: even Mr. Chattaway had come to see what might be the cause of the commotion. She made no answer.

Bridget did; rejoicing, no doubt, in her superior knowledge. "Yes, ma'am, it was jelly: she had just boiled it up."

Miss Diana wheeled round to Rebecca. "What were you making jelly for? It was not ordered."

Rebecca knew not what to say. She cast an almost imperceptible glance at Mrs. Chattaway. "Yes, it was ordered," said the latter, scarcely above her breath. "I ordered it."

"You!" returned Miss Diana. "What for?" But Miss Diana spoke in her surprise only; not to find fault: it was so very unusual a thing for Mrs. Chattaway to interfere in the domestic arrangements. It surprised them all, and her daughters looked at her. Poor Mrs. Chattaway could not put forth the plea that it was being made for herself, for calf's-foot jelly was a thing she never touched. The pause, the confusion on his wife's face, attracted the notice of Mr. Chattaway.

"Possibly you were intending to send it to regale old Canham with?" he scornfully said, in allusion to what had passed that day. Not that he believed anything so improbable.

"Madam knows the young ladies like it, and she told me to make some," good-naturedly spoke up Rebecca from the midst of her pain.

The excuse served, and the surprise passed. Miss Diana privately thought what a poor housekeeper her sister would make, ordering things when they were not required, and Mr. Chattaway quitted the scene. When the doctor arrived and had attended to the patient, Mrs. Chattaway, who was then in her room, sent to request him to come up to her before he left, adding to the message that she did not feel well.

He came up immediately. She put a question or two about

the injury to the girl, which was not great, he answered, and would not keep her a prisoner long; and then Mrs. Chattaway lowered her voice, and spoke in the softest whisper.

"Mr. King, you must tell me. Is not Rupert worse?"

"He is very ill," was the answer. "He certainly gets worse instead of better."

"Will he die?"

"Well, I do believe he will die, unless he can be got out of that unwholesome closet of a place. The question is, how is it to be done?"

"It cannot be done, Mr. King; it cannot be done unless Mr. Chattaway can be propitiated. That is the only chance."

"Mr. Chattaway never will be," thought Mr. King in his heart. "Everything is against him where he is," he said aloud: "the bad air of the room, the perpetual fear that is upon him, the want of hot and regular food. The provisions conveyed to him at chance times, eaten cold, as they chiefly have to be, are a poor substitute for the hot meals he requires."

"And they will be stopped now," said Mrs. Chattaway. "Rebecca has cooked them for me privately, but she cannot do it now. Mr. King, *what* can be done?"

"I don't know, indeed. It will not be safe to attempt to move him. In fact, I question if he would consent to it, his dread of being discovered is so great."

"Will you do all you can?" she urged.

"To be sure," he replied. "I *am* doing all I can. I got him another bottle of port-wine in to-day. If you only saw me trying to dodge into the lodge unperceived, and taking my observations before I whisk out, you wouldn't say but I am as anxious as you can be, my dear lady. Still—I don't hesitate to avow it—it will be, I believe, life or death, according as we can manage to get him away from that hole he's lying in, and to set his mind at rest."

He wished her good night, and went out. "Life or death!" Mrs. Chattaway stood at the window, and gazed forth at the dusky night, recalling over and over again the words to her heart. "Life or death!" There was no earthly chance, except the remote one of appeasing Mr. Chattaway.