

THE FOGGY NIGHT AT OFFORD.

CHAPTER XVII.—CONTINUED.

Maria sighed. She was feverishly eager to get away from Offord; to get back to Saxony; but a conviction every now and then arose in her heart that Saxony might prove even less tolerable. Her whole life—and she saw it—must be one of ceaseless terror; there could be no rest anywhere. Lady Saxony had been ill herself, and could not come to her in this illness. Maria was glad to be spared her presence; she seemed to turn with a sick feeling of despair from all whom she had ever known.

"Squire Higrave's putting for you, ma'am," said Charlotte, knocking her head into the room door and addressing Miss Hardisty. "He is in the drawing room."

Miss Hardisty rose, folded her work together, and descended, not acknowledging to herself that she felt glad to escape the monotony of the sick-room. Squire Higrave was standing at the window, looking out.

"Good morning," said he, turning to shake hands. "Mrs. Yorke's better, I find. Will she be well enough to hear the news? We have caught the murderer of Mr. Janson."

A mist came over Olivia Hardisty's sight. She felt her way to a chair. Did Squire Higrave mean the real murderer?

"I thought I'd come and tell you the first thing," continued the squire. "There's no doubt that Yorke's thousand pounds has unearthed the fellow."

Miss Hardisty began to inquire into particulars; but she felt that her voice sounded sharp and shrill.

"It was the man, King, who had been seen with the other two in the afternoon. While the two watched for young Louth, King thought he'd do a little business on his own account, and attacked Mr. Janson. He has been in hiding ever since."

"How is it known?" asked Miss Hardisty, feeling that it was not King. "One of the gang, attracted by the reward, has come forward to betray him. Quite a lad, the informer is, not more than sixteen. He has disclosed both the man's crime and his hiding-place. They are not proof against money, these rogues—would sell their comrades for if the bribe's a high one."

"Was he seen to murder him?" inquired Miss Hardisty.

"No, I suppose not. I have heard nothing of that."

"Then, in point of fact, the guilt rests only on the confession of this lad?"

"That's all."

Miss Hardisty shook her head, leaving the squire to infer that she accepted his news, as he rose to depart. She did not say that she knew too much of the guilt of another, to believe him.

Offord was in arms, when the man, King, was brought in for his examination before the magistrate. That proceeding took place subsequent to Squire Higrave's interview with Miss Hardisty.

The informer's testimony was to the following effect. That King had come home one night to the hiding-place of the gang, in a desperate fright. He accounted for it by saying that Cook and Barnell (the two men taken) had planned an attack on young Louth, and that meanwhile he, King, went back to the village and set on to watch for Janson. He had heard that Janson often carried a good bit of money about him, received as fees. King stole into Janson's garden, and there waited, knowing it was the entrance he often used. In less than a quarter of an hour Janson came in, and he, King, attacked him. He struck him down; he believed that he killed him; and he was in the act of rifling his pockets when somebody came up to interrupt. He, King, attacked the fresh comer; but there he had his match. A scuffle ensued, and the stranger's gun was broken in it; and he, King, finding he was getting the worst, got away, and made the best of his road home, arriving there in his fright. He had not intended to kill Janson, far from it; only to disable him while he eased him of his money. Neither had the other thought to kill Louth, and that gentleman's powerful resistance had led to the evil.

"All's ready," replied Finch. "I have nothing to do between now and the time we start."

"Perhaps it was because she had nothing to do that Finch judged it well to improve the time by telling her mistress of the capture of King, and his confession. "The man is to go, and has confessed," she said. "He admits having stopped inside Mr. Janson's garden, and killed him."

Maria held a handkerchief to her face to hide the terror that settled there. "Who is it that is taken?" she gasped.

"The man King, ma'am; one of that dreadful gang. It was thought that he did it from the first."

"Send Miss Hardisty to me," murmured Maria.

Miss Hardisty came. She told Mrs. Yorke the tale, so far as she knew it. Suddenly, in the midst of telling it, she gave a startled shriek; for there stood Mr. Yorke, inside the room door.

He looked as if he had come off a journey. He had a great coat on his arm, and was unwinding a warm cravat from his neck. Laying them on a chair, he advanced and stood before his wife.

"Are you satisfied now, Maria?"

"What was she to believe? Was he guilty or not guilty? She looked up, a strangely yearning look on her white face, her thin hands clasped before her. Miss Hardisty, in her impulsive eagerness, laid hold of the arm of Mr. Yorke.

"No!" he burst forth, a haughty flush dyeing his forehead. "I was the one who interrupted the wretched murderer at his work—as he has now confessed. Leave me a few minutes alone with my wife, will you, Miss Hardisty?"

Miss Hardisty, walking quite humbly from her sudden conviction of his truth and their own mistake, crossed the room and descended the stairs. Mr. Yorke, as before, stood in front of his wife, upright, his arms folded, and looking down at her.

"Which is true, Arthur?" she gasped.

"Need you ask?" was his rejoinder, spoken sternly.

"But why did you not tell me at the time?"

"Before I reply to that question, will you answer me one? If I had told you, if I had gone so far as to swear by my own innocence, would you have believed me?"

No; she felt that she should not, then.

Again, while I was waiting for Janson, near his house, I turned into a public-house and drank more—brandy and water. You must have seen that I had taken too much."

"Yes," she answered.

"Afterwards there came that unhappy suspicion, through my having mixed up the one murder with the other. That suspicion did attach to me, I could not help seeing, and I was really thankful to Olivia Hardisty, and to Henry Yorke, for helping me to a way out of it. To have tamely confessed, then, to what I had seen, would never have done; it might only have brought suspicion more tightly upon me. People would have asked what brought me in Janson's garden."

"Arthur," she said, raising her white face, "you might have confessed to us at home."

"With what chance of receiving credence?"

It was the old question. An unsatisfactory one now.

"I judged it better to bide my time," said Mr. Yorke. "We will have Henry to spend Christmas with us, and make it a Christmas tale for after dinner. I'll give it them at dessert. I suppose I may come to Saxony again?"

She was trying softly and silently, happy tears now. Mr. Yorke held her closer, and bent to kiss them away.

"I think you have saved my life, Arthur," she whispered.

"You were going to Saxony to-day, were you not?"

"Yes; by the mid-day train."

"But I perceive you are not fit to travel. Shall we stay on for a few days, and see a little more of this strange drama played out?"

"Oh yes, if you please," she readily answered. "All the places in the world seem glad to me now. I have had been fevered, Arthur."

"I know you have. I had a bulletin up daily of your progress."

"From whom?" she inquired, in surprise.

"From the physician. Had he warned me of danger, I should have hastened to you. He thought I was detained in town by law business, and could not leave. Maria," he more gravely added, "never you doubt my care and love again."

"I have never doubted them," she replied. "I—Arthur," she broke off, gazing at him earnestly, "it is I who ought to enjoin that. The cloud fell on your mind, not my mine. Has it gone away?"

"It has. I believe I was wrong, Maria. At any rate, it can never now return."

"Thank God!" she murmured. "Quite gone!"

"Quite gone," repeated Mr. Yorke, regarding the remark as a question.

"If another thousand pounds would bring Janson back to life, Maria, I would freely give it."

"Shall you speak abroad, now, of what you saw of the murder?"

"No. It would answer to no end, for I could not swear to the assailant. I disclosed the whole to one of the head police in London; but there's no necessity to proclaim it further for the benefit of the public. We will keep it as a secret. A less weighty one than that you have been lugging to your heart, Maria."

A sudden pushing open of the room door. Master Leopold flew in boisterously, followed by Finch, grumbling. "Papa! papa!" shouted the boy in his delight. And Mr. Yorke caught him in his arms.

Finch stood transfixed with surprise.

"Why, sir, when did you come?"

"Ten minutes ago," said Mr. Yorke.

"I am telling your mistress that she will do well to remain on here a little longer, until she shall be more fit to travel."

"You can unpack, Finch," said her mistress.

"Well, that's a bother!" cried Finch, who was in the habit of long service, of saying pretty well what she pleased.

"Have you come to stay to-night, sir?"

"Yes," said Mr. Yorke.

But they got home to Saxony in time for the Christmas dinner. And as to Offord, it has not done taking yet or of the flight the whole village made to the county town to see the three men executed.

"The double murder it is called to this day."

THE END.

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