

THE FOGGY NIGHT AT OFFORD.

CHAPTER VI.—Continued.

"The Rushing Water is taking out a hand or two short," chimed in an old fishwife. "Some gentleman took a whim to go out in her, and he wouldn't be crowded, he said. They took this young shaver aboard last night: he can be put anywhere."

Leaning over the side of the pier with Henry York, and attended by a maid and footman, was Miss Saxonybury. The Rushing Water came gliding past, and her cheeks expressed plainly their consciousness of it. Standing upright in the boat, in a jaunty sailor's costume, was Mr. Janson, handsome than ever. He looked at her with a face schooled to impassiveness, and gravely lifted his hat in token of adieu. She forgot her resolution for a moment: her eyes were strained yearningly on him, and the tears shone in them, as she waved her handkerchief in answer. Another grave bow, and he resumed his glazed hat, and the Rushing Water glided down the harbor.

A gentleman stood at Miss Saxonybury's side, somewhat behind her. He had seen the signs of her emotion, and his lips parted with a defiant expression. He was a tall, powerfully-built man, of nearly thirty, with remarkably white teeth, which he showed too much without perceiving him, Miss Saxonybury turned to pursue her way to the top of the crowded pier. It was a work of difficulty, and Henry York exercised his feet and his elbows.

"Harry, if you behave so rudely, if you push the people unnecessarily, I will send John home with you."

"That you won't. I would jump over the pier first, and go home ducked, on purpose to get you into a row with mamma. You know you are not to dictate to me."

"Hush! Be a good boy."

"I say, Elizabeth, don't you wish you were going out with Mr. Janson?"

"It was a telling question, innocently put. And he who was following close behind, saw that her very neck was in a glow."

"I do," continued Harry. "It is so nice to sail over the sea. I'll be a sailor when I grow up."

"Nice to sail over the sea?" cried Miss Saxonybury. "Don't you remember how ill you were, only crossing here from London?"

"It was the nasty steamer made me ill. I do mean to be a sailor, Maria, and I'll bring you lots of things home from foreign countries. Mamma thinks I only say it to tease her, when I say anything that she won't give me. I'll bring you a monkey from Africa."

Every inch of ground, towards the extremity of the pier, was contested for, that being the best gazing place. The sea was calm and lovely, the light wind, which served to spread the sails, scarcely ruffling it: more than thirty boats were already out, studding the marine landscape, and the morning sun shone brightly on their canvas, as they skimmed over the water. Miss Saxonybury was struggling on, when a crash and shouting below, and a worse press than ever to the side of the pier, suggested that some untoward accident had occurred. The Rushing Water, in going out of harbor, had, by some mishap or mismanagement, which none on board could account for, struck against the end of the pier. The boy, Paul, had been left for a single moment near the rudder: could he have mischievously altered the boat's course?

"What damage is done?" inquired Miss Saxonybury of a bystander, a fisherman, when the excitement was abating.

"Not much, as far as I can see. They will have to put back, though, till evening's tide, and give her a haul over."

"Good morning, Miss Saxonybury. You are out early."

She turned sharply round at the voice to encounter Mr. York. He was staying in the French town also, herself, no doubt, his motive power. Perhaps he was waiting the opportunity to say to her what he had thought to say years ago.

"We came to see the boats go out," she said, giving him her hand.

"I should scarcely have thought a fleet of paltry fishing-boats would be a sufficient attraction to call a young lady from her bed."

"Oh, Mr. York! Look at the numbers of English around: nearly every one we know is here. It is a sight which has the charm of novelty for many of us."

"I see your young friend Janson's courage has not failed him at the last," he said, mockingly. "We shall be rid of him for a time."

"For good, probably," she replied with the utmost apparent indifference. "Before he returns, we shall no doubt have left for home."

"I hope so. I wonder at Lady Saxonybury's having brought you here at all. I wonder that she should remain here! These continental towns are not places for Miss Saxonybury."

"She remains for Henry's improvement in French," said Maria.

"And that he may gain facility in speaking it, she sends him to the college, where he mixes with a dozen other English boys," said Mr. York. "And they abuse themselves all day ingenuously Queen's English."

"We are not going to take any notice of those pigs of French beggars," interposed Master York, shaking back his pretty curls in token of scorn.

He can't come to any harm; we are accustomed to the management of a boat, and we shall take our provisions with us. We mean to make a day of it."

"It is impossible that I can allow him to go," replied Maria. "He can ask his mamma if he likes; but I am sure it will be useless."

"It's a shame then!" exclaimed Henry. "I can never do anything that I like. Won't I when I get bigger?"

He walked sulkily by his sister's side until they reached the streets. As they were passing the college, one or two boys were going in at the scholars' entrance, and the old church clock, further off chimed out nine.

"I shall into school now," said Henry.

"Nonsense," returned Maria. "You have not had your breakfast."

"I don't want any. I don't want to be marked late. It's your fault for stopping so long upon the pier. So good-bye, Elizabeth."

"Good-bye," she repeated, scarcely heeding his departure or what she said for at that moment Edward Janson appeared, crossing the street, having landed from the Rushing Water. The sight made her oblivious to everything else.

At six o'clock, when they assembled to dinner, Henry was missing. Lady Saxonybury supposed he was kept in at school, not an unfrequent occurrence, and began dinner with a very bad grace.

She inquired of John what time he went back to school after luncheon: she and Maria having been out in the middle of the day.

"Master Henry did not come home to luncheon, ma'am."

Lady Saxonybury was indignant. "No breakfast, and keep him from two meals besides!" she uttered. "It is enough to throw him into a consumption. The master must be a bear. Go at once and bring the child home, John; bring him home by force if they object, and threaten them with the police. I'll summons that master before the Criminal Tribunal."

The footman went leisurely enough to the college; but he ran back again at full speed. Master York had not been into class that day, and he was to be punished for it on the morrow.

"Not into class!" repeated the alarmed mother. "Elizabeth told me you left him at the college."

"So I did. I saw him run to the gates. I—I think I saw him enter."

She added, more hesitatingly, trying to remember whether she did or not.

"You think! What do you mean by that?" demanded Lady Saxonybury, who really cared nothing for anybody except her son. "You saw him, or you did not."

"He never can have gone off with those boys!" suddenly exclaimed Maria, in alarm, remembering the fishing expedition.

"What boys? Why don't you speak of Jones and Anson, and a few more English lads, were going up the canal in a boat to fish, and they wanted Harry to go with them," explained Maria.

"I refused, of course."

"Then he is sure to be gone! and if he is drowned you will have been the cause!" screamed Lady Saxonybury, in agitation. "After such a thing as that put into his head, you ought to have brought him home, and kept him here. You know what he is."

There was no further peace. Lady Saxonybury not only sent about the town, but went herself to the houses of the boys' parents, and to every place where there was a possibility of hearing of him. The other parents were alarmed now. With some difficulty they discovered which canal the young gentleman had favored with their company, and bent their steps to it in a body.

Mr. Jones carrying a lantern, for it was dark then. They had not proceeded along its bank many minutes when they encountered a small army of a half-dozen, looking like drowned rats. It proved to be the young gentlemen themselves, who had all been in the water, through the upsetting of the boat.

"Where is Henry?" asked Lady Saxonybury, trembling so that she could scarcely put the question. "Has he been with you?"

"Yes, he has been with us."

"Where is he? Oh, where is he?"

"He is in the boat when it capsized. We can't make out where he is. I'm sure he scrambled out."

Maria was very pale. "How are you sure?" she asked in a dread tone.

"I am positive I saw him," cried Philip Anson, "and I spoke to him. I said to him, 'That was a splash and a near touch, wasn't it, Hal?' and he answered, 'By Jove, if it wasn't!'"

"No, it was not answered you that, Phil," interposed a little fellow about Henry's age.

"Well, I'm positive he is out," rejoined Philip Anson, "for I know I saw him, and his hair had got the curl out of it, and was hanging down straight."

"Did any of the rest of you see him?" inquired Maria, in painful suspense.

All the boys began talking together. The result to be gathered was, that they were not sure whether he was out or not; it was all a scramble at the time and nearly dark.

"Oh, mamma, do not despair!" implored Maria. But Lady Saxonybury had fainted away, and was lying on the towing-path.

CHAPTER VII.
A LOST BOY.

It was a terrible misfortune. Apart from Lady Saxonybury's almost insane grief for the child himself, it was a great misfortune in a pecuniary point of view. With her son's death a considerable portion of her income passed from her; her resources as the widow of Sir Arthur Saxonybury not being large. Just enough was left her to starve upon, she groaned, taking an exaggerated view of things, as she was apt to do. Her grief was, indeed, pitiable. She persisted in attributing all the blame of the boy's death to Maria. She commenced a system of unkind treatment, could not endure the sight of her; and when she did see her, it was only to break out into sobbing and harsh reproaches.

"I should not bear it," observed Mr. York, one day, to Maria.

"It is just it!" returned Maria. "It is just it!"

"I cannot live this life. It makes me so wretched that I sometimes begin to doubt whether I am not really guilty. I will go away rather than bear it."

"Let me emancipate you, Maria," said Mr. York.

She cast at him a rapid glance. The hour was come that she had expected; sometimes doubted, if she had not dreaded.

"You cannot be ignorant of my intentions," he resumed, "or why I have stayed here in this place, which I hate. You must know that I love you passionately; far more passionately than he did, Maria."

"Than who did?" she exclaimed, with a rush of conscious color.

"Janson. As if you did not know."

"Why do you bring up Janson?" she said. "What is Janson to me?"

"Maria, you will be my wife? Do not refuse," he impetuously added. "I have sworn that if you are not mine you shall never be another's."

"Mr. York!"

"I cannot live without you. I love you too passionately for my own peace. You must be mine, Maria. It was your father's wish."

What was she to answer? She did not know. A conflict was at work within her. She liked Mr. York, but she loved Edward Janson. Edward Janson, however, she could never hope to marry, and her days were passed in striving to forget him. With Mr. York she could go back to the dear old home at Saxonybury.

"Give me until to-morrow, and you shall have an answer," she said to him. "This has come upon me suddenly."

"Very well. Remember, Maria, that during the suspense, I shall neither eat nor sleep; I shall have neither peace nor rest. Be my wife, and your days shall be a dream of love."

"A dream of love!" she bitterly repeated, as he left her. "For him, perhaps; not for me!"

She remained in her room until evening, communing with herself, and then she sought Lady Saxonybury, saying she wished to consult her.

"I am not worth consulting now," was the querulous answer. "My spirits are gone, my heart is broken."

"Mr. York wants me to marry him."

"Mr. York!" returned her step-mother, somewhat aroused. "Has he asked you?"

"Yes; to-day."

"Then you are more lucky than you deserve."

"I do not know whether to accept or reject him."

"Reject him!" fiercely interposed Lady Saxonybury. "You are out of your senses. With his fine fortune, his position, his amiability—"

"Is he amiable?" asked Maria.

"He puzzles me at times."

"What puzzles you?"

"His words. I don't understand them. And the expression of his countenance."

"Had you not better set up for a phrenologist—or whatever they call the charlatans who pretend to read faces?" sarcastically retorted Lady Saxonybury.

"Mamma, listen. If I do accept him, it will be because I am unhappy with you."

"Pray, why should there be an 'if' in the matter at all? Why should you hesitate, or think of rejecting him?"

"Because I do not love him," answered Maria, in a low tone. "I like Mr. York, but it requires more than liking to marry a man—or it ought to require it."

"Oh, if you are going to run on about romance and sentiment, I do not understand it," returned Lady Saxonybury. "I never did more than 'like' my two husbands, yet I was happy with them. My love was wasted on somebody else; when I was almost a child."

"Was it?" cried Maria, eagerly.

"It was. It was over and done with before I married, and I did not make the less good wife. It is so with ninety-nine women out of every hundred; and rely upon it, their wedded lives are all the happier for their early romance being over. Romance and reality do not work well together, Maria. You are inexperienced, child."

Maria was beginning to think so.

"I give you my advice, Maria, and I give it for your happiness. Marry Mr. York, and be thankful. Reject him, and pass your after-life in repining, in self-reproach at your own folly."

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