

Which shall it be.

A rich man who had no children proposed to his poor neighbor, who had seven, to take one of them, and promised, if the parents would consent, that he would make them as comfortable as himself and their other six children.

Which shall it be? Which shall it be? I looked at John, John looked at me. And when I found that I must speak, I told me again what Robert said: And then I, listening, bent my head—This is his letter:

A house and land while you shall live, If in return, from out your pocket, One child to me for aye is given.

I looked at John's old garments worn; I thought of all that he had borne Of poverty, and how he had cared, Which I, though willing, could not share; I thought of seven young mouths to feed, Of seven little children's need.

"Come John," said I, "Well choose among them as they lie Asleep," so, walking hand in hand, Dear John and I surveyed our band; First to the cradle lightly stepped, Where Lillian, the father's only child, His rough hand down in a loving way, When dream or whisper made her stir, And huskily he said, "Not her!"

We stooped beside the cradle bed And one long ray of twilight shed Aghast the boyish faces there, In sleep so beautiful and fair. I saw on James' rough, red cheek A tear unshed, Ere John could speak. "He's but a baby, too," said I, And kissed him as we hurried by, Pale, patient Robert's angel face, Still in his sleep, his mother's trace; "No, for a thousand crowns not him!" He whispered, while our eyes were dim.

Poor Dick! did Dick! our wayward son— Turbulent, restless, light one, Could he be spared? Nay, he who gave Rade us beyond him to the grave; Only a mother's heart could be Patient enough for such a he; "And so," said John, "I would not dare To take him from her bedside prayer."

Then stole we softly up above, And kneel by Mary, child of love, "Perhaps for her," would he better be," I said to John, "Quite gently He lifted up a crier that lay Across her cheek in a willow way, And shook his head, "Not there," The white my heart beat audibly.

Only one more, our eldest lad, Trusty and truthful as a glad, So his his hand to John—no! I cannot will not, let him go. And so we wrote in a courteous way, We could not give one child away; And answered to the father's need, Thinking of that of which we dreamed, Happy in truth that not one face Was missed or its security in place; Thankful to work from all the seven, Trusting the rest to one in heaven.

RETURNED FROM THE GRAVE

By MRS. HENRY WOOD: Author of "East Lynne," "Orsvald Gray," &c.

CHAPTER XXIII.—CONTINUED.

While they converse, let us turn for an instant to Miss Bordillon's, where Mr. Lydney was presenting himself for a morning call. "Not at home," said the servant; but at that very unkindly moment who should present her unconscious self at the window but Miss Bordillon. Lydney looked at her, and then at the servant, a half smile upon his face. The girl felt angry and confused, and attempted a justification.

"It is not my fault, sir; I have only to obey orders. Though it is not my mistress general custom to say she is not at home when she is."

"Miss Bordillon desired you to convey her if I called?"

"Yes, sir, she did."

He wrote a few words on a leaf of his pocket-book, tore it out, and sent it in to Miss Bordillon.

"I pray you, as a favor, see me for a few minutes; I will not ask it again."

"Once more can't matter," said Miss Bordillon to herself, as she read the words.

"Show Mr. Lydney in, Ann."

"I thank you for admitting me," he began, as he entered. "I find, Miss Bordillon, that within the last day or two some strange rumors to my prejudice have been circulating in Danesheld, with Lord Dane, I never was in favor; but others were friendly with me. Will you tell me candidly what these rumors are, and whence they arise? I apply to you because I believe you are truthful and sincere, above petty prejudice, and I had learnt to believe that, of all in Danesheld, you esteem me as a friend."

Miss Bordillon hesitated in perplexity. She was, as he designated it, truthful, and sincere; but she was also kind, and revolted at the thought of giving pain. Mr. Lester had favored her with his version of the reports against Lydney, asserting that they were indisputably true—as Lord Dane had asserted to him—and, Miss Bordillon felt that she could not again receive one who lay under so dark a cloud.

"You probably heard that Mr. Lester turned me from his door?" he proceeded, finding she did not speak.

freely, now it was entered upon. "Squire Lester insisted upon it; or else Maria's visits here must be ceased."

"I am accused; I hear, among other heinous sins," he proceeded, dropping his voice to a lower key, "of entertaining covetous designs on the fortune of Miss Lester."

"Who could have told you that?" uttered Miss Bordillon.

"It is patent to all Danesheld. You may hear it as you pass along the street. I am supposed to be doing my best to delude Miss Lester into a Gretna-Green escapade, or some such unorthodox marriage, for the sake of touching her fourteen thousand pounds.

"I wish you would mention these things, Mr. Lydney, for they only pain me to hear them. For myself, I cannot but have confidence in you; there is something about you that I have trusted from the first, and trust still. But, put yourself in my position, and reflect how impossible it is that I can act against the stream, and continue to receive you here—especially with Miss Lester visiting me as usual. If you would be more open as to yourself, and declare who you are, it might be different."

"The fact is," said Lydney, but in a good-natured tone, "that you do doubt me. You like me personally, you have a sort of faith in me, at least you had; but you cannot overlook the budget of innuendoes against me, now opened. I do not know that I blame you for it, Miss Bordillon; in your position, as you observe, I might judge as you do. I will not intrude longer on you," he added, as he arose, "but I must express my hope that the time will shortly come when you will welcome me to your house again."

Miss Bordillon held out her hand in token of adieu.

"Were I you, Mr. Lydney, I would no longer remain in Danesheld; it cannot be a pleasant spot of abode to you now."

"That proves how you share in the general prejudice," he laughed, as he released her hand. "Farewell."

"Not a word about his family—or who he is," thought Miss Bordillon, as she turned to ring the bell. "I don't know what to think."

The servant had the street door open as he approached it, admitting Maria Lester. Mr. Lydney caught her hand, and drew her into a small room or study, where in past days she and Edith used to do their lessons. He closed the door, and stood before her.

"Maria," he began, calling her, in his agitation, by her Christian name, "I am going to put your friendship your confidence to me, to the proof. Dark tales are abroad in my prejudice, insinuations that I am not what I appear to be, that I am no gentleman; nay, worse, that I am a bad character. Do you believe them?"

"No," she quietly said, lifting her trusting eyes to his.

"I will not thank you; it appears to me that if you could believe such accusations, cast on me, would not be worth my thanks. Bold, you will say. Yes I am bold in this moment. It is not convenient to me—you shall know why, sometime—to declare anything more of myself than people know at present. The tales of my nefarious doings will right themselves; I do not fear them, or cast a word to them; but when you hear it said that I am no gentleman, that I am an adventurer, believe it not. Will you trust me?"

"With my whole heart and faith," she answered, the tears rising to her eyes.

"I do thank you now," and somehow he contrived to possess himself of both her hands. Holding them between his, he looked her earnestly in the face. "It has been brought against me that I have been striving to gain the affections of Miss Lester for the sake of securing her fortune. Upon the state of Miss Lester's affections I will not enter, but I will honestly avow that she has gained mine. I say no more; I must leave it to the future; to the time when I can present myself before Mr. Lester and ask that his daughter may be given to me for my own. In that hour Mr. Lester will find that fortune is certainly no object to me, and that he is heartily welcome to retain any she may possess. I have not offended you in saying this?" he added in a tone of the deepest tenderness.

No, he had not offended her; far from it: her heart only beat more responsively to the avowal. It was an instant of agitation; her feelings were nearly beyond control, and her wet eyelashes rested on her crimsoned cheeks.

"It has been told to me," he whispered, "that another covets the prize for his—one whom I suspect to be my enemy—and that Mr. Lester favors his suit."

"But not I," she answered, in a moment's impulse. "I never can be his, though he has made it a condition of placing Wilfred beyond reach of want. Papa would like it. Lord Dane is rich and a man of rank."

the windows was shaken, and Lord Dane rose hastily, pulled aside the white blind, the curtains not being closed, and found himself face to face with Mr. Shad, the glass only between them. He had mounted the iron railings outside, and was standing on the spikes leaning forward, and holding on by the frame of the window.

"You young imp!" uttered Lord Dane as he drew back the window, which opened in the middle, after the manner of the French, "what the deuce brings you here?"

"They're a-comeing on this very night, my lord—I know they is!" cried Shad, his face working with excitement. "They're in the wood now, and a-tying black craps to their hats; I see 'em a-tying of 'em on, and I thought I'd come and tell ye."

Mr. Blair was by the side of Lord Dane, and he seized the boy and deposited him inside the room.

"See the lumination in this here parlor," proceeded Shad, "and made bold to get up and look if it was your lordship was in it, but the blind hindered me. I was afeared to go to the big gates, for the servants would 'n' draw me back again."

"How many did you see?" asked Mr. Blair.

"See four. Two tall, and two short," answered Shad. "There was the three what I heered a-planning of the thing days back, and the tother, the tallest of all was like—"

"He was a-sitting down all the time, and the black hang afore his nose."

"How can you tell that he was tall, if he were sitting down?" demanded Mr. Blair.

"Cause he was," was Shad's reply. "I twigged his long legs."

"Who were you going to say he was like?"

"Well, I never heered him speak, and I never seen him get up—but he was like Will Lester."

"Nonsense!" angrily interposed Lord Dane. "What should Wilfred Lester want breaking into my house? The boy's a fool, Blair, and has always been deemed one. Do you think it was Lydney?" he sharply added, turning to Shad.

Now the boy was not a fool; he had a vast deal too much cunning to be a fool, and that cunning he was incessantly calling into requisition. It did not in the least matter to Shad whether the silent gentleman in the disguising crape might be Mr. Lydney or Mr. Wilfred Lester; his opinion was that it was the latter; but as the suggestion appeared to give offense to Lord Dane, who would evidently be better pleased to hear that it was Lydney, Shad's cunning prompted to veer around.

"Well, I dunno," said he, with admirable simplicity. "Lydney's tall, too, he is; and I think the man was broad here," touching his chest, "like Lydney's is. Yes, I does think he looked more like Lydney. 'Twas the leggin made me think o' Will Lester; but I see Lydney with a pair on one day."

"Safe to be Lydney," murmured Lord Dane in the ear of Mr. Blair. And the latter nodded.

"What did you hear?" he asked of Shad.

"I didn't hear nothing, sir. They war'n't a talking, above a odd word 'bout the walls; and I cut off, and left 'em, to tell his lordship."

Mr. Blair spoke for a moment in an undertone with Lord Dane, and then gingerly lifted Shad out of the window again, on to the spikes, telling him to jump down. Lord Dane addressed the boy:

"Was it Mr. Lydney or was it Will Lester?" asked both were tall. "So I said as I couldn't speak to neither of 'em for certain, when I see 't' ankered him. As if I didn't know Will Lester?"

After some further colloquy, Shad was dismissed, and Mr. Lydney remained in a state of the utmost perplexity and discomposure. That Wilfred Lester had joined in certain night expeditions of the poachers, touching game, he had made himself only too sure; but that he would rush madly into crime, and be incommunicable. One of two things was certain; he must, have lost his senses, to become utterly reckless.

How could he Lydney, prevent his taking place? at any rate prevent Lester's joining in it? It was indispensable he should be prevented, not only for his own sake, but for his family's, and a deep flush rose to Mr. Lydney's brow, as he thought of the terrible disgrace it would reflect on Maria, should her brother be taken and tried for housebreaking. As he thus mused, he became conscious that several policemen were passing him, not together, but singly, and at different times, as if not to attract observation; the connection of their errand flashed into his mind—they were going up to guard the castle? All that he could do was to follow them, place himself in a position that would command the approach to the castle, watch for the appearance of the robbers, and intercept Wilfred Lester.

The only retainer of Lord Dane's who had been made privy to the expected attack, was Bruff. The rest had been suffered to retire quietly to rest, night after night, unconscious that any armed force was at watch in the castle. Suffer it to be known to them, and it would no longer be a secret in Danesheld, was the argument of Mr. Blair; in which case the attack would not take place. On this Sunday night the police were admitted privately as usual; the household went to bed; but Lord Dane, Mr. Blair, and Bruff remained up. Mr. Blair told the officers that the attack was expected.

They waited and waited; the men at their appointed posts, Mr. Blair anywhere and everywhere, Lord Dane and Bruff in excitement; they waited, and waited on. The clock struck one.

"It is very strange they don't come!" muttered Mr. Blair.

Suddenly shots were heard in the wood at a distance, and the men came stealthily out of their hiding-places; Lord Dane and Bruff also rushed into the hall.

"Back every one of you!" was the stern order of Mr. Blair. "It is coming now."

"They have met with some obstacle, and are fighting it out in the wood," exclaimed Lord Dane. "Hark at the shots."

"Back, I say, all of you," was the reiterated order of the detective. "Those shots are a ruse to draw the attention of the keepers from the castle should any be near it. I expected something of the sort. They'll be here directly, now. Back; and silence; and whatever you may hear or see, let none stir forth till I give the signal."

Back they covered, and the castle returned to silence. And still they waited and waited on. Lydney also waited in his place of ambush. Like those within, he wondered what was keeping the villains.

He heard the town-clock strike one; and, not long after, he heard the shots in the wood. It did not occur to him to take the view of them that the detective had done, and they disturbed him much; but he could not quit his present post. It was a muggy disagreeable, damp night; the early part of it had been clear, but the weather was changing—anything but a pleasant night to remain on the watch in the open air.

Suddenly, a noise stole on his ear; not, however, a sound of the covert footsteps of more than one, as he was expecting, but of one pair of boy's feet scampering over the ground with all possible haste and noise. Mr. Lydney looked out and encountered Shad.

"So you are here! instead of having gone home to bed."

"Don't hold on me then, please sir," panted Shad, who was out of breath. "I'm a-going to the castle to tell Lord Dane. I know he's up a-waiting."

"To tell him what?"

"Taint the castle they be on to. It's the hall."

"What?" screamed Lydney.

"They're a-broke into it; they be in it now. I've been a-dodging on 'em all the night, and they be gone right into the hall, 'stead o' coming here. They took a pane out at one o' the winders."

Shad had not used deceit. The men were in. Drake had entered by means of the window, had then opened the back-door and admitted the rest. They waited and listened when they were fairly in; but not a mouse seemed stirring—nothing but the beating of their own hearts.

Silently Wilfred Lester to his father's study, the others with him; and silently, he applied himself to open the safe, where his father had told him the deed was deposited. He had come armed with a key, to unlock it harmlessly, so that no discovery should be made of its having been opened by unfair means. Drake kept the room-door against surprise, Ben Beecher held the light, and Nicholson did nothing. It may be wondered that Wilfred Lester should enlist three men in the expedition, when plunder was not the object, and there would be no booty to carry off; but the men had obstinately refused to go with him singly; all would risk it and stand by each other if surprised, or none. Young Lester yielded in his recklessness.

Strange objects they looked there, that dark, midnight expedition, the black craps disguising their faces. The safe was soon opened; but there appeared a mass of papers within, and Wilfred could not get at the deed without search. Other deeds were there; other papers; some tied with red tape, some sealed, some unfastened. They were disposed of in order, and there was no difficulty in looking them over—only it took time. He came to one: "Templation of George Lester, Esquire," and the temptations to tear it open and read it was great; he felt sure it was disinherited; that he, the heir by right of birth, had been discarded for Lady Adelaide's children; but he resisted the impulse and threw it aside with an angry and hasty word. Presently he came to the one he wanted; his own name on the back guided him to the right parchment, and he clutched it with a suppressed shout of joy.

"All right, boys! I have it at last."

There was a murmur of congratulation given under their breath; and Wilfred began putting in order again the papers he had disturbed. While doing this, Robertson and Drake attempted to steal out of the room. Wilfred turned to them.

"Where are you going? Stop where you are!"

"Why, you'd never go to begrudge us a snack of bread-and-cheese, and a draught of beer?" returned Drake. "We shall find it in the pantry, and 'twont be missed."

"You know the bargain," said Wilfred Lester, in suppressed anger. "Nothing must be touched in the house; no; not a crust of bread; they shall not have it to say that we came in like thieves, for common plunder."

"I'll take a stroll through it, at any rate," answered Drake, hardly. "And as to not touching a bit and a sup, if I see it—"

"I will shoot the first man who lays his finger upon anything in my father's house, no matter what it may be," was the stern interruption of young Lester, as he drew his pistol. "Drake! Nicholson! you know the agreement, I say. I have promised you a reward for helping me; and having secured the deed, I shall be able to pay you; but the house and its contents must remain intact."

They were callous, bold men, and not to be balked in that way. Having entered on the expedition with their own views of self-interest, it was little likely they would be turned from them. A low whisper of conversation went on between Drake and Nicholson; so to the effect that they must accomplish their purpose by stratagem, rather than come to an open broil with Wilfred Lester were and then: and they debated how best to work it. Wilfred, meanwhile, continued to arrange the papers in the safe; it was soon done, and he closed the door again and locked it.

"Now then," said he, "to get out as cleverly as we came in."

That was easier said than done, for more reasons than one. Wilfred Lester quitted the study, with his companions, and locked the door, leaving the key in the lock as he had found it.

"Well, go out at the hall-door," he whispered, pointing to it; "it is more handy and I know the fastenings."

Stealing over the oil-chest, he gained it, undid the bolts, drew it cautiously open about an inch, and looked around. The men stood as he had left them; not one following him; and Beecher was putting the candle on a bracket that rested against the wall.

"I tell you what it is, Master Lester," whispered Drake, who appeared to be more ready with the tongue than the others, "we have helped you on to your ends, and you must help us on to ours; or if you won't help, you must wink at 'em. We come into this house with a resolve to pay ourselves, or we shouldn't have come in at all, and you may as well hear the truth, and make no bones over it. If we take away but a spoon a-piece, we will take it, for we don't go empty handed."

Wilfred Lester's reply was to raise his pistol and cock it—not to fire upon them, but to coerce them to withdraw under fear that he would. Ben Beecher, believing life was in danger, stepped close and threw up Lester's arm. The pistol went off; the bullet shattering the glass of a door at the back of the hall.

"Fools!" bitterly exclaimed Wilfred Lester; "save yourselves, and be quick over it. Fools! Fools!"

He sped through the hall-door, leaving it open for them to follow, and darted through the shrubs, on his right hand, whence he could readily gain the road by scaling the iron rails. Nicholson and Beecher would have escaped with him, but Drake seized hold of both.

the figure on the stairs a female, by her voice—began screaming and shrieking fearfully. The men rushed through the door; and Lydney rushed after them, in his pursuit of Wilfred Lester.

"What in the name of confusion is the matter?" was heard above the hubbub in the voice of Squire Lester, as he descended in pantaloons, and slippers, while a crowd of timid ones aroused out of their sleep—ladies, domestic children—covered in the rear. And the female on the stairs, who was no other than Tiffle, sobbed out in answer:

"It's a crowd of viliyans with blackened faces, broke in to murder us."

"With all possible speed, Squire Lester and his men-servants made search. But the 'viliyans' were gone.

Exceedingly surprised, not to say discomfited, was the great London detective, Mr. Blair, to find that while he had snugly made all preparations for the defence of the castle, that edifice had been left to repose in security, and the hall had suffered the attack. Lord Dane was far more confounded to hear of it; for he sent all his calculations out to sea: What could Lydney want at the hall? he could not expect to find his box there; and it was hardly to be supposed he broke in to steal Miss Lester. Nothing had been missed, nothing displaced in the house; Squire Lester testified that he did not believe a thing had been touched; therefore robbery had scarcely been the object. But of course the outrage must be investigated.

It is the custom in some parts of England for country magistrates to hold examinations of prisoners, when in a preliminary stage, at their own houses. Whether it be in strict accordance with law is another matter. Country justices, especially in remote districts, pay more attention to convenience than law.

About eleven o'clock on Monday morning, there was a gathering at Squire Lester's to inquire into the night's outrage. Lord Dane, Mr. Blair, a neighboring magistrate or two, and the squire himself, were present; Lady Adelaide and Maria, the latter with a face of emotion, now crimson, now white; Inspector Young and a policeman; Mr. Apperly, who had been sent for; and—having obeyed the mandate to attend, half request, half command, borne from Mr. Lester by Inspector Young—William Lydney. That it was not a strictly official inquiry, only an irregular one, the reader will understand, by the ladies being present. There was no appearance of a court; they came in as morning guests might do, and took their seats anywhere; some stood. Maria held some embroidery in her hand and made a show of working at it; Lady Adelaide did nothing, save hold a screen between the fire and her delicate face. Mr. Blair appeared merely as a friend of Lord Dane's. He took no part in the proceedings, and his real character was unsuspected. The last to enter was Lydney, accompanied by Inspector Young; he looked exceedingly grave, not to say troubled, as he approached Mr. Lester, though as little like a housebreaker as it was possible to conceive. His elegant form, in its plain, gentlemanly morning-costume, was drawn to its full height; it would seem that he might suspect the accusation to be made against him, and would not abate one jot of his dignity; very attractive did his high, pale features look that morning.

"I have been favored with a message from you Mr. Lester, desiring my attendance here," he began, after saluting Lady Adelaide and Maria, and the rest of the company generally. "May I request to know for what purpose?"

"Yes, sir," dryly replied Mr. Lester. "You may be aware that my house was broken into early this morning. I am about—in conjunction with my Lord Dane, and some of my brother magistrates—to make some inquiry into it; and, from circumstances which have transpired, we deem it right that you should be present at the sitting. Are you ready to be so, of your own free will?"

"Perfectly ready," replied Mr. Lydney.

"Good!" said the squire. "Otherwise we must have compelled your attendance."

Now, it must be remembered that none save those in the secret knew of the suspected attack on Dane Castle. Mr. Lester and his brother magistrates were in ignorance of it; the police, receiving their orders from Mr. Blair, did not mention it—Mr. Blair forbidding it at the earnest request of Lord Dane. Certainly the preparations for defence, and the posting of the police inside, could have had nothing to do with the attack on the hall. Lord Dane strongly urged on Mr. Blair that the three men, spoken of by Shad, should not be told upon, and he spoke with all the high authority vested in the county's lord-lieutenant; to such authority the officer could do little else but bow.

In the first place, urged Lord Dane, nobody was sure that they were the men, they had only the word of that little liar, Shad, for it. In the second place, even if they were the men, they had beyond doubt, been disguised by that traitor Lydney—whom it would be much more in accordance with justice to punish for the whole. Thus, it occurred that nothing was likely to transpire beyond the fact of the actual entrance into the hall. Shad was not alluded to in the business, and the only person who appeared likely to give evidence was Tiffle.

Tiffle was introduced to the drawing-room, curtseying, ambling, and shuffling. Squire Lester desired her to speak out what she knew to Lord Dane and the magistrates.

"I retired to rest last night, my lord," began Tiffle, choosing to address his lordship particularly; "and what the reason was, I am unable to say; but the more I tried to get asleep, the more pertineously I lay awake. Well, my lord, it was getting on, I'm sure, for two o'clock, when I started up in bed, a-thinking I heard something down stairs. The flurry it put me in is undiscussible, and I went out of my room, to listen. If ever I heered voices in the hall, I heered 'em then; I thought some of the household had gone down stairs at their pranks—for a tight hand I'm obligated to keep over the servants in this house—and I crept to the last light and peeped through the bannisters. I never could have done it if I had known, but I no more thought of bulgarious robbers being in the hall than—"

"What did you see or hear?" interposed Lord Dane.

"My lord, I saw this. I saw three horrid marauders with their faces blackened, and I saw another which I couldn't distinguish nothing of but his coat-tails—a-whisking out of the hall door. Then, or whether, it was just before I can't be sure, a dreadful pistol went off, and I nearly fainted. I wouldn't faint, however; I come too; knowing the family's lives were at stake, and I looked down again, and there I saw a man whisk into the hall again, and I'm sorry to say—Tiffle coughed and dropped her voice—that it was Mr. Lydney."

There was a dead pause.

"What next?" said Lord Dane.

My lord, nothing. Except that they all four, him, and the black bulgarians, talked together for a minute, and then they blew out the candle which had been flaring, level with their heads, and tore away, one trying to get off faster than another."