A DARK NIGHT'S WORK.

CHAPTER I.

(CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS ISSUE.)

A stern-browed, dark-visaged man paced to and fro in the public room of the old Angel Inn at Doncaster, on the evening of October the 13th, 1816.

He had all the place to himself, for the coaches had not yet flocked in from their work, and so he strode backwards and forwards, with his arms folded and his eyes fixed upon vacancy.

"I must be done," he muttered at last, as he stopped in his walk, and flung himself into a large arm-chair by the blazing fire. "better anything than utter ruin and public disgrace. A bold stroke will make me a rich man. How late that fellow is in his boy—quartered of his bar-gain?"

As if in answer to his question, the door opened and a man entered of broad build, large coffee head, short neck and limited visage, with a red handkerchief "sported" round his neck, and a huge clay pipe between his thick lips.

"Well, here I am, Mr. Thornham," said he, "up to time too, I fancy."

"I thought you were late," replied the gentleman, in a voice that seemed to imply that he desired to quell unpleasant familiarity, "but the time drags when you're waiting. However, we will proceed to business at once. Ring the bell, and let us have something to drink."

The gentleman having been promptly obeyed, the one addressed as Thornham drew his chair closer to his companion, and began:

"Now, Peter Heathen, to-night's work will make you a very rich man, you must not therefore be squeamish."

"A man that's had the hangman's rope so nearly round his neck as I had, Heathen ain't going to be squeamish over a good job. Why if a man wants to sell me, say you, for instance I'd swing his neck as soon as I'd wring chickens off the fowls in the yard, mother. No, no, I'll not hang back."

The fellow's implied threat made Thornham shudder and turn cold.

"Well, then," he said, taking a deep draught of ale, "I'll explain at once what I want done. I will be plain by telling you who I am, in order that you may see I'm not deceiving you.

"Great Hexan miles from this inn lies the estate of Mark Everleigh, one of the richest landowners in Nottinghamshire, and my half brother.

"And Mark were brought up together, but we always hated one another, and terrible quarrels at length ended in my being sent away.

"I have expect as to my mode of life, and not to be cut off by my father with a miserable pittance, and here I am, ruined, beggared, and in an inexplicable entanglement of debts. This very night, if you and I are bold, will make me master of Everleigh and a rich man.

"The fellow who had been sitting with his legs stretched out before the guest, puffing volumes of smoke from his coarse lips, removed the pipe from his mouth as Thornham paused.

"Well, he said, "you'll find me ready. Just tell me what to do, and I'll do it."

Thornham dropped his voice to a whisper, as he proceeded

"This evening Mark Everleigh drives over to Nottingham. The Angel, as you know, is the half way house, and he will put up here to rest his horses. He has with him his son, the only child the only heir to Everleigh estates. Now, if both disappear, I am the next of kin.

"About four miles from this inn is a deep hill, so steep that if a horse were to slip he would dash the vehicles behind him to pieces down the declivity.

"At the bottom, on one side is an old disused quarry, whose edge is but a few feet from the roadway, and protected only by a low hedge.

"I will so arrange it no matter how, that an accident shall happen that the vehicle in which Mark and his son are riding shall be upset close by the spot. If they are killed, we are saved all further trouble, if not they must be settled in a manner which shall make it appear they met their death by accident. And now, I'd advise you to make the best of your way on to the quarry and wait for me there. I will join you as soon as I've seen the coffer."

"Very good," said the man, "but before I do go, perhaps you'll kindly tell me one thing. This night's work will make you master of Everleigh. What is it going to do for me?"

"Make your fortune. As soon as I come into my money, you shall have three thousand pounds."

"Agreed," said the man. "I'm off."

Not many minutes after the departure of Caleb, Thornham also departed, and made his way behind the outbuildings of the inn just as Mark Everleigh's gig rattled into the yard.

Before explaining how matters progressed at the "Angel," however, I must ask my readers to accompany me to Everleigh Grange.

Mark Everleigh was a fine, handsome man, about five and forty, tall and well built, and with all the jollity and geniality of a country gentleman about him.

Young Harry Everleigh—a lad of some fourteen years—was a counterpart of his father, both in appearance and manner.

"You seem overcome by some strange presentiment, father," said the boy, "if this journey is not very important, I would delay it till to-morrow."

Mark Everleigh shook his head.

"No, no," he said, "I feel that I must go. I am ill and in low spirits, and were I to delay, I should fancy evils twice as great as those I shall encounter."

The wheels of the gig were heard grating over the path, and in another minute, one of the servants entered to announce that it was ready.

"Now then, my boy, be quick," said his father cheerily; "get your hat and your thick coat, for the night air is chilly."

On reaching the inn in the grey of the coming night, they delivered the gig and horse over to the hands of Jack the ostler, and made their way into a private room.

Here there was a pleasant fire, and Mark Everleigh, sitting down by it, was soon lost in the contemplation of some documents.

Harry stood at the window, and in a very short space of time, his whole mind was engaged, as it were, in watching.

The boy had been from the outset curious, and now the sight of people and the various busy scenes of the ostler, as he took their favorite mare out of the shafts and led her away to the stables, until the moment when a tall figure emerged from behind the doorway.

"Ostler, a word with you," said the new comer, who was no other than Ralph Thornham.

"A word wi' me! Twenty if ye like, sir," cried Jack, heartily.

But he stopped short, leaning on his pitchfork, and nervously twiddling the straw in his mouth—his whole bent of thought seeming changed at his first view of the stranger.

Took the ostler Honest Jack as he was called was a peculiar fellow.

He was somewhat ungainly—rough of speech, but his heart was in the right place, and nature seemed to have implanted in his mind notions of right and wrong which teaching seems to fail to give to others.

So he looked hard at the stranger.

He liked not his appearance, and no wonder, for Thornham's eyes glittered coldly, his mouth was set, and his face was ghastly pale.

"Well, Jack," said Ralph, "I know you're not over rich."

"That I hain't, sir," he answered. "You see I gets my money hard-earned like, and those ain't so much get that way as by roguery."

"Curse this fellow's morality!" thought Ralph. "You're quite right there, Jack. Rogues get on the best, and honest men like you are passed by. But to business. Would you like to earn twenty pounds to-night?"

"Twenty pounds—twenty golden sovereigns?" exclaimed Jack, with glistening eyes.

"Yes, here they are. See, I am not deceiving you. Now, listen. Yonder gig belongs to Mr. Mark Everleigh."

"Yes, sir."

"Well, he has in his possession certain papers which I must obtain this night."

"Then, why don't you ask for 'em?" asked Honest Jack.

"No, no; you don't understand me," said Thornham, impatiently. "There are reasons why I must not see him—why he must not see me. If everything were easy, why should I require your assistance? Now, I have told you I will give you twenty pounds if will make it thirty, and all I require is that you will so loosen the linch pin of the off wheel of that gig that after travelling a mile or two, it will roll off and upset it."

"Why, that would be murder!" stammered Jack.

"Pooh, pooh!" said Ralph. "I thought you were a sensible fellow, and I find you as dull as the one. Why, every one on the countryside knows that Mark Everleigh is a skilful driver. He will have a tumble. I shall rush out to aid him, secure the papers in the dark, where he can't see me, and then help him on his road again."

"Well, if nothing worse, its a robbery, ain't it?" said Jack.

"No, because these papers really belong to me," returned Ralph.

"Well, I didn't to know that," said the ostler.

"No, of course," said Thornham, taking out the jingling gold, and counting thirty sovereigns into his hand. "Now, take my advice, do as I wish, and earn this money. See what fine presents you can now buy for Annie Sparks."

"It was a sore temptation for poor Jack, as it would be to any poor man placed in a similar position.

"'You see, sir,' he said, taking the money, and shaking it up in the palms of both hands, 'you see, I like Mr. Mark, and if anything were to come to him any harm like, I'd never rest again. I have slept peaceful and quiet all my life, and thirty pounds ain't much to look back on arter you've spent it, when there's a spirit a haunting of you, and telling yer you're a murderer?' Now, Mr. Mark might be killed, and—"

"Well, then," said Ralph, "let me do it."

Jack stood before him threateningly.

"No, sir, while that are trap's in my charge, no one touches it," cried he. "What'd the master say if he found me letting a chap as I knows nothing about go a-meddlin' with them 'ere wheels? No, I'll do it myself."

Ralph's face beamed with a demoniacal grin.

"Villain!" thought Harry Everleigh, who had heard every word of the conversation. "Honest Jack, indeed! Your name shall be mentioned with hatred by every true-hearted man and woman in the county."

"I'm glad you've come to reason at last," said Thornham. "you'll find in the end you've done no wrong, but assisted a friend who will never forget what you aided him to obtain. But remember," he added tapping the ostler on the chest, "no treachery, or I shall be even with you. I have a pistol in my pocket, and I am going to hide behind yonder posts. If I see you conferring too long with either Mark or his son, I shall fire and take the consequences."

"Don't fear, master," Jack said; "I shall do what's right. I've been Honest Jack for many a year, and now that I've been and sold the title for thirty pound, I ain't going to run the risk of a bullet through the head for nothing."

Thornham told Honest Jack that he would remain there concealed; but after a few minutes he glided away, and, passing behind the outbuildings, hurried away on the road to Nottingham.

The ostler waited until his tempter disappeared, and then indulged in a quiet, merry chuckle as he approached the waterbutt near the window.

"So you thought you'd frightened me, did you, master?" he muttered; "frightened me into helping you to commit murder perhaps? Not this time. The linch pin will stop where it is, or my name's not Jack Barton."

"Bravo!" exclaimed Harry, as he cautiously withdrew from his place of observation, "Bravo! He's Honest Jack, after all."

Then he approached his father and quickly woke him.

"Father," he said "I have something most particular to tell you."

Mark Everleigh listened attentively, and his face grew white with anger, yet with fear.

"Whereon this earthen ball?" he said. "I cannot conceive—I cannot believe. You say Honest Jack returned?"

"Yes, he entered to do his bidding, but he laughed at the idea when the tempter the name. He's got the money, but he spoke to be our friend, for all that; and we cannot run the risk of his being sent by Caleb to kill us."

"I wont do it," said Mark. "Be quick, and let us make our escape from the inn. Harry, you can drive the horse."

The boy had been from the outset curious, and now the sight of people and the various busy scenes of the ostler, as he took their favorite mare out of the shafts and led her away to the stables, until the moment when a tall figure emerged from behind the doorway.

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