

## **ELEVENTH SCENE - Outside the House**

The evening was chilly, but not cold for the time of year. There was no moon. The stars were out, and the wind was quiet. Upon the whole, the inhabitants of the little Somersetshire village of Baxdale agreed that it was as fine a Christmas-eve as they could remember for some years past.

Toward eight in the evening the one small street of the village was empty, except at that part of it which was occupied by the public-house. For the most part, people gathered round their firesides, with an eye to their suppers, and watched the process of cooking comfortably indoors. The old bare, gray church, situated at some little distance from the village, looked a lonelier object than usual in the dim starlight. The vicarage, nestling close under the shadow of the church-tower, threw no illumination of fire-light or candle-light on the dreary scene. The clergyman's shutters fitted well, and the clergyman's curtains were closely drawn. The one ray of light that cheered the wintry darkness streamed from the unguarded window of a lonely house, separated from the vicarage by the whole length of the church-yard. A man stood at the window, holding back the shutter, and looking out attentively over the dim void of the burial-ground. The man was Richard Turlington. The room in which he was watching was a room in his own house.

A momentary spark of light flashed up, as from a kindled match, in the burial-ground. Turlington instantly left the empty room in which he had been watching. Passing down the back garden of the house, and crossing a narrow lane at the bottom of it, he opened a gate in a low stone wall beyond, and entered the church-yard. The shadowy figure of a man of great stature, lurking among the graves, advanced to meet him. Midway in the dark and lonely place the two stopped and consulted together in whispers. Turlington spoke first.

"Have you taken up your quarters at the public-house in the village?"

"Yes, master."

"Did you find your way, while the daylight lasted, to the deserted malt-house behind my orchard wall?"

"Yes, master."

"Now listen--we have no time to lose. Hide there, behind that monument. Before nine o'clock to-night you will see me cross the churchyard, as far as this place, with the man you are to wait for. He is going to spend an hour with the vicar, at the house yonder. I shall stop short here, and say to him, 'You can't miss your way in the dark now--I will go back.' When I am far enough away from him, I shall blow a call on my whistle. The moment you hear the call, follow the man, and drop him before he gets out of the churchyard. Have you got your cudgel?"

Thomas Wildfang held up his cudgel. Turlington took him by the arm, and felt it suspiciously.

"You have had an attack of the horrors already," he said. "What does this trembling mean?"

He took a spirit-flask from his pocket as he spoke. Thomas Wildfang snatched it out of his hand, and emptied it at a draught. "All right now, master," he said. Turlington felt his arm once more. It was steadier already. Wildfang brandished his cudgel, and struck a heavy blow with it on one of the turf mounds near them. "Will that drop him, captain?" he asked.

Turlington went on with his instructions.

"Rob him when you have dropped him. Take his money and his jewelry. I want to have the killing of him attributed to robbery as the motive. Make sure before you leave him that he is dead. Then go to the malt-house. There is no fear of your being seen; all the people will be indoors, keeping Christmas-eve. You will find a change of clothes hidden in the malt-house, and an old caldron full of quicklime. Destroy the clothes you have got on, and dress yourself in the other clothes that you find. Follow the cross-road, and when it brings you into the highroad, turn to the left; a four-mile walk will take you to the town of Harminster. Sleep there to-night, and travel to London by the train in the morning. The next day go to my office, see the head clerk, and say, 'I have come to sign my receipt.' Sign it in your own name, and you will receive your hundred pounds. There are your instructions. Do you understand them?"

Wildfang nodded his head in silent token that he understood, and disappeared again among the graves. Turlington went back to the house.

He had advanced midway across the garden, when he was startled by the sound of footsteps in the lane--at that part of it which skirted one of the corners of the house. Hastening forward, he placed himself behind a

projection in the wall, so as to see the person pass across the stream of light from the uncovered window of the room that he had left. The stranger was walking rapidly. All Turlington could see as he crossed the field of light was, that his hat was pulled over his eyes, and that he had a thick beard and mustache. Describing the man to the servant on entering the house, he was informed that a stranger with a large beard had been seen about the neighborhood for some days past. The account he had given of himself stated that he was a surveyor, engaged in taking measurements for a new map of that part of the country, shortly to be published.

The guilty mind of Turlington was far from feeling satisfied with the meager description of the stranger thus rendered. He could not be engaged in surveying in the dark. What could he want in the desolate neighborhood of the house and church-yard at that time of night?

The man wanted--what the man found a little lower down the lane, hidden in a dismantled part of the church-yard wall--a letter from a young lady. Read by the light of the pocket-lantern which he carried with him, the letter first congratulated this person on the complete success of his disguise--and then promised that the writer would be ready at her bedroom window for flight the next morning, before the house was astir. The signature was "Natalie," and the person addressed was "Dearest Launce."

In the meanwhile, Turlington barred the window shutters of the room, and looked at his watch. It wanted only a quarter to nine o'clock. He took his dog-whistle from the chimney-piece, and turned his steps at once in the direction of the drawing-room, in which his guests were passing the evening.