

**THE FOGGY NIGHT AT
OFFORD. A
CHRISTMAS GIFT FOR
THE LANCASHIRE FUND**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649585502

The Foggy Night at Offord. A Christmas Gift for the Lancashire Fund by Mrs. Henry Wood

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Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

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MRS. HENRY WOOD

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A Christmas Gift

FOR
THE LANCASHIRE FUND.

BY
MRS HENRY WOOD,
AUTHOR OF "HART LYNN."

LONDON:
JAMES NISBET & CO., 21 BERNERS STREET.
AND ALL BOOKSELLERS.
M.DCCC.LXIII.

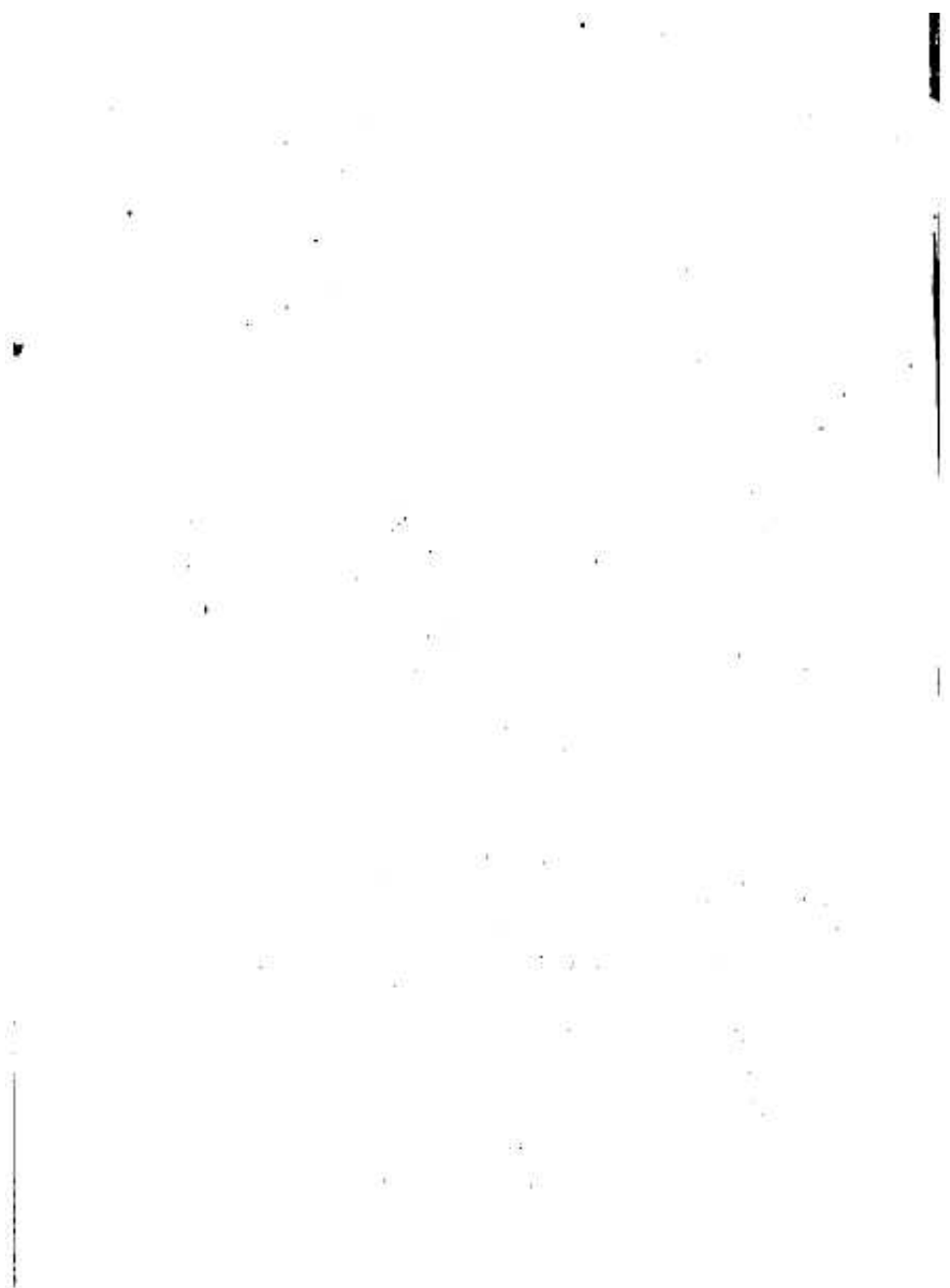
EDINBURGH:
PRINTED BY BALLANTYNE AND COMPANY,
PAUL'S WALK.



NOTE.

THE destination of the profits arising from the sale of this little book are sufficiently significant to excuse the absence of an extended preface.

Portions of the tale appeared some time back in the pages of a well-known monthly periodical. In the hope that it may prove acceptable to the general public, it has been re-arranged, and is presented as an Author's contribution to the Lancashire Fund.



THE FOGGY NIGHT AT OFFORD.

CHAPTER I.

VERNER RABY.

It was the height of the London season—not now, but years ago—and a drawing-room, all sun, and light, and heat, looked out on a fashionable square in an exceedingly fashionable locality. At the extreme end of the room, away from the sun's rays, a yet young and very lovely lady reclined in an easy-chair; a feverish flush was on her cheeks, but otherwise her features were white as the pillow on which they rested. The house was the residence of Mr Verner Raby: this lady was his wife, and she was dying.

It was said of spinal complaint—of general debility—of a sort of decline: friends and doctors equally differed as to the exact malady. None hinted

that care, disappointment, crushed feelings, could have anything to do with her sinking: yet it is probable they had more, by far, than all the other ailments ascribed to her. Somewhat of remorse may have been added also.

Once, when very young, she was engaged to be married to a Mr Mair. She thought she liked him; she did like him; but one, higher in the world's favour, came across her path. His dashing appearance dazzled her eyes, as the baron dazzled fair Imogene's, in the old song; his position dazzled her judgment; and Maria Raby would have discarded Arthur Mair for him. Her parents said No; common justice said No; but Mr Verner exerted his powers of persuasion, and Maria yielded to her own will, and clandestinely left her father's house to become his wife. The private union was followed by a grand marriage, solemnised openly; and the bridegroom took his wife's name with her fortune, and became Verner Raby. Very, very soon was her illusion dissolved, and she found she had thrown away the substance to grasp the shadow. Mr Raby speedily tired of his new toy, and she lapsed into a neglected, almost a deserted wife. He lived a wild life; dissipating his fortune, dissipating hers, tinging his character, wast-

ing his talents. Meanwhile, the despised Arthur Mair, through the unexpected death of a man younger than himself, had risen to affluence and rank, and was winning his way to the approbation of good men. He had probably forgotten Maria Raby. It is certain that his marriage had speedily followed upon her own: perhaps he wished to prove to the world that her inexcusable conduct had not told irremediably upon him. Thus, Mrs Raby had lived for many years, bearing her wrongs in silence, and battling with her remorseful feelings. But nature gave way at last, and her health left her: a few months of resigned suffering, and the grave drew very near. She was conscious of it; more conscious this afternoon than she had yet been. Her first child, a girl, had died at its birth; several years afterwards a boy was born. She was lying now, sadly thinking of him, when her husband entered. He had come home to dress for an early dinner engagement.

"How hot you look!" was his remark, his eye carelessly noting the unusual hectic on her cheeks.

"Things are troubling me," she answered, her breathing more laboured than common. "Alfred, I want to talk to you."

"Make haste, then," he replied, impatiently pull-