

CHAPTER XXXIV. - THE GREAT RAIN.

Gavin passed on through Windyghoul, thinking in his frenzy that he still heard the trap. In a rain that came down like iron rods every other sound was beaten dead. He slipped, and before he could regain his feet the dog bit him. To protect himself from dikes and trees and other horrors of the darkness he held his arm before him, but soon it was driven to his side. Wet whips cut his brow so that he had to protect it with his hands, until it had to bear the lash again, for they would not. Now he had forced up his knees, and would have succumbed but for a dread of being pinned to the earth. This fight between the man and the rain went on all night, and long before it ended the man was past the power of thinking.

In the ringing of the ten o'clock bell Gavin had lived the seventh part of a man's natural life. Only action was required of him. That accomplished, his mind had begun to work again, when suddenly the loss of Babbie stopped it, as we may put out a fire with a great coal. The last thing he had reflected about was a dogcart in motion, and, consequently, this idea clung to him. His church, his mother, were lost knowledge of, but still he seemed to hear the trap in front.

The rain increased in violence, appalling even those who heard it from under cover. However rain may storm, though it be an army of archers battering roofs and windows, it is only terrifying when the noise swells every instant. In those hours of darkness it again and again grew in force and doubled its fury, and was louder, louder, and louder, until its next attack was to be more than men and women could listen to. They held each other's hands and stood waiting. Then abruptly it abated, and people could speak. I believe a rain that became heavier every second for ten minutes would drive many listeners mad. Gavin was in it on a night that tried us repeatedly for quite half that time.

By and by even the vision of Babbie in the dogcart was blotted out. If nothing had taken its place, he would not have gone on probably; and had he turned back objectless, his strength would have succumbed to the rain. Now he saw Babbie and Rintoul being married by a minister who was himself, and there was a fair company looking on, and always when he was on the point of shouting to himself, whom he could see clearly, that this woman was already married, the rain obscured his words and the light went out. Presently the ceremony began again, always to stop at the same point. He saw it in the lightning-flash that had startled the hill. It gave him

courage to fight his way onward, because he thought he must be heard if he could draw nearer to the company.

A regiment of cavalry began to trouble him. He heard it advancing from the Spittal, but was not dismayed, for it was, as yet, far distant. The horsemen came thundering on, filling the whole glen of Quaharity. Now he knew that they had been sent out to ride him down. He paused in dread, until they had swept past him. They came back to look for him, riding more furiously than ever, and always missed him, yet his fears of the next time were not lessened. They were only the rain.

All through the night the dog followed him. He would forget it for a time, and then it would be so close that he could see it dimly. He never heard it bark, but it snapped at him, and a grin had become the expression of its face. He stoned it, he even flung himself at it, he addressed it in caressing tones, and always with the result that it disappeared, to come back presently.

He found himself walking in a lake, and now even the instinct of self-preservation must have been flickering, for he waded on, rejoicing merely in getting rid of the dog. Something in the water rose and struck him. Instead of stupefying him, the blow brought him to his senses, and he struggled for his life. The ground slipped beneath his feet many times, but at last he was out of the water. That he was out in a flood he did not realize; yet he now acted like one in full possession of his faculties. When his feet sank in water, he drew back; and many times he sought shelter behind banks and rocks, first testing their firmness with his hands. Once a torrent of stones, earth, and heather carried him down a hillside until he struck against a tree. He twined his arms round it, and had just done so when it fell with him. After that, when he touched trees growing in water, he fled from them, thus probably saving himself from death.

What he heard now might have been the roll and crack of the thunder. It sounded in his ear like nothing else. But it was really something that swept down the hill in roaring spouts of water, and it passed on both sides of him so that at one moment, had he paused, it would have crashed into him, and at another he was only saved by stopping. He felt that the struggle in the dark was to go on till the crack of doom.

Then he cast himself upon the ground. It moved beneath him like some great animal, and he rose and stole away from it. Several times did this happen. The stones against which his feet struck seemed to acquire life from his touch. So strong had he become, or so weak all other things, that

whatever clump he laid hands on by which to pull himself out of the water was at once rooted up.

The daylight would not come. He longed passionately for it. He tried to remember what it was like, and could not; he had been blind so long. It was away in front somewhere, and he was struggling to overtake it. He expected to see it from a dark place, when he would rush forward to bathe his arms in it, and then the elements that were searching the world for him would see him and he would perish. But death did not seem too great a penalty to pay for light.

And at last day did come back, gray and drear. He saw suddenly once more. I think he must have been wandering the glen with his eyes shut, as one does shut them involuntarily against the hidden dangers of black night. How different was daylight from what he had expected! He looked, and then shut his dazed eyes again, for the darkness was less horrible than the day. Had he indeed seen, or only dreamed that he saw? Once more he looked to see what the world was like; and the sight that met his eyes was so mournful that he who had fought through the long night now sank hopeless and helpless among the heather. The dog was not far away, and it, too, lost heart. Gavin held out his hand, and Snap crept timidly toward him. He unloosened his coat, and the dog nestled against him, cowed and shivering, hiding its head from the day, Thus they lay, and the rain beat upon them.