Chapter XXXII - The Schoolboy and the Wood-Nymph

Briarmains being nearer than the Hollow, Mr Yorke had conveyed his young comrade there. He had seen him laid in the best bed of the house, as carefully as if he had been one of his own sons. The sight of his blood, welling from the treacherously-inflicted wound, made him indeed the son of the Yorkshire gentleman's heart. The spectacle of the sudden event: of the tall, straight shape prostrated in its pride across the road: of the fine southern head laid low in the dust; of that youth in prime flung at once before him pallid, lifeless, helpless - this was the very combination of circumstances to win for the victim Mr Yorke's liveliest interest.

No other hand was there to raise - to aid; no other voice to question kindly; no other brain to concert measures: he had to do it all himself. This utter dependence of the speechless, bleeding youth (as a youth he regarded him) on his benevolence, secured that benevolence most effectually. Well did Mr Yorke like to have power, and to use it: he had now between his hands power over a fellow- creature's life: it suited him.

No less perfectly did it suit his saturnine better-half: the incident was quite in her way, and to her taste. Some women would have been terror-struck to see a gory man brought in over their threshold, and laid down in their hall in the 'howe of the night.' There, you would suppose, was subject-matter for hysterics. No: Mrs Yorke went into hysterics when Jessy would not leave the garden to come to her knitting, or when Martin proposed starting for Australia, with a view to realise freedom, and escape the tyranny of Matthew; but an attempted murder near her door - a half-murdered man in her best bed - set her straight, cheered her spirits, gave her cap the dash of a turban.

Mrs Yorke was just the woman who, while rendering miserable the drudging life of a simple maid-servant, would nurse like a heroine an hospital full of plague patients. She almost loved Moore: her tough heart almost yearned towards him, when she found him committed to her charge, - left in her arms, as dependent on her as her youngest-born in the cradle. Had she seen a domestic, or one of her daughters, give him a draught of water, or smooth his pillow, she would have boxed the intruder's ears. She chased Jessy and Rose from the upper realm of the house: she forbade the housemaids to set their foot in it.

Now, if the accident had happened at the Rectory gates, and old Helstone had taken in the martyr, neither Yorke nor his wife would have pitied him: they would have adjudged him right served for his tyranny and meddling: as it was, he became, for the present, the apple of their eye.

Strange! Louis Moore was permitted to come, - to sit down on the edge of the bed, and lean over the pillow, - to hold his brother's hand, and press his pale forehead with his fraternal lips; and Mrs Yorke bore it well. She suffered him to stay half the day there; she once suffered him to sit up all night in the chamber; she rose herself at five o'clock of a wet November morning, and with her own hands lit the kitchen fire, and made the brothers a breakfast, and served it to them herself. Majestically arrayed in a boundless flannel wrapper, a shawl, and her nightcap, she sat and watched them eat, as complacently as a hen beholds her chickens feed. Yet she gave the cook warning that day for venturing to make and carry up to Mr Moore a basin of sago-gruel; and the housemaid lost her favour because, when Mr Louis was departing, she brought him his surtout aired from the kitchen, and, like a 'forward piece,' as she was, helped him on with it, and accepted, in return, a smile, a 'thank you, my girl,' and a shilling. Two ladies called one day, pale and anxious, and begged earnestly, humbly, to be allowed to see Mr Moore one instant: Mrs Yorke hardened her heart, and sent them packing, - not without opprobrium.

But how was it when Hortense Moore came? - Not so bad as might have been expected: the whole family of the Moores really seemed to suit Mrs Yorke so as no other family had ever suited her. Hortense and she possessed an exhaustless mutual theme of conversation in the corrupt propensities of servants. Their views of this class were similar: they watched them with the same suspicion, and judged them with the same severity. Hortense, too, from the very first showed no manner of jealousy of Mrs Yorke's attentions to Robert; she let her keep the post of nurse with little interference: and, for herself, found ceaseless occupation in fidgeting about the house, holding the kitchen under surveillance, reporting what passed there, and, in short, making herself generally useful. Visitors, they both of them agreed in excluding sedulously from the sick-room. They held the young millowner captive, and hardly let the air breathe or the sun shine on him.

Mr MacTurk, the surgeon to whom Moore's case had been committed, pronounced his wound of a dangerous, but, he trusted, not of a hopeless character. At first he wished to place with him a nurse of his own selection; but this neither Mrs Yorke nor Hortense would hear of: they promised faithful observance of directions. He was left, therefore, for the present, in their hands.

Doubtless, they executed the trust to the best of their ability; but something got wrong: the bandages were displaced, or tampered with; great loss of blood followed. MacTurk, being summoned, came with steed afoam. He was one of those surgeons whom it is dangerous to vex: abrupt in his best moods; in his worst, savage. On seeing Moore's state, he relieved his feelings by a little flowery language, with which it

is not necessary to strew the present page. A bouquet or two of the choicest blossoms fell on the unperturbed head of one Mr Graves, a stony young assistant he usually carried about with him; with a second nosegay he gifted another young gentleman in his train - an interesting fac- simile of himself, being, indeed, his own son; but the full corbeille of blushing bloom fell to the lot of meddling womankind, en masse.

For the best part of one winter night, himself and satellites were busied about Moore. There, at his bedside, shut up alone with him in his chamber, they wrought and wrangled over his exhausted frame. They three were on one side of the bed, and Death on the other. The conflict was sharp: it lasted till day broke, when the balance between the belligerents seemed so equal that both parties might have claimed the victory.

At dawn, Graves and young MacTurk were left in charge of the patient, while the senior went himself in search of additional strength, and secured it in the person of Mrs Horsfall, the best nurse on his staff. To this woman he gave Moore in charge, with the sternest injunctions respecting the responsibility laid on her shoulders. She took this responsibility stolidly, as she did also the easy chair at the bed-head. That moment she began her reign.

Mrs Horsfall had one virtue, - orders received from MacTurk she obeyed to the letter: the Ten Commandments were less binding in her eyes than her surgeon's dictum. In other respects, she was no woman, but a dragon. Hortense Moore fell effaced before her; Mrs Yorke withdrew - crushed; yet both these women were personages of some dignity in their own estimation, and of some bulk in the estimation of others. Perfectly cowed by the breadth, the height, the bone, and the brawn of Mrs Horsfall, they retreated to the back-parlour. She, for her part, sat upstairs when she liked, and downstairs when she preferred it: she took her dram three times a day, and her pipe of tobacco four times.

As to Moore, no one now ventured to inquire about him: Mrs Horsfall had him at dry-nurse: it was she who was to do for him; and the general conjecture now ran that she did for him accordingly.

Morning and evening MacTurk came to see him: his case, thus complicated by a new mischance, was become one of interest in the surgeon's eyes: he regarded him as a damaged piece of clock-work, which it would be creditable to his skill to set a-going again. Graves and young MacTurk - Moore's sole other visitors - contemplated him in the light in which they were wont to contemplate the occupant for the time being of the dissecting-room at Stilbro' Infirmary.

Robert Moore had a pleasant time of it: in pain; in danger; too weak to move; almost too weak to speak; a sort of giantess his keeper; the three surgeons his sole society. Thus he lay through the diminishing days and lengthening nights of the whole drear month of November.

In the commencement of his captivity, Moore used feebly to resist Mrs Horsfall: he hated the sight of her rough bulk, and dreaded the contact of her hard hands; but she taught him docility in a trice. She made no account whatever of his six feet - his manly thews and sinews: she turned him in his bed as another woman would have turned a babe in its cradle. When he was good, she addressed him as 'my dear,' and 'honey'; and when he was bad, she sometimes shook him. Did he attempt to speak when MacTurk was there, she lifted her hand and bade him 'hush!' like a nurse checking a forward child. If she had not smoked - if she had not taken gin, it would have been better, he thought; but she did both. Once - in her absence - he intimated to MacTurk, that 'that woman was a dram-drinker.'

'Pooh! my dear sir; they are all so,' was the reply he got for his pains. 'But Horsfall has this virtue,' added the surgeon, - 'drunk or sober, she always remembers to obey me.'

. . . . . .

At length the latter autumn passed; its fogs, its rains withdrew from England their mourning and their tears; its winds swept on to sigh over lands far away. Behind November came deep winter; clearness, stillness, frost accompanying.

A calm day had settled into a crystalline evening: the world wore a North Pole colouring: all its lights and tints looked like the 'reflets' of white, or violet, or pale green gems. The hills wore a lilac blue; the setting sun had purple in its red; the sky was ice, all silvered azure; when the stars rose, they were of white crystal - not gold; grey, or cerulean, or faint emerald hues - cool, pure, and transparent - tinged the mass of the landscape.

What is this by itself in a wood no longer green, no longer even russet; a wood, neutral tint - this dark blue moving object? Why, it is a schoolboy - a Briarfield grammar-schoolboy - who has left his companions, now trudging home by the high road, and is seeking a certain tree, with a certain mossy mound at its root - convenient as a seat. Why is he lingering here? - the air is cold, and the time wears late. He sits down: what is he thinking about? Does be feel the chaste charm Nature wears to-night? A pearl-white moon smiles through the green trees: does he care for her smile?

Impossible to say; for he is silent, and his countenance does not speak: as yet, it is no mirror to reflect sensation, but rather a mask to conceal it. This boy is a stripling of fifteen - slight, and tall of his years; in his face there is as little of amenity as of servility: his eye seems prepared to note any incipient attempt to control or overreach him, and the rest of his features indicate faculties alert for resistance. Wise ushers avoid unnecessary interference with that lad. To break him in by severity would be a useless attempt; to win him by flattery would Êbe an effort worse than useless. He is best let alone. Time will educate, and experience train him.

Professedly, Martin Yorke (it is a young Yorke, of course) tramples on the name of poetry: talk sentiment to him, and you would be answered by sarcasm. Here he is, wandering alone, waiting duteously on Nature, while she unfolds a page of stern, of silent, and of solemn poetry, beneath his attentive gaze.

Being seated, he takes from his satchel a book - not the Latin but a contraband volume of fairy tales; there will be light enough yet for an hour to serve his keen young vision: besides, the moon waits on him - her beam, dim and vague as yet, fills the glade where he sits.

He reads: he is led into a solitary mountain region; all round him is rude and desolate, shapeless, and almost colourless. He hears bells tinkle on the wind: forthriding from the formless folds of the mist, dawns on him the brightest vision - a green-robed lady, on a snow-white palfrey; he sees her dress, her gems, and her steed; she arrests him with some mysterious questions: he is spell-bound, and must follow her into Fairyland.

A second legend bears him to the sea-shore: there tumbles in a strong tide, boiling at the base of dizzy cliffs: it rains and blows. A reef of rocks, black and rough, stretches far into the sea; all along, and among, and above these crags, dash and flash, sweep and leap, swells, wreaths, drifts of snowy spray. Some lone wanderer is out on these rocks, treading, with cautious step, the wet, wild sea-weed; glancing down into hollows where the brine lies fathoms deep and emerald-clear, and seeing there wilder and stranger, and huger vegetation, than is found on land, with treasure of shells - some green, some purple, some pearly - clustered in the curls of the snaky plants. He hears a cry. Looking up, and forward, he sees, at the bleak point of the reef, a tall, pale thing - shaped like man, but made of spray - transparent, tremulous, awful: it stands not alone: they are all human figures that wanton in the rocks - a crowd of foam- women - a band of white, evanescent Nereides.

Hush: - shut the book: hide it in the satchel: - Martin hears a tread. He listens: No - yes: once more the dead leaves, lightly crushed, rustle

on the wood-path. Martin watches: the trees part, and a woman issues forth.

She is a lady dressed in dark silk, a veil covering her face. Martin never met a lady in this wood before - nor any female, save, now and then, a village- girl come to gather nuts. To-night, the apparition does not displease him. He observes, as she approaches, that she is neither old nor plain, but, on the contrary, very youthful; and, but that he now recognises her for one whom he has often wilfully pronounced ugly, he would deem that he discovered traits of beauty behind the thin gauze of that veil.

She passes him, and says nothing. He knew she would: all woman are proud monkeys - and he knows no more conceited doll than that Caroline Helstone. The thought is hardly hatched in his mind, when the lady retraces those two steps she had got beyond him, and raising her veil, reposes her glance on his face, while she softly asks - 'Are you one of Mr Yorke's sons?'

No human evidence would ever have been able to persuade Martin Yorke that he blushed when thus addressed; yet blush he did, to the ears.

'I am,' he said bluntly; and encouraged himself to wonder, superciliously, what would come next.

'You are Martin, I think?' was the observation that followed.

It could not have been more felicitous: it was a simple sentence-very artlessly, a little timidly, pronounced; but it chimed in harmony to the youth's nature: it stilled him like a note of music.

Martin had a keen sense of his personality: he felt it right and sensible that the girl should discriminate him from his brothers. Like his father, he hated ceremony: it was acceptable to hear a lady address him as 'Martin,' and not Mr Martin or Master Martin, which form would have lost her good graces for ever. Worse, if possible, than ceremony, was the other extreme of slipshod familiarity: the slight tone of bashfulness-the scarcely perceptible hesitation- was considered perfectly in place.

'I am Martin,' he said.

'Are your father and mother well?' - (it was lucky she did not say papa and mamma: that would have undone all) - 'and Rose and Jessy?'

'I suppose so.'

'My cousin Hortense is still at Briarmains?'

'Oh, yes!'

Martin gave a comic half-smile and demi-groan: the half-smile was responded to by the lady, who could guess in what sort of odour Hortense was likely to be held by the young Yorkes.

'Does your mother like her?'

'They suit so well about the servants, they can't help liking each other!'

'It is cold to-night.'

'Why are you out so late?'

'I lost my way in this wood.'

Now, indeed, Martin allowed himself a refreshing laugh of scorn.

'Lost your way in the mighty forest of Briarmains! You deserve never more to find it.'

'I never was here before, and I believe I am trespassing now: you might inform against me if you chose, Martin, and have me fined: it is your father's wood.'

'I should think I knew that; but since you are so simple as to lose your way, I will guide you out.'

'You need not: I have got into the track now: I shall be right. Martin' (a little quickly), 'how is Mr Moore?'

Martin had heard certain rumours: it struck him that it might be amusing to make an experiment.

'Going to die. Nothing can save him. All hope flung overboard!'

She put her veil aside. She looked into his eyes, and said - 'To die!'

'To die. All along of the women, my mother and the rest: they did something about his bandages that finished everything: he would have got better but for them. I am sure they should be arrested, cribbed, tried, and brought in for Botany Bay, at the very least.'

The questioner, perhaps, did not hear this judgment: she stood motionless. In two minutes, without another word, she moved

forwards: no good-night, no further inquiry. This was not amusing, nor what Martin had calculated on: he expected something dramatic and demonstrative: it was hardly worth while to frighten the girl, if she would not entertain him in return. He called - 'Miss Helstone!'

She did not hear or turn. He hastened after and overtook her.

'Come. Are you uneasy about what I said?'

'You know nothing about death, Martin: you are too young for me to talk to concerning such a thing.'

'Did you believe me? It's all flummery! Moore eats like three men: they are always making sago or tapioca, or something good for him: I never go into the kitchen, but there is a saucepan on the fire, cooking him some dainty. I think I will play the old soldier, and be fed on the fat of the land like him.'

'Martin! Martin!' Here her voice trembled, and she stopped.

'It is exceedingly wrong of you, Martin: you have almost killed me.'

Again she stopped; she leaned against a tree, trembling, shuddering, and as pale as death.

Martin contemplated her with inexpressible curiosity. In one sense it was, as he would have expressed it, 'nuts' to him to see this: it told him so much, and he was beginning to have a great relish for discovering secrets; in another sense, it reminded him of what he had once felt when he had heard a blackbird lamenting for her nestlings, which Matthew had crushed with a stone, and that was not a pleasant feeling. Unable to find anything very appropriate to say, in order to comfort her, he began to cast about in his mind what he could do: he smiled: the lad's smile gave wondrous transparency to his physiognomy.

'Eureka!' he cried. 'I'll set all straight by-and-by. You are better now, Miss Caroline; walk forward,' he urged.

Not reflecting that it would be more difficult for Miss Helstone than for himself to climb a wall or penetrate a hedge, he piloted her by a short cut which led to no gate. The consequence was he had to help her over some formidable obstacles, and, while he railed at her for helplessness, he perfectly liked to feel himself of use.

'Martin, before we separate, assure me seriously, and on your word of honour, that Mr Moore is better.'

'How very much you think of that Moore!'

'No - but - many of his friends may ask me, and I wish to be able to give an authentic answer.'

'You may tell them he is well enough, only idle: you may tell them that he takes mutton-chops for dinner, and the best of arrowroot for supper. I intercepted a basin myself one night on its way upstairs, and ate half of it.'

'And who waits on him, Martin? Who nurses him?'

'Nurses him? - the great baby! Why, a woman as round and big as our largest water-butt - a rough, hard-favoured old girl. I make no doubt she leads him a rich life: nobody else is let near him: he is chiefly in the dark. It is my belief she knocks him about terribly in that chamber. I listen at the wall sometimes when I am in bed, and I think I hear her thumping him. You should see her fist: she could hold half-a-dozen hands like yours in her one palm. After all, notwithstanding the chops and jellies he gets, I would not be in his shoes. In fact, it is my private opinion that she eats most of what goes up on the tray to Mr Moore. I wish she may not be starving him.'

Profound silence and meditation on Caroline's part, and a sly watchfulness on Martin's.

'You never see him, I suppose, Martin?'

'I? No: I don't care to see him, for my own part.'

Silence again.

'Did not you come to our house once with Mrs Pryor, about five weeks since, to ask after him?' again inquired Martin.

'Yes.'

'I daresay you wished to be shown upstairs?'

'We did wish it: we entreated it; but your mother declined.'

'Aye! she declined. I heard it all: she treated you as it is her pleasure to treat visitors now and then: she behaved to you rudely and harshly.'

'She was not kind; for, you know, Martin, we are relations, and it is natural we should take an interest in Mr Moore. But here we must part: we are at your father's gate.'

'Very well - what of that? I shall walk home with you?'

'They will miss you, and wonder where you are.'

'Let them. . . . I can take care of myself, I suppose.'

Martin knew that he had already incurred the penalty of a lecture, and dry bread for his tea. No matter, the evening had furnished him with an adventure: it was better than muffins and toast.

He walked home with Caroline. On the way he promised to see Mr Moore, in spite of the dragon who guarded his chamber, and appointed an hour on the next day, when Caroline was to come to Briarmains Wood and get tidings of him: he would meet her at a certain tree. The scheme led to nothing: still he liked it.

Having reached home, the dry bread and the lecture were duly administered to him, and he was dismissed to bed at an early hour. He accepted his punishment with the toughest stoicism.

Ere ascending to his chamber he paid a secret visit to the dining-room, a still, cold, stately apartment, seldom used; for the family customarily dined in the back-parlour. He stood before the mantelpiece, and lifted his candle to two pictures hung above - female heads: one, a type of serene beauty - happy and innocent; the other, more lovely - but forlorn and desperate.

'She looked like that,' he said, gazing on the latter sketch, 'when she sobbed, turned white, and leaned against the tree.'

'I suppose,' he pursued, when he was in his room, and seated on the edge of his pallet-bed - 'I suppose she is what they call, 'in love'; yes, in love with that long thing in the next chamber. Whist! is that Horsfall clattering him? I wonder he does not yell out. It really sounds as if she had fallen on him tooth and nail; but I suppose she is making the bed. I saw her at it once - she hit into the mattresses as if she was boxing. It is queer, Zillah (they call her Zillah) - Zillah Horsfall is a woman, and Caroline Helstone is a woman: they are two individuals of the same species - not much alike though. Is she a pretty girl, that Caroline? I suspect she is - very nice to look at - something so clear in her face - so soft in her eyes. I approve of her looking at me; it does me good. She has long eyelashes: their shadow seems to rest where she gazes, and to instil peace and thought. If she behaves well, and continues to suit me, as she has suited me to-day, I may do her a good turn. I rather relish the notion of circumventing my mother and that ogress, old Horsfall. Not that I like humouring Moore; but whatever I do I'll be paid for, and in coin of my own choosing: I

know what reward I will claim - one displeasing to Moore, and agreeable to myself.'

He turned into bed.