The Guilty River

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CHAPTER I - ON THE WAY TO THE RIVER

FOR reasons of my own, I excused myself from accompanying my stepmother to a dinner-party given in our neighborhood. In my present humor, I preferred being alone--and, as a means of getting through my idle time, I was quite content to be occupied in catching insects.

Provided with a brush and a mixture of rum and treacle, I went into Fordwitch Wood to set the snare, familiar to hunters of moths, which we call sugaring the trees.

The summer evening was hot and still; the time was between dusk and dark. After ten years of absence in foreign parts, I perceived changes in the outskirts of the wood, which warned me not to enter it too confidently when I might find a difficulty in seeing my way. Remaining among the outermost trees, I painted the trunks with my treacherous mixture--which allured the insects of the night, and stupefied them when they settled on its rank surface. The snare being set, I waited to see the intoxication of the moths.

A time passed, dull and dreary. The mysterious assemblage of trees was blacker than the blackening sky. Of millions of leaves over my head, none pleased my ear, in the airless calm, with their rustling summer song.

The first flying creatures, dimly visible by moments under the gloomy sky, were enemies whom I well knew by experience. Many a fine insect specimen have I lost, when the bats were near me in search of their evening meal.

What had happened before, in other woods, happened now. The first moth that I had snared was a large one, and a specimen well worth securing. As I stretched out my hand to take it, the apparition of a flying shadow passed, swift and noiseless, between me and the tree. In less than an instant the insect was snatched away, when my fingers were within an inch of it. The bat had begun his supper, and the man and the mixture had provided it for him.

Out of five moths caught, I became the victim of clever theft in the case of three. The other two, of no great value as specimens, I was just quick enough to secure. Under other circumstances, my patience as a collector would still have been a match for the dexterity of the bats. But on that evening--a memorable evening when I look back at it now--my spirits were depressed, and I was easily discouraged. My favorite studies of the insect-

world seemed to have lost their value in my estimation. In the silence and the darkness I lay down under a tree, and let my mind dwell on myself and on my new life to come.

I am Gerard Roylake, son and only child of the late Gerard Roylake of Trimley Deen.

At twenty-two years of age, my father's death had placed me in possession of his large landed property. On my arrival from Germany, only a few hours since, the servants innocently vexed me. When I drove up to the door, I heard them say to each other: "Here is the young Squire." My father used to be called "the old Squire." I shrank from being reminded of him--not as other sons in my position might have said, because it renewed my sorrow for his death. There was no sorrow in me to be renewed. It is a shocking confession to make: my heart remained unmoved when I thought of the father whom I had lost.

Our mothers have the most sacred of all claims on our gratitude and our love. They have nourished us with their blood; they have risked their lives in bringing us into the world; they have preserved and guided our helpless infancy with divine patience and love. What claim equally strong and equally tender does the other parent establish on his offspring? What motive does the instinct of his young children find for preferring their father before any other person who may be a familiar object in their daily lives? They love him--naturally and rightly love him--because he lives in their remembrance (if he is a good man) as the first, the best, the dearest of their friends.

My father was a bad man. He was my mother's worst enemy; and he was never my friend.

The little that I know of the world tells me that it is not the common lot in life of women to marry the object of their first love. A sense of duty had compelled my mother to part with the man who had won her heart, in the first days of her maidenhood; and my father had discovered it, after his marriage. His insane jealousy foully wronged the truest wife, the most long-suffering woman that ever lived. I have no patience to write of it. For ten miserable years she suffered her martyrdom; she lived through it, dear angel, sweet suffering soul, for my sake. At her death, my father was able to gratify his hatred of the son whom he had never believed to be his own child. Under pretence of preferring the foreign system of teaching, he sent me to a school in France. My education having been so far completed, I was next transferred to a German University. Never again did I see the place of my birth, never did I get a letter from home, until the family lawyer wrote from

Trimley Deen, requesting me to assume possession of my house and lands, under the entail.

I should not even have known that my father had taken a second wife but for some friend (or enemy)--I never discovered the person--who sent me a newspaper containing an announcement of the marriage.

When we saw each other for the first time, my stepmother and I met necessarily as strangers. We were elaborately polite, and we each made a meritorious effort to appear at our ease. On her side, she found herself confronted by a young man, the new master of the house, who looked more like a foreigner than an Englishman--who, when he was congratulated (in view of the approaching season) on the admirable preservation of his partridges and pheasants, betrayed an utter want of interest in the subject; and who showed no sense of shame in acknowledging that his principal amusements were derived from reading books, and collecting insects. How I must have disappointed Mrs. Roylake! and how considerately she hid from me the effect that I had produced!

Turning next to my own impressions, I discovered in my newly-found relative, a little light-eyed, light-haired, elegant woman; trim, and bright, and smiling; dressed to perfection, clever to her fingers' ends, skilled in making herself agreeable--and yet, in spite of these undeniable fascinations, perfectly incomprehensible to me. After my experience of foreign society, I was incapable of understanding the extraordinary importance which my stepmother seemed to attach to rank and riches, entirely for their own sakes. When she described my unknown neighbors, from one end of the county to the other, she took it for granted that I must be interested in them on account of their titles and their fortunes. She held me up to my own face, as a kind of idol to myself, without producing any better reason than might be found in my inheritance of an income of sixteen thousand pounds. And when I expressed (in excusing myself for not accompanying her, uninvited, to the dinner-party) a perfectly rational doubt whether I might prove to be a welcome guest, Mrs. Roylake held up her delicate little hands in unutterable astonishment. "My dear Gerard, in your position!" She appeared to think that this settled the question. I submitted in silence; the truth is, I was beginning already to despair of my prospects. Kind as my stepmother was, and agreeable as she was, what chance could I see of establishing any true sympathy between us? And, if my neighbors resembled her in their ways of thinking, what hope could I feel of finding new friends in England to replace the friends in Germany whom I had lost? A stranger among my own country people, with the every-day habits and every-day pleasures of my youthful life left behind me--without plans or hopes to interest me in looking at the

future--it is surely not wonderful that my spirits had sunk to their lowest ebb, and that I even failed to appreciate with sufficient gratitude the fortunate accident of my birth.

Perhaps the journey to England had fatigued me, or perhaps the controlling influences of the dark and silent night proved irresistible. This only is certain: my solitary meditations under the tree ended in sleep.

I was awakened by a light falling on my face.

The moon had risen. In the outward part of the wood, beyond which I had not advanced, the pure and welcome light penetrated easily through the scattered trees. I got up and looked about me. A path into the wood now showed itself, broader and better kept than any path that I could remember in the days of my boyhood. The moon showed it to me plainly, and my curiosity was aroused.

Following the new track, I found that it led to a little glade which I at once recognized. The place was changed in one respect only. A neglected water-spring had been cleared of brambles and stones, and had been provided with a drinking cup, a rustic seat, and a Latin motto on a marble slab. The spring at once reminded me of a greater body of water--a river, at some little distance farther on, which ran between the trees on one side, and the desolate open country on the other. Ascending from the glade, I found myself in one of the narrow woodland paths, familiar to me in the by-gone time.

Unless my memory was at fault, this was the way which led to an old water-mill on the river-bank. The image of the great turning wheel, which half-frightened half-fascinated me when I was a child, now presented itself to my memory for the first time after an interval of many years. In my present frame of mind, the old scene appealed to me with the irresistible influence of an old friend. I said to myself: "Shall I walk on, and try if I can find the river and the mill again?" This perfectly trifling question to decide presented to me, nevertheless, fantastic difficulties so absurd that they might have been difficulties encountered in a dream. To my own astonishment, I hesitated--walked back again along the path by which I had advanced--reconsidered my decision, without knowing why--and turning in the opposite direction, set my face towards the river once more. I wonder how my life would have ended, if I had gone the other way?