

CHAPTER II - THE RIVER INTRODUCES US

I stood alone on the bank of the ugliest stream in England.

The moonlight, pouring its unclouded radiance over open space, failed to throw a beauty not their own on those sluggish waters. Broad and muddy, their stealthy current flowed onward to the sea, without a rock to diversify, without a bubble to break, the sullen surface. On the side from which I was looking at the river, the neglected trees grew so close together that they were undermining their own lives, and poisoning each other. On the opposite bank, a rank growth of gigantic bulrushes hid the ground beyond, except where it rose in hillocks, and showed its surface of desert sand spotted here and there by mean patches of health. A repellent river in itself, a repellent river in its surroundings, a repellent river even in its name. It was called The Loke. Neither popular tradition nor antiquarian research could explain what the name meant, or could tell when the name had been given. "We call it The Loke; they do say no fish can live in it; and it dirties the clean salt water when it runs into the sea." Such was the character of the river in the estimation of the people who knew it best. But I was pleased to see The Loke again. The ugly river, like the woodland glade, looked at me with the face of an old friend.

On my right hand side rose the venerable timbers of the water-mill.

The wheel was motionless, at that time of night; and the whole structure looked--as remembered objects will look, when we see them again after a long interval--smaller than I had supposed it to be. Otherwise, I could discover no change in the mill. But the wooden cottage attached to it had felt the devastating march of time. A portion of the decrepit building still stood revealed in its wretched old age; propped, partly by beams which reached from the thatched roof to the ground, and partly by the wall of a new cottage attached, presenting in yellow brick-work a hideous modern contrast to all that was left of its ancient neighbor.

Had the miller whom I remembered, died; and were these changes the work of his successor? I thought of asking the question, and tried the door: it was fastened. The windows were all dark excepting one, which I discovered in the upper storey, at the farther side of the new building. Here, there was a dim light burning. It was impossible to disturb a person, who, for all I knew to the contrary, might be going to bed. I turned back to The Loke, proposing to extend my walk, by a mile or a little more, to a village that I remembered on

the bank of the river.

I had not advanced far, when the stillness around me was disturbed by an intermittent sound of splashing in the water. Pausing to listen, I heard next the working of oars in their rowlocks. After another interval a boat appeared, turning a projection in the bank, and rowed by a woman pulling steadily against the stream.

As the boat approached me in the moonlight, this person corrected my first impression, and revealed herself as a young girl. So far as I could perceive she was a stranger to me. Who could the girl be, alone on the river at that time of night? Idly curious I followed the boat, instead of pursuing my way to the village, to see whether she would stop at the mill, or pass it.

She stopped at the mill, secured the boat, and stepped on shore.

Taking a key from her pocket, she was about to open the door of the cottage, when I advanced and spoke to her. As far from recognizing her as ever, I found myself nevertheless thinking of an odd outspoken child, living at the mill in past years, who had been one of my poor mother's favorites at our village school. I ran the risk of offending her, by bluntly expressing the thought which was then in my mind.

"Is it possible that you are Cristel Toller?" I said.

The question seemed to amuse her. "Why shouldn't I be Cristel Toller?" she asked.

"You were a little girl," I explained, "when I saw you last. You are so altered now--and so improved--that I should never have guessed you might be the daughter of Giles Toller of the mill, if I had not seen you opening the cottage door."

She acknowledged my compliment by a curtsy, which reminded me again of the village school. "Thank you, young man," she said smartly; "I wonder who you are?"

"Try if you can recollect me," I suggested.

"May I take a long look at you?"

"As long as you like."

She studied my face, with a mental effort to remember me, which gathered her pretty eyebrows together quaintly in a frown.

"There's something in his eyes," she remarked, not speaking to me but to herself, "which doesn't seem to be quite strange. But I don't know his voice, and I don't know his beard." She considered a little, and addressed herself directly to me once more. "Now I look at you again, you seem to be a gentleman. Are you one?"

"I hope so."

"Then you're not making game of me?"

"My dear, I am only trying if you can remember Gerard Roylake."

While in charge of the boat, the miller's daughter had been rowing with bared arms; beautiful dusky arms, at once delicate and strong. Thus far, she had forgotten to cover them up. The moment mentioned my name, she started back as if I had frightened her--pulled her sleeves down in a hurry--and hid the objects of my admiration as an act of homage to myself! Her verbal apologies followed.

"You used to be such a sweet-spoken pretty little boy," she said, "how should I know you again, with a big voice and all that hair on your face?" It seemed to strike her on a sudden that she had been too familiar. "Oh, Lord," I heard her say to herself, "half the county belongs to him!" She tried another apology, and hit this time on the conventional form. "I beg your pardon, sir. Welcome back to your own country, sir. I wish you good-night, sir."

She attempted to escape into the cottage; I followed her to the threshold of the door. "Surely it's not time to go to bed yet," I ventured to say.

She was still on her good behavior to her landlord. "Not if you object to it, sir," she answered.

This recognition of my authority was irresistible. Cristel had laid me under an obligation to her good influence for which I felt sincerely grateful--she had made me laugh, for the first time since my return to England.

"We needn't say good-night just yet," I suggested; "I want to hear a little more about you. Shall I come in?"

She stepped out of the doorway even more rapidly than she had stepped into it. I might have been mistaken, but I thought Cristel seemed to be actually alarmed by my proposal. We walked up and down the river-bank. On every occasion when we approached the cottage, I detected her in stealing a look at the ugly modern part of it. There could be no mistake this time; I saw doubt, I saw anxiety in her face. What was going on at the mill? I made some domestic inquiries, beginning with her father. Was the miller alive and well?

"Oh yes, sir. Father gets thinner as he gets older--that's all."

"Did he send you out by yourself, at this late hour, in the boat?"

"They were waiting for a sack of flour down there," she replied, pointing in the direction of the river-side village. "Father isn't as quick as he used to be. He's often late over his work now."

Was there no one to give Giles Toller the help that he must need at his age? "Do you and your father really live alone in this solitary place?" I said.

A change of expression appeared in her bright brown eyes which roused my curiosity. I also observed that she evaded a direct reply. "What makes you doubt, sir, if father and I live alone?" she asked.

I pointed to the new cottage. "That ugly building," I answered, "seems to give you more room than you want--unless there is somebody else living at the mill."

I had no intention of trying to force the reply from her which she had hitherto withheld; but she appeared to put that interpretation on what I had said. "If you will have it," she burst out, "there is somebody else living with us."

"A man who helps your father?"

"No. A man who pays my father's rent."

I was quite unprepared for such a reply as this: Cristel had surprised me. To begin with, her father was "well-connected," as we say in England. His younger brother had made a fortune in commerce, and had vainly offered him the means of retiring from the mill with a sufficient income. Then again, Giles Toller was known to have saved money. His domestic expenses made no heavy demand on his purse; his German wife (whose Christian name was

now borne by his daughter) had died long since; his sons were no burden on him; they had never lived at the mill in my remembrance. With all these reasons against his taking a stranger into his house, he had nevertheless, if my interpretation of Cristel's answer was the right one, let his spare rooms to a lodger. "Mr. Toller can't possibly be in want of money," I said.

"The more money father has, the more he wants. That's the reason," she added bitterly, "why he asked for plenty of room when the cottage was built, and why we have got a lodger."

"Is the lodger a gentleman?"

"I don't know. Is a man a gentleman, if he keeps a servant? Oh, don't trouble to think about it, sir! It isn't worth thinking about."

This was plain speaking at last. "You don't seem to like the lodger," I said.

"I hate him!"

"Why?"

She turned on me with a look of angry amazement--not undeserved, I must own, on my part--which showed her dark beauty in the perfection of its luster and its power. To my eyes she was at the moment irresistibly charming. I daresay I was blind to the defects in her face. My good German tutor used to lament that there was too much of my boyhood still left in me. Honestly admiring her, I let my favorable opinion express itself a little too plainly. "What a splendid creature you are!" I burst out. Cristel did her duty to herself and to me; she passed over my little explosion of nonsense without taking the smallest notice of it.

"Master Gerard," she began--and checked herself. "Please to excuse me, sir; you have set my head running on old times. What I want to say is: you were not so inquisitive when you were a young gentleman in short jackets. Please behave as you used to behave then, and don't say anything more about our lodger. I hate him because I hate him. There!"

Ignorant as I was of the natures of women, I understood her at last. Cristel's opinion of the lodger was evidently the exact opposite of the lodger's opinion of Cristel. When I add that this discovery did decidedly operate as a relief to my mind, the impression produced on me by the miller's daughter is stated without exaggeration and without reserve.

"Good-night," she repeated, "for the last time." I held out my hand. "Is it quite right, sir," she modestly objected, "for such as me to shake hands with such as you?"

She did it nevertheless; and dropping my hand, cast a farewell look at the mysterious object of her interest--the new cottage. Her variable humor changed on the instant. Apparently in a state of unendurable irritation, she stamped on the ground. "Just what I didn't want to happen!" she said to herself.