

## **CHAPTER XV - THE MILLER'S HOSPITALITY**

On the way to Toller's cottage, my fears for Cristel weighed heavily on my mind.

That the man who had tried to poison me was capable of committing any other outrage, provided he saw a prospect of escaping with impunity, no sane person could hesitate to conclude. But the cause of my alarm was not to be traced to this conviction. It was a doubt that made me tremble.

After what I had myself seen, and what Gloody had told me, could I hope to match my penetration, or the penetration of any person about me whom I could trust, against the fathomless cunning, the Satanic wickedness, of the villain who was still an inmate with Cristel, under her father's roof?

I have spoken of his fathomless cunning, and his Satanic wickedness. The manner in which the crime had been prepared and carried out would justify stronger expressions still. Such was the deliberate opinion of the lawyer whom I privately consulted, under circumstances still to be related.

"Let us arrive at a just appreciation of the dangerous scoundrel whom we have to deal with," this gentleman said. "His preliminary experiment with the dog; his resolution to make suspicion an impossibility, by drinking from the same tea which he had made ready for you; his skilled preparation of an antidote, the color of which might court appearances by imitating water--are there many poisoners clever enough to provide themselves beforehand with such a defence as this? How are you to set the circumstances in their true light, on your side? You may say that you threw out the calculations, on which he had relied for securing his own safety, by drinking his second dose of the antidote while he was out of the room; and you can appeal to the fainting-fits from which you and he suffered on the same evening, as a proof that the action of the poison was partially successful; in your case and in his, because you and he were insufficiently protected by half doses only of the antidote. A bench of Jesuits would understand these refinements. A bench of British magistrates would look at each other, and say: Where is the medical evidence? No, Mr. Roylake, we must wait. You can't even turn him out of the cottage before he has had the customary notice to quit. The one thing to take care of--in case some other suspicions of ours turn out to be well founded--is that our man shall not give us the slip. One of my clerks, and one of your gamekeepers shall keep watch on his lodgings, turn and turn about, till his time is up. Go where he may after that, he shall not

escape us."

I may now take up the chain of events again.

On reaching Toller's cottage, I was distressed (but hardly surprised) to hear that Cristel, exhausted after a wakeful night, still kept her bed, in the hope of getting some sleep. I was so anxious to know if she was at rest, that her father went upstairs to look at her.

I followed him--and saw Ponto watching on the mat outside her door. Did this indicate a wise distrust of the Cur? "A guardian I can trust, sir," the old man whispered, "while I'm at the mill."

He looked into Cristel's room, and permitted me to look over his shoulder. My poor darling was peacefully asleep. Judging by the miller's manner, which was as cool and composed as usual, I gathered that Cristel had wisely kept him in ignorance of what had happened on the previous evening.

The inquiry which I had next in my mind was forestalled by old Toller.

"Our deaf-devil, Mr. Gerard, has done a thing this morning which puzzles me," he began; "and I should like to hear what you think of it. For the first time since we have had him here, he has opened his door to a visitor. And--what a surprise for you!--it's the other devil with the hat and feather who got at my Cristy, and made her cry."

That this meeting would be only too likely to happen, in due course of time, I had never doubted. That it had happened, now, confirmed me in my resolution to keep guard over Cristel at the cottage, till the Cur left it.

I asked, of course, how those two enemies of mine had first seen each other.

"She was just going to knock at our door, Mr. Gerard, when she happened to look up. There he was, airing himself at his window as usual. Do you think she was too much staggered at the sight of him to speak? At any rate, he got the start of her. 'Wait till I come down,' says he--and there he was, almost as soon as he said it. They went into his place together; and for best part of an hour they were in each other's company. Every man has his failings; I don't deny that I'm a little inquisitive by nature. Between ourselves, I got under the open window and listened. At a great disadvantage, I needn't tell you; for she was obliged to write what she had to say. But he talked. I was too late for the cream of it; I only heard him wish her good-bye. 'If your ladyship telegraphs this morning,' says he, 'when will the man come to me?' Now

what do you say to that?"

"More than I have time to say now, Mr. Toller. Can you find me a messenger to take a note to Trimley Deen?"

"We have no messengers in this lonesome place, sir."

"Very well. Then I must take my own message. You will see me again, as soon as I can get back."

Mr. Toller's ready curiosity was roused in a moment.

"Perhaps, you wish to have a look at the repairs?" he suggested in his most insinuating manner.

"I wish to see what her ladyship's telegram brings forth," I said; "and mean to be here when 'the man' arrives."

My venerable tenant was delighted. "Turn him inside out, sir, and get at his secrets. I'll help you."

Returning to Trimley Deen, I ordered the pony-chaise to be got ready, and a small portmanteau to be packed--speaking in the hall. The sound of my voice brought Mrs. Roylake out of the morning-room. She was followed by Lady Rachel. If I could only have heard their private conference, I should have seen the dangerous side of the Cur's character under a new aspect.

"Gerard!" cried my stepmother, "what did I hear just now? You can't be going back to Germany!"

"Certainly not," I answered.

"Going to stay with some friends perhaps?" Lady Rachel suggested. "I wonder whether I know them?"

It was spitefully done--but, in respect of tone and manner, done to perfection.

The pony-chaise drew up at the door. This was another of the rare occasions in my life on which I acted discreetly. It was necessary for me to say something. I said, "Good morning."

Nothing had happened at the cottage, during the interval of my absence.

Clever as he was, old Toller had never suspected that I should return to him (with luggage!) in the character of a self-invited guest. His jaw dropped, and his wicked little eyes appealed to the sky. Merciful Providence! what have I done to deserve this? There, as I read him, was the thought in the miller's mind, expressed in my best English.

"Have you got a spare bed in the house?" I asked.

Mr. Toller forgot the respect due to the person who could stop the repairs at a moment's notice. He answered in the tone of a man who had been grossly insulted: "No!"

But for the anxieties that oppressed me, I should have only perceived the humorous side of old Toller's outbreak of temper. He had chosen his time badly, and he got a serious reply.

"Understand this," I said: "either you receive me civilly--or you make up your mind to find a flour-mill on some other property than mine."

This had its effect. The miller's servility more than equalled his insolence. With profuse apologies, he offered me his own bedroom. I preferred a large old-fashioned armchair which stood in a corner of the kitchen. Listening in a state of profound bewilderment--longing to put inquisitive questions, and afraid to do so--Toller silently appealed to my compassion. I had nothing to conceal; I mentioned my motive. Without intending it, I had wounded him in one of his most tender places; the place occupied by his good opinion of himself. He said with sulky submission:

"Much obliged, Mr. Gerard. My girl is safe under my protection. Leave it to me, sir--leave it to me."

I had just reminded old Toller of his age, and of the infirmities which age brings with it, when his daughter--pale and languid, with signs of recent tears in her eyes--entered the kitchen. When I approached her, she trembled and drew back; apparently designing to leave the room. Her father stopped her. "Mr. Gerard has something to tell you," he said. "I'm off to the mill." He took up his hat, and left us.

Submitting sadly, she let me take her in my arms, and try to cheer her. But when I alluded to what I owed to her admirable devotion and courage, she entreated me to be silent. "Don't bring it all back!" she cried, shuddering at the remembrances which I had awakened, "Father said you had something to tell me. What is it?"

I repeated (in language more gentle and more considerate) what I had already said to her father. She took my hand, and kissed it gratefully. "You have your mother's face, and your mother's heart," she said; "you are always good, you are never selfish. But it mustn't be. How can I let you suffer the discomfort of staying here? Indeed, I am in no danger; you are alarming yourself without a cause."

"How can you be sure of that?" I asked.

She looked reluctantly at the door of communication.

"Must I speak of him?"

"Only to tell me," I pleaded, "whether you have seen him since last night."

She had both seen him and heard from him, on reaching home. "He opened that door," she told me, "and threw on the floor one of the leaves out of his book. After doing that, he relieved me from the sight of him."

"Show me the leaf, Cristel."

"Father has got it. I thought he was asleep in the armchair. He snatched it out of my hand. It isn't worth reading."

She turned pale, nevertheless, when she replied in those terms. I could see that I was disturbing her, when I asked if she remembered what the Cur had written. But our position was far too serious to be trifled with. "I suppose he threatened you?" I said, trying to lead her on. "What did he say?"

"He said, if any attempt was made to remove me out of his reach, after what had happened that evening, my father would find him on the watch day and night, and would regret it to the end of his life. The wretch thinks me cruel enough to have told my father of the horrors we went through! You know that he has dismissed his poor old servant? Was I wrong in advising Gloody to go to you?"

"You were quite right. He is at my house--and I should like to keep him at Trimley Deen; but I am afraid he and the other servants might not get on well together?"

"Will you let him come here?"

She spoke earnestly; reminding me that I had thought it wrong to leave her father, at his age, without someone to help him.

"If an accident separated me from him," she went on, "he would be left alone in this wretched place."

"What accident are you thinking of?" I asked. "Is there something going on, Cristel, that I don't know of?"

Had I startled her? or had I offended her?

"Can we tell what may or may not happen to us, in the time to come?" she asked abruptly. "I don't like to think of my father being left without a creature to take care of him. Gloody is so good and so true; and they always get on well together. If you have nothing better in view for him--?"

"My dear, I have nothing half so good in view; and Gloody, I am sure, will think so too." I privately resolved to insure a favorable reception for the poor fellow, by making him the miller's partner. Bank notes in Toller's pocket! What a place reserved for Gloody in Toller's estimation!

But I confess that Cristel's allusion to a possible accident rather oppressed my mind, situated as we were at that time. What we talked of next has slipped from my memory. I only recollect that she made an excuse to go back to her room, and that nothing I could say or do availed to restore her customary cheerfulness.

As the twilight was beginning to fade, we heard the sound of a carriage. The new man had arrived in a fly from the station. Before bedtime, he made his appearance in the kitchen, to receive the domestic instructions of which a stranger stood in need. A quiet man and a civil man: even my prejudiced examination could discover nothing in him that looked suspicious. I saw a well-trained servant--and I saw nothing more.

Old Toller made a last attempt to persuade me that it was not worth a gentleman's while to accept his hospitality, and found me immovable. I was equally obstinate when Cristel asked leave to make up a bed for me in the counting-house at the mill.

With the purpose that I had in view, if I accepted her proposal I might as well have been at Trimley Deen.

Left alone, I placed the armchair and another chair for my feet, across the

door of communication. That done, I examined a little door behind the stairs (used I believe for domestic purposes) which opened on a narrow pathway, running along the river-side of the house. It was properly locked. I have only to add that nothing happened during the night.

The next day showed no alteration for the better, in Cristel. She made an excuse when I proposed to take her out with me for a walk. Her father's business kept him away from the cottage, and thus gave me many opportunities of speaking to her in private. I was so uneasy, or so reckless--I hardly know which--that I no longer left it to be merely inferred that I had resolved to propose marriage to her.

"My sweet girl, you are so wretched, and so unlike yourself, in this place, that I entreat you to leave it. Come with me to London, and let me make you safe and happy as my wife."

"Oh, Mr. Roylake!"

"Why do you call me, 'Mr Roylake'? Have I done anything to offend you? There seems to be some estrangement between us. Do you believe that I love you?"

"I wish I could doubt it!" she answered.

"Why?"

"You know why."

"Cristel! Have I made some dreadful mistake? The truth! I want the truth! Do you love me?"

A low cry of misery burst from her. Was she mastered by love, or by despair? She threw herself on my breast. I kissed her. She murmured, "Oh don't tempt me! Don't tempt me!" Again and again, I kissed her. "Ah," I broke out, in the ecstasy of my sense of relief, "I know that you love me, now!"

"Yes," she said, simply and sadly, "I do love you."

My selfish passion asked for more even than this.

"Prove it by being my wife," I answered.

She put me back from her, firmly and gently.

"I will prove it, Gerard, by not letting you disgrace yourself."

With those horrible words--put into her mouth, beyond all doubt by the woman who had interfered between us--she left me. The long hours of the day passed: I saw her no more.

People who are unable to imagine what I suffered, are not the people to whom I now address myself. After all the years that have passed--after age and contact with the world have hardened me--it is still a trial to my self-control to look back to that day. Events I can remember with composure. To events, therefore, let me return.

No communication of any sort reached us from the Cur. Towards evening, I saw him pacing up and down on the road before the cottage, and speaking to his new servant. The man (listening attentively) had the master's book of leaves in his hand, and wrote in it from time to time as replies were wanted from him. He was probably receiving instructions. The Cur's discretion was a bad sign. I should have felt more at ease, if he had tried to annoy Cristel, or to insult me.

Towards bedtime, old Toller's sense of hospitality exhibited marked improvement. He was honored and happy to have me under his poor roof--a roof, by the way, which was also in need of repairs--but he protested against my encountering the needless hardship of sleeping in a chair, when a bed could be set up for me in the counting-house. "Not what you're used to, Mr. Gerard. Empty barrels, and samples of flour, and account-books smelling strong of leather, instead of velvet curtains and painted ceilings; but better than a chair, sir--better than a chair!"

I was as obstinate as ever. With thanks, I insisted on the chair.

Feverish, anxious, oppressed in my breathing--with nerves unstrung, as a doctor would have put it--I disturbed the order of the household towards twelve o'clock by interfering with old Toller in the act of locking up the house-door.

"Let me get a breath of fresh air," I said to him, "or there will be no sleep for me to-night."

He opened the door with a resignation to circumstances, so exemplary that it claimed some return. I promised to be back in a quarter of an hour. Old Toller stifled a yawn. "I call that truly considerate," he said--and stifled



another yawn. Dear old man!

Stepping into the road, I first examined the Cur's part of the cottage. Not a sound was audible inside; not a creature was visible outside. The usual dim light was burning behind the window that looked out on the road. Nothing, absolutely nothing, that was suspicious could I either hear or see.

I walked on, by what we called the upper bank of the river; leading from the village of Kylam. The night was cloudy and close. Now the moonlight reached the earth at intervals; now again it was veiled in darkness. The trees, at this part of the wood, so encroached on the bank of the stream as considerably to narrow and darken the path. Seeing a possibility of walking into the river if I went on much farther, I turned back again in the more open direction of Kylam, and kept on briskly (as I reckon) for about five minutes more.

I had just stopped to look at my watch, when I saw something dark floating towards me, urged by the slow current of the river. As it came nearer, I thought I recognized the mill-boat.

It was one of the dark intervals when the moon was overcast. I was sufficiently interested to follow the boat, on the chance that a return of the moonlight might show me who could possibly be in it. After no very long interval, the yellow light for which I was waiting poured through the lifting clouds.

The mill-boat, beyond all doubt--and nobody in it! The empty inside of the boat was perfectly visible to me. Even if I had felt inclined to do so, it would have been useless to jump into the water and swim to the boat. There were no oars in it, and therefore no means of taking it back to the mill. The one thing I could do was to run to old Toller and tell him that his boat was adrift.

On my way to the cottage, I thought I heard a sound like the shutting of a door. I was probably mistaken. In expectation of my return, the door was secured by the latch only; and the miller, looking out of his bedroom window, said: "Don't forget to lock it, sir; the key's inside."

I followed my instructions, and ascended the stairs. Surprised to hear me in that part of the house, he came out on the landing in his nightgown.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Nothing very serious," I said. "The boat's adrift. I suppose it will run on shore somewhere."

"It will do that, Mr. Gerard; everybody along the river knows the boat." He held up his lean trembling hand. "Old fingers don't always tie fast knots."

He went back into his bed. It was opposite the window; and the window, being at the side of the old cottage, looked out on the great open space above the river. When the moonlight appeared, it shone straight into his eyes. I offered to pull down the blind.

"Thank you kindly, sir; please to let it be. I wake often in the night, and I like to see the heavens when I open my eyes."

Something touched me behind: it was the dog. Like his noble and beautiful race, Ponto knew his friends. He licked my hand, and then he walked out through the bedroom door. Instead of taking his usual place, on the mat before Cristel's room, he smelt for a moment under the door--whined softly--and walked up and down the landing.

"What's the matter with the dog?" I asked.

"Restless to-night," said old Toller. "Dogs are restless sometimes. Lie down!" he called through the doorway.

The dog obeyed, but only for a moment. He whined at the door again--and then, once more, he walked up and down the landing.

I went to the bedside. The old man was just going to sleep. I shook him by the shoulder.

"There's something wrong," I said. "Come out and look at Ponto."

He grumbled--but he came out. "Better get the whip," he said.

"Before you do that," I answered, "knock at your daughter's door."

"And wake her?" he asked in amazement.

I knocked at the door myself. There was no reply. I knocked again, with the same result.

"Open the door," I said, "or I will do it myself."

He obeyed me. The room was empty; and the bed had not been slept in.

Standing helpless on the threshold of the door, I looked into the empty room; hearing nothing but my heart thumping heavily, seeing nothing but the bed with the clothes on it undisturbed.

The sudden growling of the dog shook me back (if I may say so) into the possession of myself. He was looking through the balusters that guarded the landing. The head of a man appeared, slowly ascending the stairs. Acting mechanically, I held the dog back. Thinking mechanically, I waited for the man. The face of the new servant showed itself. The dog frightened him: he spoke in tones that trembled, standing still on the stairs.

"My master has sent me, sir--"

A voice below interrupted him. "Come back," I heard the Cur say; "I'll do it myself. Toller! where is Toller?"

The enraged dog, barking furiously, struggled to get away from me. I dragged him--the good honest creature who was incapable of concealments and treacheries!--into his master's room. In the moment before I closed the door again, I saw Toller down on his knees with his arms laid helplessly on the window-sill, staring up at the sky as if he had gone mad. There was no time for questions; I drove poor Ponto back into the room, and shut the door.

On the landing, I found myself face to face with the Cur.

"You!" he said.

I lifted my hand. The servant ran between us. "For God's sake, control yourself, sir! We mean no harm. It's only to tell Mr. Toller that his boat is missing."

"Mr. Toller knows it already," I said. "No honest man would touch your master if he could help it. I warn him to go; and I make him understand me by a sign." I pointed down the stairs, and turned my head to look at him.

He was no longer before me. His face, hideously distorted by rage and terror, showed itself at the door of Cristel's empty room. He rushed out on me; his voice rose to the detestable screech which I had heard once already.

"Where have you hidden her? Give her back to me--or you die." He drew a pistol out of the breast-pocket of his coat. I seized the weapon by the barrel, and snatched it away from him. As the charge exploded harmlessly between us, I struck him on the head with the butt-end of the pistol. He dropped on the landing.

The door of Toller's room opened behind me. He stood speechless; the report of the pistol had terrified him. In the instant when I looked at the old man, I saw, through the window of his room, a rocket soar into the sky, from behind the promontory between us and Kylam.

Some cry of surprise must, I suppose, have escaped me. Toller suddenly looked round towards the window, just as the last fiery particles of the rocket were floating slowly downwards against the black clouds.

I had barely time enough to see this, before a trembling hand was laid on my shoulder, from behind. The servant, white with terror, pointed to his master.

"Have you killed him?" the man said.

The same question must have been in the mind of the dog. He was quiet now. Doubtfully, reluctantly, he was smelling at the prostrate human creature. I knelt down, and put my hand on the wretch's heart. Ponto, finding us both on a level together, gave me the dog's kiss; I returned the caress with my free hand. The servant saw me, with my attention divided in this way between the animal and the man.

"Damn it, sir," he burst out indignantly, "isn't a Christian of more importance than a dog?"

A Christian!--but I was in no humor to waste words. "Are you strong enough to carry him to his own side of the house?" I asked.

"I won't touch him, if he's dead!"

"He is not dead. Take him away!"

All this time my mind was pre-occupied by the extraordinary appearance of the rocket, rising from the neighborhood of a lonely little village between midnight and one in the morning. How I connected that mysterious signal with a possibility of tracing Cristel, it is useless to inquire. That was the thought in me, when I led my lost darling's father back to his room. Without stopping to explain myself, I reminded him that the cottage was quiet again,

and told him to wait my return.

In the kitchen, I overtook the servant and his burden. The door of communication (by which they had entered) was still open.

"Lock that door," I said.

"Lock it yourself," he answered; "I'll have nothing to do with this business." He passed through the doorway, and along the passage, and ascended his master's stairs.

It struck me directly that the man had suggested a sure way of protecting Toller, during my absence. The miller's own door was already secured; I took the key, so as to be able to let myself in again--then passed through the door of communication--fastened it--and put the key in my pocket. The third door, by which the Cur entered his lodgings, was of course at my disposal. I had just closed it, when I discovered that I had a companion. Ponto had followed me.

I felt at once that the dog's superior powers of divination might be of use, on such an errand as mine was. We set out together for Kylam.

Wildly hurried--without any fixed idea in my mind--I ran to Kylam, for the greater part of the way. It was now very dark. On a sandy creek, below the village, I came in contact with something solid enough to hurt me for the moment. It was the stranded boat.

A smoker generally has matches about him. Helped by my little short-lived lights, I examined the interior of the boat. There was absolutely nothing in it but a strip of old tarpaulin--used, as I guessed, to protect the boat, or something that it carried, in rainy weather.

The village population had long since been in bed. Silence and darkness mercilessly defied me to discover anything. For a while I waited, encouraging the dog to circle round me and exercise his sense of smell. Any suspicious person or object he would have certainly discovered. Nothing--not even the fallen stick of the rocket--rewarded our patience. Determined to leave nothing untried, I groped, rather than found, my way to the village ale house, and succeeded at last in rousing the landlord. He hailed me from the window (naturally enough) in no friendly voice. I called out my name. Within my own little limits, it was the name of a celebrated person. The landlord opened his door directly; eager to answer my questions if he could do it. Nothing in the least out of the common way had happened at Kylam. No

strangers had been seen in, or near, the place. The stranded boat had not been discovered; and the crashing flight of the rocket into the air had failed to disturb the soundly-sleeping villagers.

On my melancholy way back, fatigue of body--and, far worse, fatigue of mind--forced me to take a few minutes' rest.

The dimly-flowing river was at my feet; the river on which I had seen Cristel again, for the first time since we were children. Thus far, the dreadful loss of her had been a calamity, held away from me in some degree by events which had imperatively taken possession of my mind. In the darkness and the stillness, the misery of having lost her was free to crush me. My head dropped on the neck of the dog, nestling close at my side. "Oh, Ponto!" I said to him, "she's gone!" Nobody could see me; nobody could despise me--I burst out crying.