

## Chapter 6 - A Cry For Help

The Paper Mill had stopped work for the night, and the paths and roads in its neighbourhood were sprinkled with clusters of people going home from their day's labour in it. There were men, women, and children in the groups, and there was no want of lively colour to flutter in the gentle evening wind. The mingling of various voices and the sound of laughter made a cheerful impression upon the ear, analogous to that of the fluttering colours upon the eye. Into the sheet of water reflecting the flushed sky in the foreground of the living picture, a knot of urchins were casting stones, and watching the expansion of the rippling circles. So, in the rosy evening, one might watch the ever-widening beauty of the landscape - beyond the newly-released workers wending home - beyond the silver river - beyond the deep green fields of corn, so prospering, that the loiterers in their narrow threads of pathway seemed to float immersed breast-high - beyond the hedgerows and the clumps of trees - beyond the windmills on the ridge - away to where the sky appeared to meet the earth, as if there were no immensity of space between mankind and Heaven.

It was a Saturday evening, and at such a time the village dogs, always much more interested in the doings of humanity than in the affairs of their own species, were particularly active. At the general shop, at the butcher's and at the public-house, they evinced an inquiring spirit never to be satiated. Their especial interest in the public-house would seem to imply some latent rakishness in the canine character; for little was eaten there, and they, having no taste for beer or tobacco (Mrs Hubbard's dog is said to have smoked, but proof is wanting), could only have been attracted by sympathy with loose convivial habits. Moreover, a most wretched fiddle played within; a fiddle so unutterably vile, that one lean long-bodied cur, with a better ear than the rest, found himself under compulsion at intervals to go round the corner and howl. Yet, even he returned to the public-house on each occasion with the tenacity of a confirmed drunkard.

Fearful to relate, there was even a sort of little Fair in the village. Some despairing gingerbread that had been vainly trying to dispose of itself all over the country, and had cast a quantity of dust upon its head in its mortification, again appealed to the public from an infirm booth. So did a heap of nuts, long, long exiled from Barcelona, and yet speaking English so indifferently as to call fourteen of themselves a pint. A Peep-show which had originally started with the Battle of Waterloo, and had since made it every other battle of later date by altering the Duke of Wellington's nose, tempted the student of illustrated history. A Fat Lady, perhaps in part sustained upon postponed pork, her professional associate being a Learned Pig, displayed her life-size picture in a low dress as she appeared when presented at Court, several yards round. All this was a vicious

spectacle as any poor idea of amusement on the part of the rougher hewers of wood and drawers of water in this land of England ever is and shall be. They MUST NOT vary the rheumatism with amusement. They may vary it with fever and ague, or with as many rheumatic variations as they have joints; but positively not with entertainment after their own manner.

The various sounds arising from this scene of depravity, and floating away into the still evening air, made the evening, at any point which they just reached fitfully, mellowed by the distance, more still by contrast. Such was the stillness of the evening to Eugene Wrayburn, as he walked by the river with his hands behind him.

He walked slowly, and with the measured step and preoccupied air of one who was waiting. He walked between the two points, an osier-bed at this end and some floating lilies at that, and at each point stopped and looked expectantly in one direction.

'It is very quiet,' said he.

It was very quiet. Some sheep were grazing on the grass by the river-side, and it seemed to him that he had never before heard the crisp tearing sound with which they cropped it. He stopped idly, and looked at them.

'You are stupid enough, I suppose. But if you are clever enough to get through life tolerably to your satisfaction, you have got the better of me, Man as I am, and Mutton as you are!'

A rustle in a field beyond the hedge attracted his attention. 'What's here to do?' he asked himself leisurely going towards the gate and looking over. 'No jealous paper-miller? No pleasures of the chase in this part of the country? Mostly fishing hereabouts!'

The field had been newly mown, and there were yet the marks of the scythe on the yellow-green ground, and the track of wheels where the hay had been carried. Following the tracks with his eyes, the view closed with the new hayrick in a corner.

Now, if he had gone on to the hayrick, and gone round it? But, say that the event was to be, as the event fell out, and how idle are such suppositions! Besides, if he had gone; what is there of warning in a Bargeman lying on his face?

'A bird flying to the hedge,' was all he thought about it; and came back, and resumed his walk.

'If I had not a reliance on her being truthful,' said Eugene, after taking some half-dozen turns, 'I should begin to think she had given me the slip for the second time. But she promised, and she is a girl of her word.'

Turning again at the water-lilies, he saw her coming, and advanced to meet her.

'I was saying to myself, Lizzie, that you were sure to come, though you were late.'

'I had to linger through the village as if I had no object before me, and I had to speak to several people in passing along, Mr Wrayburn.'

'Are the lads of the village - and the ladies - such scandal-mongers?' he asked, as he took her hand and drew it through his arm.

She submitted to walk slowly on, with downcast eyes. He put her hand to his lips, and she quietly drew it away.

'Will you walk beside me, Mr Wrayburn, and not touch me?' For, his arm was already stealing round her waist.

She stopped again, and gave him an earnest supplicating look. 'Well, Lizzie, well!' said he, in an easy way though ill at ease with himself 'don't be unhappy, don't be reproachful.'

'I cannot help being unhappy, but I do not mean to be reproachful. Mr Wrayburn, I implore you to go away from this neighbourhood, to-morrow morning.'

'Lizzie, Lizzie, Lizzie!' he remonstrated. 'As well be reproachful as wholly unreasonable. I can't go away.'

'Why not?'

'Faith!' said Eugene in his airily candid manner. 'Because you won't let me. Mind! I don't mean to be reproachful either. I don't complain that you design to keep me here. But you do it, you do it.'

'Will you walk beside me, and not touch me;' for, his arm was coming about her again; 'while I speak to you very seriously, Mr Wrayburn?'

'I will do anything within the limits of possibility, for you, Lizzie,' he answered with pleasant gaiety as he folded his arms. 'See here! Napoleon Buonaparte at St Helena.'

'When you spoke to me as I came from the Mill the night before last,' said Lizzie, fixing her eyes upon him with the look of supplication which troubled his better nature, 'you told me that you were much surprised to see me, and that you were on a solitary fishing excursion. Was it true?'

'It was not,' replied Eugene composedly, 'in the least true. I came here, because I had information that I should find you here.'

'Can you imagine why I left London, Mr Wrayburn?'

'I am afraid, Lizzie,' he openly answered, 'that you left London to get rid of me. It is not flattering to my self-love, but I am afraid you did.'

'I did.'

'How could you be so cruel?'

'O Mr Wrayburn,' she answered, suddenly breaking into tears, 'is the cruelty on my side! O Mr Wrayburn, Mr Wrayburn, is there no cruelty in your being here to-night!'

'In the name of all that's good - and that is not conjuring you in my own name, for Heaven knows I am not good' - said Eugene, 'don't be distressed!'

'What else can I be, when I know the distance and the difference between us? What else can I be, when to tell me why you came here, is to put me to shame!' said Lizzie, covering her face.

He looked at her with a real sentiment of remorseful tenderness and pity. It was not strong enough to impell him to sacrifice himself and spare her, but it was a strong emotion.

'Lizzie! I never thought before, that there was a woman in the world who could affect me so much by saying so little. But don't be hard in your construction of me. You don't know what my state of mind towards you is. You don't know how you haunt me and bewilder me. You don't know how the cursed carelessness that is over-officious in helping me at every other turning of my life, WON'T help me here. You have struck it dead, I think, and I sometimes almost wish you had struck me dead along with it.'

She had not been prepared for such passionate expressions, and they awakened some natural sparks of feminine pride and joy in her breast. To consider, wrong as he was, that he could care so much for her, and that she had the power to move him so!

'It grieves you to see me distressed, Mr Wrayburn; it grieves me to see you distressed. I don't reproach you. Indeed I don't reproach you. You have not felt this as I feel it, being so different from me, and beginning from another point of view. You have not thought. But I entreat you to think now, think now!'

'What am I to think of?' asked Eugene, bitterly.

'Think of me.'

'Tell me how NOT to think of you, Lizzie, and you'll change me altogether.'

'I don't mean in that way. Think of me, as belonging to another station, and quite cut off from you in honour. Remember that I have no protector near me, unless I have one in your noble heart. Respect my good name. If you feel towards me, in one particular, as you might if I was a lady, give me the full claims of a lady upon your generous behaviour. I am removed from you and your family by being a working girl. How true a gentleman to be as considerate of me as if I was removed by being a Queen!'

He would have been base indeed to have stood untouched by her appeal. His face expressed contrition and indecision as he asked:

'Have I injured you so much, Lizzie?'

'No, no. You may set me quite right. I don't speak of the past, Mr Wrayburn, but of the present and the future. Are we not here now, because through two days you have followed me so closely where there are so many eyes to see you, that I consented to this appointment as an escape?'

'Again, not very flattering to my self-love,' said Eugene, moodily; 'but yes. Yes. Yes.'

'Then I beseech you, Mr Wrayburn, I beg and pray you, leave this neighbourhood. If you do not, consider to what you will drive me.'

He did consider within himself for a moment or two, and then retorted, 'Drive you? To what shall I drive you, Lizzie?'

'You will drive me away. I live here peacefully and respected, and I am well employed here. You will force me to quit this place as I quitted London, and - by following me again - will force me to quit the next place in which I may find refuge, as I quitted this.'

'Are you so determined, Lizzie - forgive the word I am going to use, for its literal truth - to fly from a lover?'

'I am so determined,' she answered resolutely, though trembling, 'to fly from such a lover. There was a poor woman died here but a little while ago, scores of years older than I am, whom I found by chance, lying on the wet earth. You may have heard some account of her?'

'I think I have,' he answered, 'if her name was Higden.'

'Her name was Higden. Though she was so weak and old, she kept true to one purpose to the very last. Even at the very last, she made me promise that her purpose should be kept to, after she was dead, so settled was her determination. What she did, I can do. Mr Wrayburn, if I believed - but I do not believe - that you could be so cruel to me as to drive me from place to place to wear me out, you should drive me to death and not do it.'

He looked full at her handsome face, and in his own handsome face there was a light of blended admiration, anger, and reproach, which she - who loved him so in secret whose heart had long been so full, and he the cause of its overflowing - drooped before. She tried hard to retain her firmness, but he saw it melting away under his eyes. In the moment of its dissolution, and of his first full knowledge of his influence upon her, she dropped, and he caught her on his arm.

'Lizzie! Rest so a moment. Answer what I ask you. If I had not been what you call removed from you and cut off from you, would you have made this appeal to me to leave you?'

'I don't know, I don't know. Don't ask me, Mr Wrayburn. Let me go back.'

'I swear to you, Lizzie, you shall go directly. I swear to you, you shall go alone. I'll not accompany you, I'll not follow you, if you will reply.'

'How can I, Mr Wrayburn? How can I tell you what I should have done, if you had not been what you are?'

'If I had not been what you make me out to be,' he struck in, skilfully changing the form of words, 'would you still have hated me?'

'O Mr Wrayburn,' she replied appealingly, and weeping, 'you know me better than to think I do!'

'If I had not been what you make me out to be, Lizzie, would you still have been indifferent to me?'

'O Mr Wrayburn,' she answered as before, 'you know me better than that too!'

There was something in the attitude of her whole figure as he supported it, and she hung her head, which besought him to be merciful and not force her to disclose her heart. He was not merciful with her, and he made her do it.

'If I know you better than quite to believe (unfortunate dog though I am!) that you hate me, or even that you are wholly indifferent to me, Lizzie, let me know so much more from yourself before we separate. Let me know how you would have dealt with me if you had regarded me as being what you would have considered on equal terms with you.'

'It is impossible, Mr Wrayburn. How can I think of you as being on equal terms with me? If my mind could put you on equal terms with me, you could not be yourself. How could I remember, then, the night when I first saw you, and when I went out of the room because you looked at me so attentively? Or, the night that passed into the morning when you broke to me that my father was dead? Or, the nights when you used to come to see me at my next home? Or, your having known how uninstructed I was, and having caused me to be taught better? Or, my having so looked up to you and wondered at you, and at first thought you so good to be at all mindful of me?'

'Only 'at first' thought me so good, Lizzie? What did you think me after 'at first'? So bad?'

'I don't say that. I don't mean that. But after the first wonder and pleasure of being noticed by one so different from any one who had ever spoken to me, I began to feel that it might have been better if I had never seen you.'

'Why?'

'Because you WERE so different,' she answered in a lower voice. 'Because it was so endless, so hopeless. Spare me!'

'Did you think for me at all, Lizzie?' he asked, as if he were a little stung.

'Not much, Mr Wrayburn. Not much until to-night.'

'Will you tell me why?'

'I never supposed until to-night that you needed to be thought for. But if you do need to be; if you do truly feel at heart that you have indeed

been towards me what you have called yourself to-night, and that there is nothing for us in this life but separation; then Heaven help you, and Heaven bless you!

The purity with which in these words she expressed something of her own love and her own suffering, made a deep impression on him for the passing time. He held her, almost as if she were sanctified to him by death, and kissed her, once, almost as he might have kissed the dead.

'I promised that I would not accompany you, nor follow you. Shall I keep you in view? You have been agitated, and it's growing dark.'

'I am used to be out alone at this hour, and I entreat you not to do so.'

'I promise. I can bring myself to promise nothing more tonight, Lizzie, except that I will try what I can do.'

'There is but one means, Mr Wrayburn, of sparing yourself and of sparing me, every way. Leave this neighbourhood to-morrow morning.'

'I will try.'

As he spoke the words in a grave voice, she put her hand in his, removed it, and went away by the river-side.

'Now, could Mortimer believe this?' murmured Eugene, still remaining, after a while, where she had left him. 'Can I even believe it myself?'

He referred to the circumstance that there were tears upon his hand, as he stood covering his eyes. 'A most ridiculous position this, to be found out in!' was his next thought. And his next struck its root in a little rising resentment against the cause of the tears.

'Yet I have gained a wonderful power over her, too, let her be as much in earnest as she will!'

The reflection brought back the yielding of her face and form as she had drooped under his gaze. Contemplating the reproduction, he seemed to see, for the second time, in the appeal and in the confession of weakness, a little fear.

'And she loves me. And so earnest a character must be very earnest in that passion. She cannot choose for herself to be strong in this fancy, wavering in that, and weak in the other. She must go through with her nature, as I must go through with mine. If mine exacts its pains and penalties all round, so must hers, I suppose.'



Pursuing the inquiry into his own nature, he thought, 'Now, if I married her. If, outfacing the absurdity of the situation in correspondence with M. R. F., I astonished M. R. F. to the utmost extent of his respected powers, by informing him that I had married her, how would M. R. F. reason with the legal mind? 'You wouldn't marry for some money and some station, because you were frightfully likely to become bored. Are you less frightfully likely to become bored, marrying for no money and no station? Are you sure of yourself?' Legal mind, in spite of forensic protestations, must secretly admit, 'Good reasoning on the part of M. R. F. NOT sure of myself.'

In the very act of calling this tone of levity to his aid, he felt it to be profligate and worthless, and asserted her against it.

'And yet,' said Eugene, 'I should like to see the fellow (Mortimer excepted) who would undertake to tell me that this was not a real sentiment on my part, won out of me by her beauty and her worth, in spite of myself, and that I would not be true to her. I should particularly like to see the fellow to-night who would tell me so, or who would tell me anything that could be construed to her disadvantage; for I am wearily out of sorts with one Wrayburn who cuts a sorry figure, and I would far rather be out of sorts with somebody else. 'Eugene, Eugene, Eugene, this is a bad business.' Ah! So go the Mortimer Lightwood bells, and they sound melancholy to-night.'

Strolling on, he thought of something else to take himself to task for. 'Where is the analogy, Brute Beast,' he said impatiently, 'between a woman whom your father coolly finds out for you and a woman whom you have found out for yourself, and have ever drifted after with more and more of constancy since you first set eyes upon her? Ass! Can you reason no better than that?'

But, again he subsided into a reminiscence of his first full knowledge of his power just now, and of her disclosure of her heart. To try no more to go away, and to try her again, was the reckless conclusion it turned uppermost. And yet again, 'Eugene, Eugene, Eugene, this is a bad business!' And, 'I wish I could stop the Lightwood peal, for it sounds like a knell.'

Looking above, he found that the young moon was up, and that the stars were beginning to shine in the sky from which the tones of red and yellow were flickering out, in favour of the calm blue of a summer night. He was still by the river-side. Turning suddenly, he met a man, so close upon him that Eugene, surprised, stepped back, to avoid a collision. The man carried something over his shoulder which might have been a broken oar, or spar, or bar, and took no notice of him, but passed on.

'Halloa, friend!' said Eugene, calling after him, 'are you blind?'

The man made no reply, but went his way.

Eugene Wrayburn went the opposite way, with his hands behind him and his purpose in his thoughts. He passed the sheep, and passed the gate, and came within hearing of the village sounds, and came to the bridge. The inn where he stayed, like the village and the mill, was not across the river, but on that side of the stream on which he walked. However, knowing the rushy bank and the backwater on the other side to be a retired place, and feeling out of humour for noise or company, he crossed the bridge, and sauntered on: looking up at the stars as they seemed one by one to be kindled in the sky, and looking down at the river as the same stars seemed to be kindled deep in the water. A landing-place overshadowed by a willow, and a pleasure-boat lying moored there among some stakes, caught his eye as he passed along. The spot was in such dark shadow, that he paused to make out what was there, and then passed on again.

The rippling of the river seemed to cause a correspondent stir in his uneasy reflections. He would have laid them asleep if he could, but they were in movement, like the stream, and all tending one way with a strong current. As the ripple under the moon broke unexpectedly now and then, and palely flashed in a new shape and with a new sound, so parts of his thoughts started, unbidden, from the rest, and revealed their wickedness. 'Out of the question to marry her,' said Eugene, 'and out of the question to leave her. The crisis!'

He had sauntered far enough. Before turning to retrace his steps, he stopped upon the margin, to look down at the reflected night. In an instant, with a dreadful crash, the reflected night turned crooked, flames shot jaggedly across the air, and the moon and stars came bursting from the sky.

Was he struck by lightning? With some incoherent half-formed thought to that effect, he turned under the blows that were blinding him and mashing his life, and closed with a murderer, whom he caught by a red neckerchief - unless the raining down of his own blood gave it that hue.

Eugene was light, active, and expert; but his arms were broken, or he was paralysed, and could do no more than hang on to the man, with his head swung back, so that he could see nothing but the heaving sky. After dragging at the assailant, he fell on the bank with him, and then there was another great crash, and then a splash, and all was done.

Lizzie Hexam, too, had avoided the noise, and the Saturday movement of people in the straggling street, and chose to walk alone by the water until her tears should be dry, and she could so compose herself as to escape remark upon her looking ill or unhappy on going home. The peaceful serenity of the hour and place, having no reproaches or evil intentions within her breast to contend against, sank healingly into its depths. She had meditated and taken comfort. She, too, was turning homeward, when she heard a strange sound.

It startled her, for it was like a sound of blows. She stood still, and listened. It sickened her, for blows fell heavily and cruelly on the quiet of the night. As she listened, undecided, all was silent. As she yet listened, she heard a faint groan, and a fall into the river.

Her old bold life and habit instantly inspired her. Without vain waste of breath in crying for help where there were none to hear, she ran towards the spot from which the sounds had come. It lay between her and the bridge, but it was more removed from her than she had thought; the night being so very quiet, and sound travelling far with the help of water.

At length, she reached a part of the green bank, much and newly trodden, where there lay some broken splintered pieces of wood and some torn fragments of clothes. Stooping, she saw that the grass was bloody. Following the drops and smears, she saw that the watery margin of the bank was bloody. Following the current with her eyes, she saw a bloody face turned up towards the moon, and drifting away.

Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, and grant, O Blessed Lord, that through thy wonderful workings it may turn to good at last! To whomsoever the drifting face belongs, be it man's or woman's, help my humble hands, Lord God, to raise it from death and restore it to some one to whom it must be dear!

It was thought, fervently thought, but not for a moment did the prayer check her. She was away before it welled up in her mind, away, swift and true, yet steady above all - for without steadiness it could never be done - to the landing-place under the willow-tree, where she also had seen the boat lying moored among the stakes.

A sure touch of her old practised hand, a sure step of her old practised foot, a sure light balance of her body, and she was in the boat. A quick glance of her practised eye showed her, even through the deep dark shadow, the sculls in a rack against the red-brick garden-wall. Another moment, and she had cast off (taking the line with her), and the boat had shot out into the moonlight, and she was rowing down the stream as never other woman rowed on English water.

Intently over her shoulder, without slackening speed, she looked ahead for the driving face. She passed the scene of the struggle - yonder it was, on her left, well over the boat's stern - she passed on her right, the end of the village street, a hilly street that almost dipped into the river; its sounds were growing faint again, and she slackened; looking as the boat drove, everywhere, everywhere, for the floating face.

She merely kept the boat before the stream now, and rested on her oars, knowing well that if the face were not soon visible, it had gone down, and she would overshoot it. An untrained sight would never have seen by the moonlight what she saw at the length of a few strokes astern. She saw the drowning figure rise to the surface, slightly struggle, and as if by instinct turn over on its back to float. Just so had she first dimly seen the face which she now dimly saw again.

Firm of look and firm of purpose, she intently watched its coming on, until it was very near; then, with a touch unshipped her sculls, and crept aft in the boat, between kneeling and crouching. Once, she let the body evade her, not being sure of her grasp. Twice, and she had seized it by its bloody hair.

It was insensible, if not virtually dead; it was mutilated, and streaked the water all about it with dark red streaks. As it could not help itself, it was impossible for her to get it on board. She bent over the stern to secure it with the line, and then the river and its shores rang to the terrible cry she uttered.

But, as if possessed by supernatural spirit and strength, she lashed it safe, resumed her seat, and rowed in, desperately, for the nearest shallow water where she might run the boat aground. Desperately, but not wildly, for she knew that if she lost distinctness of intention, all was lost and gone.

She ran the boat ashore, went into the water, released him from the line, and by main strength lifted him in her arms and laid him in the bottom of the boat. He had fearful wounds upon him, and she bound them up with her dress torn into strips. Else, supposing him to be still alive, she foresaw that he must bleed to death before he could be landed at his inn, which was the nearest place for succour.

This done very rapidly, she kissed his disfigured forehead, looked up in anguish to the stars, and blessed him and forgave him, 'if she had anything to forgive.' It was only in that instant that she thought of herself, and then she thought of herself only for him.

Now, merciful Heaven be thanked for that old time, enabling me, without a wasted moment, to have got the boat afloat again, and to row back against the stream! And grant, O Blessed Lord God, that through poor me he may be raised from death, and preserved to some one else to whom he may be dear one day, though never dearer than to me!

She rowed hard - rowed desperately, but never wildly - and seldom removed her eyes from him in the bottom of the boat. She had so laid him there, as that she might see his disfigured face; it was so much disfigured that his mother might have covered it, but it was above and beyond disfigurement in her eyes.

The boat touched the edge of the patch of inn lawn, sloping gently to the water. There were lights in the windows, but there chanced to be no one out of doors. She made the boat fast, and again by main strength took him up, and never laid him down until she laid him down in the house.

Surgeons were sent for, and she sat supporting his head. She had oftentimes heard in days that were gone, how doctors would lift the hand of an insensible wounded person, and would drop it if the person were dead. She waited for the awful moment when the doctors might lift this hand, all broken and bruised, and let it fall.

The first of the surgeons came, and asked, before proceeding to his examination, 'Who brought him in?'

'I brought him in, sir,' answered Lizzie, at whom all present looked.

'You, my dear? You could not lift, far less carry, this weight.'

'I think I could not, at another time, sir; but I am sure I did.'

The surgeon looked at her with great attention, and with some compassion. Having with a grave face touched the wounds upon the head, and the broken arms, he took the hand.

O! would he let it drop?

He appeared irresolute. He did not retain it, but laid it gently down, took a candle, looked more closely at the injuries on the head, and at the pupils of the eyes. That done, he replaced the candle and took the hand again. Another surgeon then coming in, the two exchanged a whisper, and the second took the hand. Neither did he let it fall at once, but kept it for a while and laid it gently down.

'Attend to the poor girl,' said the first surgeon then. 'She is quite unconscious. She sees nothing and hears nothing. All the better for her! Don't rouse her, if you can help it; only move her. Poor girl, poor girl! She must be amazingly strong of heart, but it is much to be feared that she has set her heart upon the dead. Be gentle with her.'