

## Chapter 7 - Better To Be Abel Than Cain

Day was breaking at Plashwater Weir Mill Lock. Stars were yet visible, but there was dull light in the east that was not the light of night. The moon had gone down, and a mist crept along the banks of the river, seen through which the trees were the ghosts of trees, and the water was the ghost of water. This earth looked spectral, and so did the pale stars: while the cold eastern glare, expressionless as to heat or colour, with the eye of the firmament quenched, might have been likened to the stare of the dead.

Perhaps it was so likened by the lonely Bargeman, standing on the brink of the lock. For certain, Bradley Headstone looked that way, when a chill air came up, and when it passed on murmuring, as if it whispered something that made the phantom trees and water tremble - or threaten - for fancy might have made it either.

He turned away, and tried the Lock-house door. It was fastened on the inside.

'Is he afraid of me?' he muttered, knocking.

Rogue Riderhood was soon roused, and soon undrew the bolt and let him in.

'Why, T'otherest, I thought you had been and got lost! Two nights away! I a'most believed as you'd giv' me the slip, and I had as good as half a mind for to advertise you in the newspapers to come for'ard.'

Bradley's face turned so dark on this hint, that Riderhood deemed it expedient to soften it into a compliment.

'But not you, governor, not you,' he went on, stolidly shaking his head. 'For what did I say to myself arter having amused myself with that there stretch of a comic idea, as a sort of a playful game? Why, I says to myself; 'He's a man o' honour.' That's what I says to myself. 'He's a man o' double honour.'

Very remarkably, Riderhood put no question to him. He had looked at him on opening the door, and he now looked at him again (stealthily this time), and the result of his looking was, that he asked him no question.

'You'll be for another forty on 'em, governor, as I judges, afore you turns your mind to breakfast,' said Riderhood, when his visitor sat down, resting his chin on his hand, with his eyes on the ground. And very remarkably again: Riderhood feigned to set the scanty furniture

in order, while he spoke, to have a show of reason for not looking at him.

'Yes. I had better sleep, I think,' said Bradley, without changing his position.

'I myself should recommend it, governor,' assented Riderhood. 'Might you be anyways dry?'

'Yes. I should like a drink,' said Bradley; but without appearing to attend much.

Mr Riderhood got out his bottle, and fetched his jug-full of water, and administered a potation. Then, he shook the coverlet of his bed and spread it smooth, and Bradley stretched himself upon it in the clothes he wore. Mr Riderhood poetically remarking that he would pick the bones of his night's rest, in his wooden chair, sat in the window as before; but, as before, watched the sleeper narrowly until he was very sound asleep. Then, he rose and looked at him close, in the bright daylight, on every side, with great minuteness. He went out to his Lock to sum up what he had seen.

'One of his sleeves is tore right away below the elber, and the t'other's had a good rip at the shoulder. He's been hung on to, pretty tight, for his shirt's all tore out of the neck-gathers. He's been in the grass and he's been in the water. And he's spotted, and I know with what, and with whose. Hooroar!'

Bradley slept long. Early in the afternoon a barge came down. Other barges had passed through, both ways, before it; but the Lock-keeper hailed only this particular barge, for news, as if he had made a time calculation with some nicety. The men on board told him a piece of news, and there was a lingering on their part to enlarge upon it.

Twelve hours had intervened since Bradley's lying down, when he got up. 'Not that I swaller it,' said Riderhood, squinting at his Lock, when he saw Bradley coming out of the house, 'as you've been a sleeping all the time, old boy!'

Bradley came to him, sitting on his wooden lever, and asked what o'clock it was? Riderhood told him it was between two and three.

'When are you relieved?' asked Bradley.

'Day arter to-morrow, governor.'

'Not sooner?'

'Not a inch sooner, governor.'

On both sides, importance seemed attached to this question of relief. Riderhood quite petted his reply; saying a second time, and prolonging a negative roll of his head, 'n - n - not a inch sooner, governor.'

'Did I tell you I was going on to-night?' asked Bradley.

'No, governor,' returned Riderhood, in a cheerful, affable, and conversational manner, 'you did not tell me so. But most like you meant to it and forgot to it. How, otherways, could a doubt have come into your head about it, governor?'

'As the sun goes down, I intend to go on,' said Bradley.

'So much the more necessary is a Peck,' returned Riderhood. 'Come in and have it, T'otherest.'

The formality of spreading a tablecloth not being observed in Mr Riderhood's establishment, the serving of the 'peck' was the affair of a moment; it merely consisting in the handing down of a capacious baking dish with three-fourths of an immense meat pie in it, and the production of two pocket-knives, an earthenware mug, and a large brown bottle of beer.

Both ate and drank, but Riderhood much the more abundantly. In lieu of plates, that honest man cut two triangular pieces from the thick crust of the pie, and laid them, inside uppermost, upon the table: the one before himself, and the other before his guest. Upon these platters he placed two goodly portions of the contents of the pie, thus imparting the unusual interest to the entertainment that each partaker scooped out the inside of his plate, and consumed it with his other fare, besides having the sport of pursuing the clots of congealed gravy over the plain of the table, and successfully taking them into his mouth at last from the blade of his knife, in case of their not first sliding off it.

Bradley Headstone was so remarkably awkward at these exercises, that the Rogue observed it.

'Look out, T'otherest!' he cried, 'you'll cut your hand!'

But, the caution came too late, for Bradley gashed it at the instant. And, what was more unlucky, in asking Riderhood to tie it up, and in standing close to him for the purpose, he shook his hand under the smart of the wound, and shook blood over Riderhood's dress.

When dinner was done, and when what remained of the platters and what remained of the congealed gravy had been put back into what remained of the pie, which served as an economical investment for all miscellaneous savings, Riderhood filled the mug with beer and took a long drink. And now he did look at Bradley, and with an evil eye.

'T'otherest!' he said, hoarsely, as he bent across the table to touch his arm. 'The news has gone down the river afore you.'

'What news?'

'Who do you think,' said Riderhood, with a hitch of his head, as if he disdainfully jerked the feint away, 'picked up the body? Guess.'

'I am not good at guessing anything.'

'She did. Hooroar! You had him there agin. She did.'

The convulsive twitching of Bradley Headstone's face, and the sudden hot humour that broke out upon it, showed how grimly the intelligence touched him. But he said not a single word, good or bad. He only smiled in a lowering manner, and got up and stood leaning at the window, looking through it. Riderhood followed him with his eyes. Riderhood cast down his eyes on his own besprinkled clothes. Riderhood began to have an air of being better at a guess than Bradley owned to being.

'I have been so long in want of rest,' said the schoolmaster, 'that with your leave I'll lie down again.'

'And welcome, T'otherest!' was the hospitable answer of his host. He had laid himself down without waiting for it, and he remained upon the bed until the sun was low. When he arose and came out to resume his journey, he found his host waiting for him on the grass by the towing-path outside the door.

'Whenever it may be necessary that you and I should have any further communication together,' said Bradley, 'I will come back. Good-night!'

'Well, since no better can be,' said Riderhood, turning on his heel, 'Good-night!' But he turned again as the other set forth, and added under his breath, looking after him with a leer: 'You wouldn't be let to go like that, if my Relief warn't as good as come. I'll catch you up in a mile.'

In a word, his real time of relief being that evening at sunset, his mate came lounging in, within a quarter of an hour. Not staying to fill up the utmost margin of his time, but borrowing an hour or so, to be

repaid again when he should relieve his reliever, Riderhood straightway followed on the track of Bradley Headstone.

He was a better follower than Bradley. It had been the calling of his life to slink and skulk and dog and waylay, and he knew his calling well. He effected such a forced march on leaving the Lock House that he was close up with him - that is to say, as close up with him as he deemed it convenient to be - before another Lock was passed. His man looked back pretty often as he went, but got no hint of him. HE knew how to take advantage of the ground, and where to put the hedge between them, and where the wall, and when to duck, and when to drop, and had a thousand arts beyond the doomed Bradley's slow conception.

But, all his arts were brought to a standstill, like himself when Bradley, turning into a green lane or riding by the river-side - a solitary spot run wild in nettles, briars, and brambles, and encumbered with the scathed trunks of a whole hedgerow of felled trees, on the outskirts of a little wood - began stepping on these trunks and dropping down among them and stepping on them again, apparently as a schoolboy might have done, but assuredly with no schoolboy purpose, or want of purpose.

'What are you up to?' muttered Riderhood, down in the ditch, and holding the hedge a little open with both hands. And soon his actions made a most extraordinary reply. 'By George and the Draggin!' cried Riderhood, 'if he ain't a going to bathe!'

He had passed back, on and among the trunks of trees again, and has passed on to the water-side and had begun undressing on the grass. For a moment it had a suspicious look of suicide, arranged to counterfeit accident. 'But you wouldn't have fetched a bundle under your arm, from among that timber, if such was your game!' said Riderhood. Nevertheless it was a relief to him when the bather after a plunge and a few strokes came out. 'For I shouldn't,' he said in a feeling manner, 'have liked to lose you till I had made more money out of you neither.'

Prone in another ditch (he had changed his ditch as his man had changed his position), and holding apart so small a patch of the hedge that the sharpest eyes could not have detected him, Rogue Riderhood watched the bather dressing. And now gradually came the wonder that he stood up, completely clothed, another man, and not the Bargeman.

'Aha!' said Riderhood. 'Much as you was dressed that night. I see. You're a taking me with you, now. You're deep. But I knows a deeper.'

When the bather had finished dressing, he kneeled on the grass, doing something with his hands, and again stood up with his bundle under his arm. Looking all around him with great attention, he then went to the river's edge, and flung it in as far, and yet as lightly as he could. It was not until he was so decidedly upon his way again as to be beyond a bend of the river and for the time out of view, that Riderhood scrambled from the ditch.

'Now,' was his debate with himself 'shall I follow you on, or shall I let you loose for this once, and go a fishing?' The debate continuing, he followed, as a precautionary measure in any case, and got him again in sight. 'If I was to let you loose this once,' said Riderhood then, still following, 'I could make you come to me again, or I could find you out in one way or another. If I wasn't to go a fishing, others might. - I'll let you loose this once, and go a fishing!' With that, he suddenly dropped the pursuit and turned.

The miserable man whom he had released for the time, but not for long, went on towards London. Bradley was suspicious of every sound he heard, and of every face he saw, but was under a spell which very commonly falls upon the shedder of blood, and had no suspicion of the real danger that lurked in his life, and would have it yet. Riderhood was much in his thoughts - had never been out of his thoughts since the night-adventure of their first meeting; but Riderhood occupied a very different place there, from the place of pursuer; and Bradley had been at the pains of devising so many means of fitting that place to him, and of wedging him into it, that his mind could not compass the possibility of his occupying any other. And this is another spell against which the shedder of blood for ever strives in vain. There are fifty doors by which discovery may enter. With infinite pains and cunning, he double locks and bars forty-nine of them, and cannot see the fiftieth standing wide open.

Now, too, was he cursed with a state of mind more wearing and more wearisome than remorse. He had no remorse; but the evildoer who can hold that avenger at bay, cannot escape the slower torture of incessantly doing the evil deed again and doing it more efficiently. In the defensive declarations and pretended confessions of murderers, the pursuing shadow of this torture may be traced through every lie they tell. If I had done it as alleged, is it conceivable that I would have made this and this mistake? If I had done it as alleged, should I have left that unguarded place which that false and wicked witness against me so infamously deposed to? The state of that wretch who continually finds the weak spots in his own crime, and strives to strengthen them when it is unchangeable, is a state that aggravates the offence by doing the deed a thousand times instead of once; but it is a state, too, that tauntingly visits the offence upon a sullen unrepentant nature with its heaviest punishment every time.

Bradley toiled on, chained heavily to the idea of his hatred and his vengeance, and thinking how he might have satiated both in many better ways than the way he had taken. The instrument might have been better, the spot and the hour might have been better chosen. To batter a man down from behind in the dark, on the brink of a river, was well enough, but he ought to have been instantly disabled, whereas he had turned and seized his assailant; and so, to end it before chance-help came, and to be rid of him, he had been hurriedly thrown backward into the river before the life was fully beaten out of him. Now if it could be done again, it must not be so done. Supposing his head had been held down under water for a while. Supposing the first blow had been truer. Supposing he had been shot. Supposing he had been strangled. Suppose this way, that way, the other way. Suppose anything but getting unchained from the one idea, for that was inexorably impossible.

The school reopened next day. The scholars saw little or no change in their master's face, for it always wore its slowly labouring expression. But, as he heard his classes, he was always doing the deed and doing it better. As he paused with his piece of chalk at the black board before writing on it, he was thinking of the spot, and whether the water was not deeper and the fall straighter, a little higher up, or a little lower down. He had half a mind to draw a line or two upon the board, and show himself what he meant. He was doing it again and improving on the manner, at prayers, in his mental arithmetic, all through his questioning, all through the day.

Charley Hexam was a master now, in another school, under another head. It was evening, and Bradley was walking in his garden observed from behind a blind by gentle little Miss Peecher, who contemplated offering him a loan of her smelling salts for headache, when Mary Anne, in faithful attendance, held up her arm.

'Yes, Mary Anne?'

'Young Mr Hexam, if you please, ma'am, coming to see Mr Headstone.'

'Very good, Mary Anne.'

Again Mary Anne held up her arm.

'You may speak, Mary Anne?'

'Mr Headstone has beckoned young Mr Hexam into his house, ma'am, and he has gone in himself without waiting for young Mr Hexam to come up, and now HE has gone in too, ma'am, and has shut the door.'

'With all my heart, Mary Anne.'

Again Mary Anne's telegraphic arm worked.

'What more, Mary Anne?'

'They must find it rather dull and dark, Miss Peecher, for the parlour blind's down, and neither of them pulls it up.'

'There is no accounting,' said good Miss Peecher with a little sad sigh which she repressed by laying her hand on her neat methodical boddice, 'there is no accounting for tastes, Mary Anne.'

Charley, entering the dark room, stopped short when he saw his old friend in its yellow shade.

'Come in, Hexam, come in.'

Charley advanced to take the hand that was held out to him; but stopped again, short of it. The heavy, bloodshot eyes of the schoolmaster, rising to his face with an effort, met his look of scrutiny.

'Mr Headstone, what's the matter?'

'Matter? Where?'

'Mr Headstone, have you heard the news? This news about the fellow, Mr Eugene Wrayburn? That he is killed?'

'He is dead, then!' exclaimed Bradley.

Young Hexam standing looking at him, he moistened his lips with his tongue, looked about the room, glanced at his former pupil, and looked down. 'I heard of the outrage,' said Bradley, trying to constrain his working mouth, 'but I had not heard the end of it.'

'Where were you,' said the boy, advancing a step as he lowered his voice, 'when it was done? Stop! I don't ask that. Don't tell me. If you force your confidence upon me, Mr Headstone, I'll give up every word of it. Mind! Take notice. I'll give up it, and I'll give up you. I will!'

The wretched creature seemed to suffer acutely under this renunciation. A desolate air of utter and complete loneliness fell upon him, like a visible shade.

'It's for me to speak, not you,' said the boy. 'If you do, you'll do it at your peril. I am going to put your selfishness before you, Mr Headstone - your passionate, violent, and ungovernable selfishness - to show you why I can, and why I will, have nothing more to do with you.'



He looked at young Hexam as if he were waiting for a scholar to go on with a lesson that he knew by heart and was deadly tired of. But he had said his last word to him.

'If you had any part - I don't say what - in this attack,' pursued the boy; 'or if you know anything about it - I don't say how much - or if you know who did it - I go no closer - you did an injury to me that's never to be forgiven. You know that I took you with me to his chambers in the Temple when I told him my opinion of him, and made myself responsible for my opinion of you. You know that I took you with me when I was watching him with a view to recovering my sister and bringing her to her senses; you know that I have allowed myself to be mixed up with you, all through this business, in favouring your desire to marry my sister. And how do you know that, pursuing the ends of your own violent temper, you have not laid me open to suspicion? Is that your gratitude to me, Mr Headstone?'

Bradley sat looking steadily before him at the vacant air. As often as young Hexam stopped, he turned his eyes towards him, as if he were waiting for him to go on with the lesson, and get it done. As often as the boy resumed, Bradley resumed his fixed face.

'I am going to be plain with you, Mr Headstone,' said young Hexam, shaking his head in a half-threatening manner, 'because this is no time for affecting not to know things that I do know - except certain things at which it might not be very safe for you, to hint again. What I mean is this: if you were a good master, I was a good pupil. I have done you plenty of credit, and in improving my own reputation I have improved yours quite as much. Very well then. Starting on equal terms, I want to put before you how you have shown your gratitude to me, for doing all I could to further your wishes with reference to my sister. You have compromised me by being seen about with me, endeavouring to counteract this Mr Eugene Wrayburn. That's the first thing you have done. If my character, and my now dropping you, help me out of that, Mr Headstone, the deliverance is to be attributed to me, and not to you. No thanks to you for it!'

The boy stopping again, he moved his eyes again.

'I am going on, Mr Headstone, don't you be afraid. I am going on to the end, and I have told you beforehand what the end is. Now, you know my story. You are as well aware as I am, that I have had many disadvantages to leave behind me in life. You have heard me mention my father, and you are sufficiently acquainted with the fact that the home from which I, as I may say, escaped, might have been a more creditable one than it was. My father died, and then it might have been supposed that my way to respectability was pretty clear. No. For then my sister begins.'

He spoke as confidently, and with as entire an absence of any tell-tale colour in his cheek, as if there were no softening old time behind him. Not wonderful, for there WAS none in his hollow empty heart. What is there but self, for selfishness to see behind it?

'When I speak of my sister, I devoutly wish that you had never seen her, Mr Headstone. However, you did see her, and that's useless now. I confided in you about her. I explained her character to you, and how she interposed some ridiculous fanciful notions in the way of our being as respectable as I tried for. You fell in love with her, and I favoured you with all my might. She could not be induced to favour you, and so we came into collision with this Mr Eugene Wrayburn. Now, what have you done? Why, you have justified my sister in being firmly set against you from first to last, and you have put me in the wrong again! And why have you done it? Because, Mr Headstone, you are in all your passions so selfish, and so concentrated upon yourself that you have not bestowed one proper thought on me.'

The cool conviction with which the boy took up and held his position, could have been derived from no other vice in human nature.

'It is,' he went on, actually with tears, 'an extraordinary circumstance attendant on my life, that every effort I make towards perfect respectability, is impeded by somebody else through no fault of mine! Not content with doing what I have put before you, you will drag my name into notoriety through dragging my sister's - which you are pretty sure to do, if my suspicions have any foundation at all - and the worse you prove to be, the harder it will be for me to detach myself from being associated with you in people's minds.'

When he had dried his eyes and heaved a sob over his injuries, he began moving towards the door.

'However, I have made up my mind that I will become respectable in the scale of society, and that I will not be dragged down by others. I have done with my sister as well as with you. Since she cares so little for me as to care nothing for undermining my respectability, she shall go her way and I will go mine. My prospects are very good, and I mean to follow them alone. Mr Headstone, I don't say what you have got upon your conscience, for I don't know. Whatever lies upon it, I hope you will see the justice of keeping wide and clear of me, and will find a consolation in completely exonerating all but yourself. I hope, before many years are out, to succeed the master in my present school, and the mistress being a single woman, though some years older than I am, I might even marry her. If it is any comfort to you to know what plans I may work out by keeping myself strictly respectable in the scale of society, these are the plans at present occurring to me. In conclusion, if you feel a sense of having injured me, and a desire to

make some small reparation, I hope you will think how respectable you might have been yourself and will contemplate your blighted existence.'

Was it strange that the wretched man should take this heavily to heart? Perhaps he had taken the boy to heart, first, through some long laborious years; perhaps through the same years he had found his drudgery lightened by communication with a brighter and more apprehensive spirit than his own; perhaps a family resemblance of face and voice between the boy and his sister, smote him hard in the gloom of his fallen state. For whichever reason, or for all, he drooped his devoted head when the boy was gone, and shrank together on the floor, and grovelled there, with the palms of his hands tight-clasping his hot temples, in unutterable misery, and unrelieved by a single tear.

Rogue Riderhood had been busy with the river that day. He had fished with assiduity on the previous evening, but the light was short, and he had fished unsuccessfully. He had fished again that day with better luck, and had carried his fish home to Plashwater Weir Mill Lockhouse, in a bundle.