

The Guilty River

By

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The Guilty River

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1. On The Way To The River

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

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

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

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

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

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

Out of five moths caught, I became the victim of clever theft in the case of three. The other two, of no great value as specimens, I was just quick enough to secure. Under other circumstances, my patience as a collector would still have been a match for the dexterity of the bats. But on that evening--a memorable evening when I look back at it now--my spirits were depressed, and I was easily discouraged. My favorite studies of the insect-world seemed to have lost their value in my estimation. In the silence and the darkness I lay down under a tree, and let my mind dwell on myself and on my new life to come.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

from reading books, and collecting insects. How I must have disappointed Mrs. Roylake! and how considerately she hid from me the effect that I had produced!

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

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

I was awakened by a light falling on my face.

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

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

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

2. 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.

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