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Chapter 7 - The Woman On The Bridge

MY mother looked in at the library door, and disturbed me over my books.

"I have been hanging a little picture in my room," she said. "Come upstairs, my dear, and give me your opinion of it."

I rose and followed her. She pointed to a miniature portrait, hanging above the mantelpiece.

"Do you know whose likeness that is?" she asked, half sadly, half playfully. "George! Do you really not recognize yourself at thirteen years old?"

How should I recognize myself? Worn by sickness and sorrow; browned by the sun on my long homeward voyage; my hair already growing thin over my forehead; my eyes already habituated to their one sad and weary look; what had I in common with the fair, plump, curly-headed, bright-eyed boy who confronted me in the miniature? The mere sight of the portrait produced the most extraordinary effect on my mind. It struck me with an overwhelming melancholy; it filled me with a despair of myself too dreadful to be endured. Making the best excuse I could to my mother, I left the room. In another minute I was out of the house.

I crossed the park, and left my own possessions behind me. Following a by-road, I came to our well-known river; so beautiful in itself, so famous among trout-fishers throughout Scotland. It was not then the fishing season. No human being was in sight as I took my seat on the bank. The old stone bridge which spanned the stream was within a hundred yards of me; the setting sun still tinged the swift-flowing water under the arches with its red and dying light.

Still the boy's face in the miniature pursued me. Still the portrait seemed to reproach me in a merciless language of its own: "Look at what you were once; think of what you are now!"

I hid my face in the soft, fragrant grass. I thought of the wasted years of my life between thirteen and twenty-three.

How was it to end? If I lived to the ordinary life of man, what prospect had I before me?

Love? Marriage? I burst out laughing as the idea crossed my mind. Since the innocently happy days of my boyhood I had known no more of love than the insect that now crept over my hand as it lay on the grass. My money, to be sure, would buy me a wife; but would my money make her dear to me? dear as Mary had once been, in the golden time when my portrait was first painted?

Mary! Was she still living? Was she married? Should I know her again if I saw her? Absurd! I had not seen her since she was ten years old: she was now a woman, as I was a man. Would she know me if we met? The portrait, still pursuing me, answered the question: "Look at what you were once; think of what you are now!"

I rose and walked backward and forward, and tried to turn the current of my thoughts in some new direction.

It was not to be done. After a banishment of years, Mary had got back again into my mind. I sat down once more on the river bank. The sun was sinking fast. Black shadows hovered under the arches of the old stone bridge. The red light had faded from the swift-flowing water, and had left it overspread with one monotonous hue of steely gray. The first stars looked down peacefully from the cloudless sky. The first shiverings of the night breeze were audible among the trees, and visible here and there in the shallow places of the stream. And still, the darker it grew, the more persistently my portrait led me back to the past, the more vividly the long-lost image of the child Mary showed itself to me in my thoughts.

Was this the prelude of her coming back to me in dreams; in her perfected womanhood, in the young prime of her life?

It might be so.

I was no longer unworthy of her, as I had once been. The effect produced on me by the sight of my portrait was in itself due to moral and mental changes in me for the better, which had been steadily proceeding since the time when my wound had laid me helpless among strangers in a strange land. Sickness, which has made itself teacher and friend to many a man, had made itself teacher and friend to me. I looked back with horror at the vices of my youth; at the fruitless after-days when I had impiously doubted all that is most noble, all that is most consoling in human life. Consecrated by sorrow, purified by repentance, was it vain in me to hope that her spirit and my spirit might yet be united again? Who could tell?

I rose once more. It could serve no good purpose to linger until night by the banks of the river. I had left the house, feeling the impulse which drives us, in certain excited conditions of the mind, to take refuge in movement and change. The remedy had failed; my mind was as strangely disturbed as ever. My wisest course would be to go home, and keep my good mother company over her favorite game of piquet.

I turned to take the road back, and stopped, struck by the tranquil beauty of the last faint light in the western sky, shining behind the black line formed by the parapet of the bridge.

In the grand gathering of the night shadows, in the deep stillness of the dying day, I stood alone and watched the sinking light.

As I looked, there came a change over the scene. Suddenly and softly a living figure glided into view on the bridge. It passed behind the black line of the parapet, in the last long rays of the western light. It crossed the bridge. It paused, and crossed back again half-way. Then it stopped. The minutes passed, and there the figure stood, a motionless black object, behind the black parapet of the bridge.

I advanced a little, moving near enough to obtain a closer view of the dress in which the figure was attired. The dress showed me that the solitary stranger was a woman.

She did not notice me in the shadow which the trees cast on the bank. She stood with her arms folded in her cloak, looking down at the darkening river.

Why was she waiting there at the close of evening alone?

As the question occurred to me, I saw her head move. She looked along the bridge, first on one side of her, then on the other. Was she waiting for some person who was to meet her? Or was she suspicious of observation, and anxious to make sure that she was alone?

A sudden doubt of her purpose in seeking that solitary place, a sudden distrust of the lonely bridge and the swift-flowing river, set my heart beating quickly and roused me to instant action. I hurried up the rising ground which led from the river-bank to the bridge, determined on speaking to her while the opportunity was still mine.

She neither saw nor heard me until I was close to her. I approached with an irrepressible feeling of agitation; not knowing how she might receive me when I spoke to her. The moment she turned and faced me, my composure came back. It was as if, expecting to see a stranger, I had unexpectedly encountered a friend.

And yet she was a stranger. I had never before looked on that grave and noble face, on that grand figure whose exquisite grace and symmetry even her long cloak could not wholly hide. She was not, perhaps, a strictly beautiful woman. There were defects in her which were sufficiently marked to show themselves in the fading light. Her hair, for example, seen under the large garden hat that she wore, looked almost as short as the hair of a man; and the color of it was of that dull, lusterless brown hue which is so commonly seen in English women of the ordinary type. Still, in spite of these drawbacks, there was a latent charm in her expression, there was an inbred fascination in her manner, which instantly found its way to my sympathies and its hold on my admiration. She won me in the moment when I first looked at her.

"May I inquire if you have lost your way?" I asked.

Her eyes rested on my face with a strange look of inquiry in them. She did not appear to be surprised or confused at my venturing to address her.

"I know this part of the country well," I went on. "Can I be of any use to you?"

She still looked at me with steady, inquiring eyes. For a moment, stranger as I was, my face seemed to trouble her as if it had been a face that she had seen and forgotten again. If she really had this idea, she at once dismissed it with a little toss of her head, and looked away at the river as if she felt no further interest in me.

"Thank you. I have not lost my way. I am accustomed to walking alone. Good-evening."

She spoke coldly, but courteously. Her voice was delicious; her bow, as she left me, was the perfection of unaffected grace. She left the bridge on the side by which I had first seen her approach it, and walked slowly away along the darkening track of the highroad.

Still I was not quite satisfied. There was something underlying the charming expression and the fascinating manner which my instinct felt to be something wrong. As I walked away toward the opposite end of the bridge, the doubt began to grow on me whether she had spoken the truth. In leaving the neighborhood of the river, was she simply trying to get rid of me?

I at once resolved to put this suspicion of her to the test. Leaving the bridge, I had only to cross the road beyond, and to enter a plantation on the bank of the river. Here, concealed behind the first tree which was large enough to hide me, I could command a view of the bridge, and I could fairly count on detecting her, if she returned to the river, while there was a ray of light to see her by. It was not easy walking in the obscurity of the plantation: I had almost to grope my way to the nearest tree that suited my purpose.

I had just steadied my foothold on the uneven ground behind the tree, when the stillness of the twilight hour was suddenly broken by the distant sound of a voice.

The voice was a woman's. It was not raised to any high pitch; its accent was the accent of prayer, and the words it uttered were these:

"Christ, have mercy on me!"

There was silence again. A nameless fear crept over me, as I looked out on the bridge.

She was standing on the parapet. Before I could move, before I could cry out, before I could even breathe again freely, she leaped into the river.

The current ran my way. I could see her, as she rose to the surface, floating by in the light on the mid-stream. I ran headlong down the bank. She sank again, in the moment when I stopped to throw aside my hat and coat and to kick off my shoes. I was a practiced swimmer. The instant I was in the water my composure came back to me--I felt like myself again.

The current swept me out into the mid-stream, and greatly increased the speed at which I swam. I was close behind her when she rose for the second time--a shadowy thing, just visible a few inches below the surface of the river. One more stroke, and my left arm was round her; I had her face out of the water. She was insensible. I could hold her in the right way to leave me master of all my movements; I could devote myself, without flurry or fatigue, to the exertion of taking her back to the shore.

My first attempt satisfied me that there was no reasonable hope, burdened as I now was, of breasting the strong current running toward the mid-river from either bank. I tried it on one side, and I tried it on the other, and gave it up. The one choice left was to let myself drift with her down the stream. Some fifty yards lower, the river took a turn round a promontory of land, on which stood a little inn much frequented by anglers in the season. As we approached the place, I made another attempt (again an attempt in vain) to reach the shore. Our last chance now was to be heard by the people of the inn. I shouted at the full pitch of my voice as we drifted past. The cry was answered. A man put off in a boat. In five minutes more I had her safe on the bank again; and the man and I were carrying her to the inn by the river-side.

The landlady and her servant-girl were equally willing to be of service, and equally ignorant of what they were to do. Fortunately, my medical education made me competent to direct them. A good fire, warm blankets, hot water in bottles, were all at my disposal. I showed the women myself how to ply the work of revival. They persevered, and I persevered; and still there she lay, in her perfect beauty of form, without a sign of life perceptible; there she lay, to all outward appearance, dead by drowning.

A last hope was left--the hope of restoring her (if I could construct the apparatus in time) by the process called "artificial respiration." I was just endeavoring to tell the landlady what I wanted and was just conscious of a strange difficulty in expressing myself, when the good woman started back, and looked at me with a scream of terror.

"Good God, sir, you're bleeding!" she cried. "What's the matter? Where are you hurt?"

In the moment when she spoke to me I knew what had happened. The old Indian wound (irritated, doubtless, by the violent exertion that I had imposed on myself) had opened again. I struggled against the sudden sense of faintness that seized on me; I tried to tell the people of the inn what to do. It was useless. I dropped to my knees; my head sunk on the bosom of the woman stretched senseless upon the low couch beneath me. The death-in-life that had got her had got me. Lost to the world about us,

we lay, with my blood flowing on her, united in our deathly trance.

Where were our spirits at that moment? Were they together and conscious of each other? United by a spiritual bond, undiscovered and unsuspected by us in the flesh, did we two, who had met as strangers on the fatal bridge, know each other again in the trance? You who have loved and lost--you whose one consolation it has been to believe in other worlds than this--can you turn from my questions in contempt? Can you honestly say that they have never been _your_ questions too?