

Lancaster Intelligencer.

FRIDAY EVENING, SEPT. 8, 1882.

ON THE BRIDGE;

By Jasper Ingram's Devotion.

Written for the Intelligencer.

Down by St. Catharine's creek, in the shadows of the giant oaks, once monarchs of a forest primeval, lay the quiet village of St. Catharine's. A quaint old town with scattering houses, whose slanting gables, mossed with soft, green moss, testified that the hand of time had lingered lovingly on the place, hiding with emerald langens, the ravages it had made.

There was a charm about the spot, a shadow of peace and rest. The church bell rang the Angelus softly, and the sound, dwelt upon the air, as if conscious that in passing it would sound on the wings of softly breathed prayer amid the flood of rosy light, which, striking across the gray church tower fell athwart St. Catharine's bridge, now half in ruins, and almost hid from view by the drooping boughs of cypress and graceful festoons of the trumpet flower and clematis, which formed a bower "worthy of a maiden's dream, or of a poet in his youth."

Half leaning on the railing and idly scattering the white bloom of clematis on the sun-kissed waters, stood Ruth. Armed, a slender girl, with a flower face and great dark eyes, now lowly drooped beneath Jasper Ingram's tender gaze.

As the last tones of the Angelus died on the evening air, the young girl raised her eyes to her companion's, and said laughingly: "And this is our ten minutes' talk on the bridge. Do you know two trains have stopped and passed the station while you have been waiting for one?"

"No, I know nothing of it," answered her lover, imprisoning her flower-laden hands in his. "Why should I? I have you not bewitched me? I have been for the last ten minutes—you say it is two hours—in a trance, unconscious of murmuring waters, waving boughs or passing bells, only knowing I have won two short months ago I dared not dream might be mine. I little thought when I wandered here this evening I was to find my long sought treasure."

"This is a favorite resort of mine," she answered. "I come here every evening to listen to the Angelus. I cannot tell how dear this spot and the old church bell have become to me. It always rings in the evening as I reach the bridge and it seems a different bell from that which rings for our woes and joys. A mystic spirit voice that haunts alone this fairy nook."

"Has it ever rung so joyous a peal? Has its voice ever been so prophetic of joy and gladness as to-night, Ruth?" asked Jasper, bending his gaze in the blushing face half turned away.

"The reply was low, so low that he drew her still closer to hear it. "Never. The sound seems to hover over and around us—to pause as if it lingered to hear our words. Yes," she added almost sadly, as the last sound faded afar off in the distance, "it seemed to blend with the sad moaning of the pines. I felt as if my ear was a peal over to fall upon my ear again."

"But aside such fanciful love," he said earnestly. "Henceforth, St. Catharine's bridge will be to me a shrine, and when I win my fortune I shall erect, heretic though I be, a votive altar in thanks-giving for a prayer granted here, while St. Catharine's bell shall have such a new-fangled set of chiming that will be wanting the Angelus rung all hours in the day."

"By the time your fortune comes, Jasper," was the laughing reply, "I may thank you for St. Catharine's debt of gratitude. Perhaps some day I may be a patient Griseldis compared to me."

"I'll take the risk, darling. I wonder what you saw in such a penniless scraggle as I am, to prefer me over Roger Fenwick? He has every thing in his favor—wealth, station, family, and the bravest trust heart that ever beat in man's bosom. While I am minus all that a fond mamma would desire in a son-in-law," he added teasingly, not noticing how the fair girl paled and trembled at the mention of Roger Fenwick's name.

"Do you know, little one. I would long ago have put my fate to the touch, but my gratitude to Fenwick sealed my lips. I know that he loves his little ward with all the strength of his strong, proud nature. I fancied you might love or learn to love him; so I hid my feelings, or at least tried to hide them," he added, interpreting the saucy glance of her bright eyes; "and resolving never to stand between your guardian and the most cherished wish of his heart, for I owe him a heavy debt of gratitude as man can owe another."

"It is a sad story," he continued; "his voice trembling with emotion. "A mere youth, I was tempted almost beyond my strength, when he never spoke to me until you told me his hopes were vain. I could not break the vow I made. The deep obligation I owe him, even now, makes me feel as if I am wronging him in trying to win you from him."

"Jasper, you do not know how hard I tried to love him," Ruth murmured through her tears. "He has been all that a brother could be since the hour my dying father placed me in his charge. Tender and loving, watching over me with almost a woman's care, he never said when last night he asked me to be his wife, and would not hear my no, but said he would wait in hopes of success, I tried to think I loved him, but—but—"

"But you knew your heart was mine, mine alone, to have and hold until death do us part," Jasper said with almost fierce joy, as he pressed his farewell kiss on her trembling lips.

"As if in answer to his words there broke upon the air the sound of St. Catharine's bell. Not a joyous wedding peal. Not the measured strokes of three times three, that spoke of Gabriel's greeting unto the hand maiden of the Lord—but the slow, solemn tolling of the passing bell. Deep and slow the sound smote the air, driving before it the lingering rays of the dying sun—lengthening in darker, deeper gloom the black shadows of the cypress boughs.

Ruth's face turned as white as winter moonlight, and the lips, pressed to those of her lover, grew icy and cold. "There is a dirge for my rival's hopes," said Jasper with a forced laugh; "but seeing how pale Ruth had grown he added anxiously: "Do not look so like a snow wreath, Ruth; and as if you think yonder bell's sound will dim the brightness of our life. Come, or I shall fancy my pet is superstitious."

"A woman's love is in itself superstition, Jasper," murmured Ruth, as pressing her to his heart her lover tore himself away and was soon lost amid the evening shadows.

Lost in sweet reveries, Ruth lingered on the bridge, gazing dreamingly down the stream, over which the high banks, fringed away by the washing of the waters, hung like a shawl. Suddenly two forms appeared standing in the distance against the blue sky. A thrill of fear

crept over her as she recognized in them Roger Fenwick and his bitter enemy, Edward Ord. Foes for years, at school, in the arena of political life, their rivalry, intensified by the bitterness of a family feud, handed down from generation to generation.

Well might the young girl tremble at a encounter between them. Their voices reached her ears and there was a ring of hot fire in her guardian's tones as he ordered his companion to quit the spot or else he would throw him over the bank. A few fierce words were interchanged and then Roger Fenwick's arm was raised high in the air and blows fell in rapid succession. She hid her face to shut out the horrible sight, and when she raised her head again the combatants were no longer in view. A thick screen of shrubs intervened and hid them from her sight, but she heard a dull, heavy splash in the waters beneath, and a few minutes after saw Roger Fenwick walking slowly back towards Morecombe Court.

A nameless terror seized Ruth. She knew not how long she stood spell-bound on the fatal spot, gazing, as if in a trance, upon the high cliff, where the falling, serpentine like river, "The chill air of the evening warned her that night was coming on; and turning, she glided ghost-like through the mist, unconscious of all around her—not noticing the curious glance a workman, who was passing, threw upon her as she hurriedly crossed the bridge. As she dragged herself wearily up the broad steps, that led to the portico at Morecombe, she found herself in the presence of her guardian, who, with far-away look in his cold gray eyes, stood leaning against one of the two continued pillars. He started at the sound of her step, and turning towards her, said fretfully:

"Ruth, I wish you would not stay out so late. Where have you been?" "I was down at the bridge, Mr. Fenwick," she answered, raising her eyes to his, expecting to see some change pass over his face; but in this she was disappointed. His features were perfectly calm as he said with half a smile:

"The bridge has an attraction for you of late, Ruth. I must admit, however, I do not altogether approve of the long et-a-tete held there this evening. Trusting places, I believe, went out of style with the shepherds and shepherdesses. They are laid up with the rheumatism, and are expected to entertain wandering youths in the drawing-room."

His light bantering tones were to Ruth the refinement of cruelty. She gazed horror-stricken at him. Had she fallen from the bridge and been drowning? Could he whom she knew so long, so loved, so venerated, be guilty of his black crime, and yet be so calm, was the thought that flashed like an arrow of fire through her brain.

"Why, child, how white you are," he exclaimed as he caught a glimpse of her face. "Are you ill? You are trembling like an aspen leaf."

How gentle his voice grew, as taking her hands in his he tenderly placed her in a chair and he anxiously over her, not seeing how she shrank to his side. "There is nothing the matter, only, only—oh, Mr. Fenwick, you know."

"I know what, Ruth? I only know for the last two hours you and Jasper Ingram have been lingering on the bridge, trying your future I suppose by floating flowers, each with a hope unaided, on the stream. I believe that is the approved way of divining the future in love's young dream."

"God grant no shallows freighted with hopes of mine went down that stream," she replied bitterly. "I hope not, I never want your hopes to float beyond the old home here. I told you I would wait patiently, Ruth, but at the sight of your troubled face to-night a great fear has seized my soul. Ruth, did you answer me as you did last night, because Jasper Ingram has won?"

"As the last words fell from his lips, the young girl sprang impetuously to her feet, maddened almost with rage and grief and at her ineffectual efforts to make him understand what she meant, that evening's crime. To have him speak to her of his love, while the blood of his victim was yet new upon his hands, seemed a nightmare, and it was with horror she broke from his detaining hand and passing like a flash of light, disappeared through the open door.

It was with surprise, almost bordering on amazement, that Roger Fenwick gazed after his ward; and as she entered the hall it was as if a great joy and light had come from him. Until within the last hour he had never thought of her, but as a part of his own life. A helpless child, her dying father had placed her in his arms. She had grown up in his home; making it bright and beautiful with her winning ways and winsome mien. Well he had told her, she was all to him and found as he thought, her heart an unopened flower, he never dreamed, that the sun-beams of another love had crept beneath its petals. Until within the last hour he had never thought of her, but as a part of his own life. A helpless child, her dying father had placed her in his arms. She had grown up in his home; making it bright and beautiful with her winning ways and winsome mien. 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