

# The Bridge Over the Stream

By R. H. Benson

We were at tea one afternoon on the little low, tiled platform that marked the site of an old summer-house. Tall hurdles covered with briar-roses on the further side of the path fenced off the rest of the garden from us, and the sun had just sunk below the level of the house, throwing both ourselves and the garden into cool shadow. The servant had brought out the tea-things, but he presently returned with something of horror on his face. The old man looked up and saw him.

“What is it, Parker?” he asked.

“There’s been an accident, sir. Torn Awcock at the home farm has been drawn into some machine, and they say he must lose both arms, and maybe his life.”

The old man turned quite white, and his eyes grew larger and brighter.

“Is the doctor with him?” he asked, in a perfectly steady voice.

“Yes, sir, and they’ve sent a message, would you be good enough to step down? The rector’s away, and Tom’s mother’s crying terrible. But not yet, sir. About seven o’clock, they say. It won’t be over till then, and there’s no immediate danger.”

“Tell them I will be there at seven,” said the clergyman.

Parker went back to the house, and presently we heard the footsteps of a child running down the drive towards the farm.

“How shocking it is!” I said in a moment or two.

“Ah!” said the old man, smiling, “I have learnt my lesson. It is not really so shocking as you think. Does that sound hard?”

I said nothing, for it seemed to me that the consolations of religion could not soften the horror of such things. If such agonies are necessary as remedies or atonements, at least they are terrible.

“I learnt my lesson,” the old man went “down the road there, outside the hedge—down by the bridge. Would you like to hear it? Or are you tired of an old dreamer’s stories?” and he smiled at me.

“Now I know you think that I am hard—I am a little apart maybe from human life—that I cannot understand the blind misery of those who suffer in ignorance; yet you would be the first, I believe, to think that Mrs. Awcock’s consolations are unreal, and that when she tells me that she knows there is a wise purpose behind, she is only repeating what is proper to say to a clergyman. But that is not so; the old threadbare sentence is intensely real to these people, and, I hope, to myself too. For there is nothing that I desire more than to be a child like them. It is the apparent purposelessness that distresses you; it is the certainty of a deliberate purpose that comforts me. Well, shall I tell you what I saw?”

I was a little distressed at what looked like callousness, but I told him I would like to hear the story.

“I was standing one evening—it would be about five years ago—in the field down there near the stream. You remember the bridge there, over which the road goes, just outside the hedge. I love running water, and I went slowly up and down by the side of the beck. There were children on the road, coming back from school, and they stopped on the bridge to look at the water, as children and old men will. They did not see me, as the field is a little below the road, and besides their backs were turned to me. I could see a pink frock or two, and a pair of stout bare legs. Two girls were taking their brother home—he was between them, a hand clasped by each of the

sisters. I suppose the eldest girl would be about nine, and the boy five. They were talking solemnly, and I could hear every word.

“Why are children always supposed to be gay? There is no solemnity in the world to be compared to the solemnity of a little boy, or of his sister who has charge of him.

“One of the girls said, ‘Look, Johnny, there are little fishes down there.’

“ ‘When I am a man’ Johnny began, very slowly.

“ ‘Look, Johnny,’ said the other girl, ‘there’s a blue flower.’

Up to this I remember every word. But then I began to watch Johnny.

“The girls went on talking, but they leaned over more, and I could not hear them plainly. Johnny stealthily withdrew a hand from each of his sisters, and began to look for a stone to throw at the fishes or the blue flower, I suppose; for man is lord of Creation. I could see him presently through the hedge digging patiently with his fingers and loosening a stone that was firm in the road. And at that moment I heard a far-away shout and the distant bark of a dog.

“The evening was wonderfully still, every leaf hung quiet: and there were far-off clouds heaping themselves up in the west, tower over tower. We had a thunderstorm that night, I remember. The brook was quiet, just slipping noiselessly from pool to pool.

“Still Johnny was digging and the girls were talking. Then out of the village above us came again far-off noises. I could hear a rumble and the clatter of hoofs, then a cry or two more, and the nearer terrified yelp of a dog. But the girls were intent on the brook—and Johnny on the stone.

“Even now I did not understand what was happening: but I grew uneasy—and with great difficulty, for I was an old man even then, tried to scramble up the high bank by the bridge. As I reached the top I saw that one of the girls had gone. She had run, I suppose, off the bridge down by the side of the road. The other girl was still standing—but looking in a frightened way up the hill. Down the hill came the loud rumble of a cart and the clatter of hoofs, terribly near.

“The girl by the side of the road began to scream to her sister, who darted off, and then remembered Johnny and turned. Johnny got up too and ran to the parapet and stood against it.

“I was shouting, too, by now, through the hedge: but I could do nothing more, nothing more, because the hedge was high and thick, and I was an old man. Then in a moment I remembered that shouting would only distract them, and I stopped. It was useless. I could do absolutely nothing. But it was very hard.

“Then I saw the galloping body of a horse through the branches, with a butcher’s cart that rocked behind him. There was no one on the cart.

“Now there was room for the cart to pass the boy safely. By the wheelmarks, which I looked at afterwards, there were three clear feet—if only the boy had stood still.

“The girls seemed petrified as they stood, one in act to run, the other crouching and hiding her face against the hedge. The cart was now within ten yards, as I could see, though I was still staring at Johnny. Then this is what I saw.

“Somewhere behind him over the parapet of the bridge there was a figure. I remember nothing about it except the face and the hands. The face was, I think, the tenderest I have ever seen. The eyes were downcast, looking upon the boy’s head with indescribable love, the lips were smiling. One hand was over the boy’s eyes, the other against his shoulder behind. In a moment the memory of other stories I had heard came to mind—and I gave a sob of relief that the boy was safe in such care.

“But as the iron hoofs and rocking wheels came up, the hand on the boy’s shoulder suddenly pushed him to meet them; and yet those tender eyes and mouth never flinched, and the child took

a step ward in front of the horse, and was beaten down without a cry: and the cart lurched heavily, righted itself, and dashed on out of sight.

“When the cloud of dust had passed, the little body lay quiet on the road, and the two girls were clinging to one another, screaming and sobbing, but there was nothing else.

“I was as angry at first as an old man could be. I nearly (may He forgive me for it now!) cursed God and died. But the memory of that tender face did its work. It was as the face of a mother who nurses her first-born child, as the face of a child who kisses a wounded creature, it was as I think the Father’s Face itself must have been, which those angels always behold, as He looked down upon the Sacrifice of His only Son.

“Will you forgive me now if I seemed hard a few minutes ago? Perhaps you still think it was hardness that made me speak as I did. But, for myself, I hope I may call it by a better name than that.”