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# **Helbeck of Bannisdale —Volume II**

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# Imprint

This book is part of TREDITION CLASSICS

Author: Humphry, Mrs. Ward

Cover design: Buchgut, Berlin – Germany

Publisher: tredition GmbH, Hamburg - Germany

ISBN: 978-3-8424-7142-9

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## BOOK III *Continued*

### HELBECK OF BANNISDALE

#### CHAPTER II.

"Look out there! For God's sake, go to your places!"

The cry of the foreman reached the ears of the clinging women. They fell apart—each peering into the crowd and the tumult.

Mounted on a block of wood about a dozen yards from them—waving his arm and shouting to the stream of panic-stricken workmen—they saw the man who had been their guide through the works. Four white-hot ingots, just uncovered, blazed deserted on their truck close to him, and a multitude of men and boys were pushing past them, tumbling over each other in their eagerness to reach the neighbourhood of the furnace. The space between the ingots and some machinery near them was perilously narrow. At any moment, those rushing past might have been pushed against the death-bearing truck. Ah! another cry. A man's coat-sleeve has caught fire. He is pulled back—another coat is flung about him—the line of white faces turns towards him an instant—wavers—then the crowd flows on as before.

Another man in authority comes up also shouting. The man on the block dismounts, and the two hold rapid colloquy. "Have they sent for Mr. Martin?" "Aye." "Where's Mr. Barlow?" "He's no good!" "Have they stopped the mills?" "Aye—there's not a man'll touch a thing—you'd think they'd gone clean out of their minds. There'll be accidents all over the place if somebody can't quiet 'em."

Suddenly the buzzing groups behind the foreman parted, and a young broad-shouldered workman, grimed from head to foot, his blue eyes rolling in his black face, came staggering through.

"Gie ma a drink," he said, clutching at the old woman; "an let ma sit down!"

He almost fell upon an iron barrow that lay face downwards on the path. Laura, sitting crouched and sick upon the ground, raised her head to look at him. Another man, evidently a comrade, followed him, took the mug of cold tea from the old woman's shaking hand, lifted his head and helped him drink it.

"Blast yer!—why ain't it spirits?" said the youth, throwing himself back against his companion. His eyes closed on his smeared cheeks; his jaw fell; his whole frame seemed to sink into collapse; those gazing at him saw, as it were, the dislocation and undoing of a man.

"Cheer up, Ned—cheer up," said the older man, kneeling down behind him—"you'll get over it, my boy—it worn't none o' your fault. Stand back there, you fellows, and gie im air."

"Oh, damn yer! let ma be," gasped the young fellow, stretching himself against the other's support, like one who feels the whole inner being of him sick to death, and cannot be still for an instant under the anguish.

The woman with the tea began to cry loudly and ask questions. Laura rose to her feet, and touched her.

"Don't cry—can't you get some brandy?" Then in her turn she felt herself caught by the arm.

"Miss Fountain—Miss Laura—I can get you out of this!—there's a way out here by the back."

Mason's white countenance showed over her shoulder as she turned.

"Not yet—can't anyone find some brandy? Ah!"

For their guide came up at the moment with a bottle in his hand. It was Laura who handed him the mug, and it was she who, stooping down, put the spirit to the lips of the fainting workman. Her mind seemed to float in a mist of horror, but her will asserted itself; she recovered her power of action sooner than the men around her. They stared at the young lady for a moment; but no more. The one hideous fact that possessed them robbed all else of meaning.



"Did he see it?" said Laura to the man's friend. Her voice reached no ear but his. For they were surrounded by two uproars—the noise of the crowd of workmen, a couple of thousand men aimlessly surging and shouting to each other, and the distant thunder of the furnace.

"Aye, Miss. He wor drivin the tub, an he saw Overton in front—it wor the wheel of his barrer slipped, an soomthin must ha took him—if he'd ha let goa straight theer ud bin noa harm doon—bit he mut ha tried to draw it back—an the barrer pulled him right in."

"He didn't suffer?" said Laura eagerly, her face close under his.

"Thank the Lord, he can ha known nowt about it!—nowt at aw. The gas ud throttle him, Miss, afore he felt the fire."

"Is there a wife?"

"Noa—he coom here a widower three weeks sen—there's a little gell— —"

"Aye! they be gone for her an t' passon boath," said another voice; "what's passon to do whan he cooms?"

"Salve the masters' consciences!" cried a third in fury. "They'll burn us to hell first, and then quieten us with praying."

Many faces turned to the speaker, a thin, wiry man one of the "agitators" of the town, and a dull groan went round.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Make way there!" cried an imperious voice, and the crowd between them and the entrance side of the shed began to part. A gentleman came through, leading a clergyman, who walked hurriedly, with eyes downcast, holding his book against his breast.

There was a flutter of caps through the vast shed. Every head stood bared, and bent. On went the parson towards the little platform with the railway. The furnace had sunk somewhat—its roar was less acute— — Laura looking at it thought of the gorged beast that falls to rest.

But another parting of the throng—one sob!—the common sob of hundreds.

Laura looked.

"It's t' little gell, Ned! t' little gell!" said the elder workman to the youth he was supporting.

And there in the midst of the blackened crowd of men was a child, frightened and weeping, led tenderly forward by a grey-haired workman, who looked down upon her, quite unconscious of the tears that furrowed his own cheeks.

"Oh, let me—let me go!" cried Laura. The men about her fell back. They made a way for her to the child. The old woman had disappeared. In an instant Laura, as of right, took the place of her sex. Half an hour before she had been the merest passing stranger in that vast company; now she was part of them, organically necessary to the act passing in their midst. The men yielded her the child instinctively, at once; she caught the little one in her sheltering arm.

"Ought she to be here?" she asked sharply of the grey-haired man.

"They're goin to read the Burial Service, Miss," he said, as he dashed away the mist from his eyes. "An we thowt that the little un would like soom day to think she'd been here. So I found her—she wor in school."

The child looked round her in terror. The platform in front of the furnace had been hurriedly cleared. It was now crowded with men—masters and managers in black coats mingled with workmen, to the front the parson in his white. He turned to the throng below and opened his book.

*"I am the Resurrection and the Life."*

A great pulsation passed through the mob of workmen. On all sides strong men broke down and wept.

The child stared at the platform, then at these faces round her that were turned upon her.

"Daddy—where's Daddy?" she said trembling, her piteous eyes travelling up and down the pretty lady beside her.

Laura sat down on the edge of a truck and drew the little shaking creature to her breast. Such a power of tenderness went out from her, so soft was the breast, so lulling the scent of the roses pinned

into the lady's belt, that the child was stilled. Every now and then, as she looked at the men, pressing round her, a passion of fear seemed to run through her; she shuddered and struggled in Laura's hold. Otherwise she made not a sound. And the great words swept on.

\* \* \* \* \*

How the scene penetrated!—leaving great stabbing lines never to be effaced in the quivering tissues of the girl's nature. Once before she had heard the English Burial Service. Her father—groaning and fretting under the penalties of friendship—had taken her, when she was fifteen, to the funeral of an old Cambridge colleague. She remembered still the cold cemetery chapel, the gowned mourners, the academic decorum, or the mild regret amid which the function passed. Then her father's sharp impatience as they walked home—that reasonable men in a reasonable age should be asked to sit and listen to Paul's logic, and the absurdities of Paul's cosmical speculations!

And now—from what movements, what obscurities of change within herself, had come this new sense, half loathing, half attraction, that could not withdraw itself from the stroke, from the attack of this Christian poetry—these cries of the soul, now from the Psalms, now from Paul, now from the unknown voices of the Church?

Was it merely the setting that made the difference—the horror of what had passed, the infinite relief to eye and heart of this sudden calm that had fallen on the terror and distraction of the workmen—the strangeness of this vast shed for church, with its fierce perpetual drama of assaulting flame and flying shadow, and the gaunt tangled forms of its machinery—the dull glare of that distant furnace that had made so little—hardly an added throb, hardly a leaping flame! of the living man thrown to it half an hour before, and seemed to be still murmuring and growling there, behind this great act of human pity, in a dying discontent?

Whence was it—this stilling, pacifying power?

All around her men were sobbing and groaning, but as the wave dies after the storm. They seemed to feel themselves in some grasp

that sustained, some hold that made life tolerable again. "Amens" came thick and fast. The convulsion of the faces was abating; a natural human courage was flowing back into contracted hearts.

*"Blessed are the dead—for they rest from their labours—" "as our hope is this our brother doth."*

Laura shivered. The constant agony of the world, in its constant search for all that consoles, all that eases, laid its compelling hand upon her. By a natural instinct she wrapped her arms closer, more passionately, round the child upon her knee.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Won't she come?" said Mason.

He and Seaton were standing in the downstairs parlour of a small house in a row of workmen's cottages, about half a mile from the steel works.

Mason still showed traces, in look and bearing, of the horror he had witnessed. But he had sufficiently recovered from it to be conscious into the bargain of his own personal grievance, of their spoilt day, and his lost chances. Seaton, too, showed annoyance and impatience; and as Polly entered the room he echoed Mason's question.

Polly shook her head.

"She says she won't leave the child till the last moment. We must go and have our tea, and come back for her."

"Come along then!" said Mason gloomily, as he led the way to the door.

The little garden outside, as they passed through it, was crowded with women discussing the accident, and every now and then a crowd would gather on the pavement and disperse again. To each and all the speakers, the one intolerable thing was the total disappearance of the poor lost one. No body—no clothes—no tangible relic of the dead: it was a sore trial to customary beliefs. Heaven and hell seemed alike inconceivable when there was no phantom grave-body to make trial of them. One woman after another declared that it would send her mad if it ever happened to any belonging of hers. "But it's a mercy there's no one to fret—nobbut t' little gell—an she's too sma'." There was much talk about the young lady that had come

home with her—"a nesh pretty-lukin yoong creetur"—to whom little Nelly clung strangely—no doubt because she and her father had been so few weeks in Froswick that there had been scarcely time for them to make friends of their own. The child held the lady's gown in her clutch perpetually, Mr. Dixon reported—would not lose sight of her for a moment. But the lady herself was only a visitor to Froswick, was being just taken through the works, when the accident happened, and was to leave the town by an evening train—so it was said. However, there would be those left behind who would look after the poor lamb—Mrs. Starr, who had taken the tea to the works, and Mrs. Dixon, the Overtons' landlady. They were in the house now; but the lady had begged everyone else to keep outside.

The summer evening crept on.

At half-past six Polly with Hubert behind her climbed the stairs of the little house. Polly pushed open the door of the back room, and Hubert peered over her shoulder.

Inside was a small workman's room, with a fire burning, and the window wide open. There were tea-things on the table; a canary bird singing loudly in a cage beside the window; and a suit of man's clothes with a clean shirt hanging over a chair near the fire.

In a rocking-chair by the window lay the little girl—a child of about nine years old. She was quite colourless, but she was not crying. Her eyes still had the look of terror that the sight of the works had called up in them, and she started at every sound. Laura was kneeling beside her, trying to make her drink some tea. The child kept pushing the tea away, but her other hand held fast to Laura's arm. On the further side of the table sat two elderly women.

"Laura, there's only just time!" said Polly softly, putting her head through the door.

The child started painfully, and the cup Laura held was with difficulty saved from falling.

Laura stooped and kissed the little one's cheek.

"Dear, will you let me go now? Mrs. Dixon will take care of you—and I'll come and see you again soon."

Nelly began to breathe fast. She caught Laura's sleeve with both hands.

"Don't you go, Miss—I'll not stay with her." She nodded towards her landlady.

"Now, Nelly, you must be a good girl," said Mrs. Dixon, rising and coming forward—she was a strange, ugly woman, with an almost bald head—"you must do what your poor papa wud ha wished you to do. Let the lady go, an I'll take care on you same as one o' my own, till they can come and take you to the House."

"Oh! don't say that!" cried Laura.

But it was too late. The child had heard the word—had understood it.

She looked wildly from one to the other, then she threw herself against the side of the chair, in a very madness of crying. Now, she pushed even Laura away. It seemed as though at the sound of that one word she had felt herself indeed forsaken, she had become acquainted with her grief.

Laura's eyes filled with tears.

Polly, standing at the door, spoke to her in vain.

\* \* \* \* \*

"There's another train—Mr. Seaton said so!" Laura threw the words over her shoulder as though in anger. Hubert Mason stood behind her. In her excitement it seemed to her that he was dragging her by force from this sobbing and shrieking misery before her.

"I don't believe he's right. I never heard of any train later than the 7.10," said Mason, in perplexity.

"Go and ask him."

Mason went away and returned.

"Of course he swears there is. You won't get Seaton to say he's mistaken in a hurry. All I know is I never heard of it."

"He must be right," said Laura obstinately. "Don't trouble about me—send a cab. Oh!"

She put her hands to her ears for an instant, as they stood by the door, as though to shut out the child's cries. Hubert looked down upon her, hesitating, his face flushed, his eyes drawn and sombre.

"Now—you'll let me take you home, Miss Laura? It'll be very late for you. I can get back to-morrow."

She looked up suddenly.

"No, *no!*" she said, almost stamping. "I can get home alone quite well.

I want no one."

Then she caught the lad's expression—and put her hand to her brow a moment.

"Come back for me now at any rate—in an hour," she said in another voice. "Please take me to the train—of course. I must go then."

"Oh, Laura, I *can't* wait!" cried Polly from the stairs—"I wish I could. But mother's sending Daffady with the cart—and she'd be that cross."

Laura came out to the stairway.

"Don't wait. Just tell the carriage—mind"—she hung over the banisters,

enforcing the words—"tell them that I'm coming by the later train. They're not to send down for me again—I can get a cab at the inn.

Mind,

Polly,—did you hear?"

She bent forward, caught Polly's assent, and ran back to the child.

\* \* \* \* \*

An hour later Mason found Laura with little Nelly lying heavily asleep in her arms. At sight of him she put finger on lip, and, rising, carried the child to her bed. Tenderly she put her down—tenderly kissed the little hand. The child's utter sleep seemed to soothe her, for she turned away with a smile on her blanched lips. She gave money to Mrs. Starr, who was to nurse the little one for a week, and then, it seemed to Mason, she was all alacrity, all eagerness to go.

"Oh! but we're late!" she said, looking at her watch in the street. And she hastily put her head out of the window and implored the cabman to hurry.

Mason said nothing.

The station, when they reached it, was in a Saturday night ferment. Trains were starting and arriving, the platforms were packed with passengers.

Mason said a word to a porter as they rushed in. The porter answered; then, while they fled on, the man stopped a moment and looked back as though about to run after them. But a dozen passengers with luggage laid hands upon him at once, and he was left with no time for more than the muttered remark:

"Marsland? Why, there's no train beyond Braeside to-night."

"No. 4 platform," said Hubert to his companion. "Train just going." Laura threw off her exhaustion and ran.

The guard was just putting his whistle to his lips. Hubert lifted her into her carriage.

"Good-bye," she said, waving to him, and disappeared at once into a crowd of fellow-passengers.

"Right for Marsland?" cried Hubert to the guard.

The guard, who had already whistled, waved his flag as he replied:

"Marsland? No train beyond the junction to-night."

Hubert paused for a moment, then, as the train was moving briskly out, sprang upon the foot-board. A porter rushed up, the door was opened, and he was shoved in amid remonstrances from front and rear.

The heavily laden train stopped at every station—was already nearly an hour late. Holiday crowds got in and out; the platforms were gay with talk and laughter.

Mason saw nothing and heard nothing. He sat leaning forward, his hat slouched over his eyes. The man opposite thought he had fallen asleep.



Whose fault was it? Not his! He might have made sure? Why, wasn't  
Seaton's word good enough? *She* thought so.

Why hadn't he made sure? — in that interval before he came back for her. She might have stayed at Froswick for the night. Plenty of decent people would have put her up. He remembered how he had delayed to call the cab till the last moment.

... Good God! how could a man know what he had thought! He was fair moidered — bedazzled — by that awful thing — and all the change of plans. And there was Seaton's word for it. Seaton was a practical man, and always on the railway.

What would she say — when the train stopped? In anticipation he already heard the cry of the porters — "Braeside — all change!" The perspiration started on his brow. Why, there was sure to be a decent inn at Braeside, and he would do everything for her. She would be glad — of course she would be glad to see him — as soon as she discovered her dilemma. After all he was her cousin — her blood relation.

And Mr. Helbeck? The lad's hand clenched. A clock-face came slowly into view at a wayside station. 8.45. He was now waiting for her at Marsland. For the Squire himself would bring the trap; there was no coachman at Bannisdale. A glow of fierce joy passed through the lad's mind, as he thought of the Squire waiting, the train's arrival, the empty platform, the returning carriage. What would the Squire think? Damn him! — let him think what he liked.

\* \* \* \* \*

Meanwhile, in another carriage, Laura leant back with shut eyes, pursued by one waking dream after another. Shadow and flame — the whirling sparks — the cry! — that awful wrenching of the heart in her breast — the parting crowd, and the white-faced child, phantom-like, in its midst. She sat up, shaken anew by the horror of it, trying to put it from her.

The carriage was now empty. All the other travellers had dismounted, and she seemed to be rushing through the summer night alone. For the long daylight was nearly done. The purple of the June

evening was passing into the more mysterious purple of the starlight; a clear and jewelled sky hung softly over valleys with "seaward parted lips," over woods with the wild rose bushes shining dimly at their edge; over knolls of rocky ground, crowned with white spreading farms; over those distant forms to the far north where the mountains melted into the night.

Her heart was still wrung for the orphaned child—prized yesterday, no doubt—they said he was a good father!—desolate to-day—like herself. "Daddy!—where's Daddy?" She laid her brow against the window-sill and let the tears come again, as she thought of that trembling cry. For it was her own—the voice of her own hunger— orphan to orphan.

And yet, after this awful day—this never to be forgotten shock and horror—she was not unhappy. Rather, a kind of secret joy possessed her as the train sped onward. Her nature seemed to be sinking wearily into soft gulfs of reconciliation and repose. Froswick, with its struggle and death, its newness and restlessness, was behind her—she was going home, to the old house, with its austerity and peace.

Home? Bannisdale, home? How strange! But she was too tired to fight herself to-night—she let the word pass. In her submission to it there was a secret pleasure.

... The first train had come in by now. Eagerly, she saw Polly on the platform—Polly looking for the pony cart. Was it old Wilson, or Mr. Helbeck? Wilson, of course! And yet—yet—she knew that Wilson had been away in Whinthorpe on farm business all day. And Mr. Helbeck was careful of the old man. Ah well! there would be something—and someone—to meet her when she arrived. Her heart knew that.

Now they were crossing the estuary. The moon was rising over the sands, and those far hills, the hills of Bannisdale. There on the further bank were the lights of Braeside. She had forgotten to ask whether they changed at the junction—probably the Marsland train would be waiting.

The Greet!—its voice was in her ears, its many channels shone in the flooding light. How near the hills seemed!—just a moonlight

walk along the sands, and one was there, under the old tower and the woods. The sands were dangerous, people said. There were quicksands among them, and one must know the paths. Ah! well—she smiled. Humdrum trains and cabs were good enough for her to-night.

She hung at the open window, looking down into the silver water. How strange, after these ghastly hours, to feel yourself floating in beauty and peace—a tremulous peace—like this? The world going your way—the soul yielding itself to fate—taking no more painful thought for the morrow—

\* \* \* \* \*

"Braeside! All change!"

Laura sprang from the carriage. The station clock opposite told her to her dismay that it was nearly half-past eleven.

"Where's the Marsland train?" she said to the porter who had come forward to help her. "And how dreadfully late we are!"

"Marsland train, Miss! Last one left an hour ago—no other till 6.12 to-morrow morning."

"What do you mean? Oh! you didn't hear!—it's the train for *Marsland* I want."

"Afraid you won't get it then, Miss, till to-morrow. Didn't they warn you at Froswick? They'd ought to. This train only makes the main-line connection—for Crewe and Rugby—no connection Whinthorpe way after 8.20."

Laura's limbs seemed to waver beneath her. A step on the platform. She turned and saw Hubert Mason.

"You!"

Mason thought she would faint. He caught her arm to support her. The porter looked at them curiously, then moved away, smiling to himself.

Laura tottered to the railing at the back of the platform and supported herself against it.

"What are you here for?" she said to him in a voice—a voice of hatred—a voice that stung.

He glanced down upon her, pulling his fair moustache. His handsome face was deeply flushed.

"I only heard there was no train on, from the guard, just as you were starting; so I jumped into the next carriage that I might be of some use to you here if I could. You needn't look at me like that," he broke out violently—"I couldn't help it!"

"You might have found out," she said hoarsely.

"Say you believe I did it on purpose!—to get you into trouble!—you may as well. You'd believe anything bad about me, I know."

Already there was a new note in his voice, a hoarse, tyrannous note, as though he felt her in his power. In her terror the girl recalled that wild drive from the Browhead dance, with its disgusts and miseries. Was he sober now? What was she to do?—how was she to protect herself? She felt a passionate conviction that she was trapped, that he had planned the whole catastrophe, knowing well what would be thought of her at Bannisdale—in the neighbourhood.

She looked round her, making a desperate effort to keep down exhaustion and excitement. The main-line train had just gone, and the station-master, with a lantern in his hand, was coming up the platform.

Laura went to meet him.

"I've made a mistake and missed the last train to Marsland. Can I sit here in the station till the morning?"

The station-master looked at her sharply—then at the man standing a yard or two behind her. The young lady had to his eye a wild, dishevelled appearance. Her fair hair had escaped its bonds in all directions, and was hanging loose upon her neck behind. Her hat had been crumpled and bent by the child's embracing arms; the little muslin dress showed great smears of coal-dust here and there, and the light gloves were black.