

CHAPTER XXII - Master Landsell's Son

"I dunnot know what to mak' on her," Joan said to Anice, speaking of Liz. "Sometimes she is i' sich sperrits that she's fairly flighty, an' then agen, she's aw fretted an' crossed with ivvery-thing. Th' choild seems to worrit her to death."

"That lass o' Lowrie's has made a bad bargain, i' takin' up wi' that wench," said a townswoman to Grace. "She's noan one o' th' soart as 'll keep straight. She's as shallow as a brook i' midsummer. What's she doin' leavin' th' young un to Joan, and gaddin' about wi' ribbons i' her bonnet? Some lasses would na ha' th' heart to show theirsens."

The truth was that the poor weak child was struggling feebly in deep water again. She had not thought of danger. She had only been tired of the monotony of her existence, and had longed for a change. If she had seen the end she would have shrunk from it before she had taken her first step. She wanted no more trouble and shame, she only wanted variety and excitement.

She was going down a by-lane leading to the Maxy's cottage, and was hurrying through the twilight, when she brushed against a man who was lounging carelessly along the path, smoking a cigar, and evidently enjoying the balmy coolness of the summer evening. It was just light enough for her to see that this person was well-dressed, and young,

and with a certain lazily graceful way of moving, and it was just light enough for the man to see that the half-frightened face she lifted was pretty and youthful. But, having seen this much, he must surely have recognized more, for he made a quick backward step. "Liz!" he said. "Why, Liz, my girl!" And Liz stood still. She stood still, because, for the moment, she lost the power of motion. Her heart gave a great wild leap, and, in a minute more, she was trembling all over with a strange, dreadful emotion. It seemed as if long, terrible months were blotted out, and she was looking into her cruel lover's face, as she had looked at it last. It was the man who had brought her to her greatest happiness and her deepest pain and misery. She could not speak at first; but soon she broke into a passion of tears. It evidently made the young man uncomfortable--perhaps it touched him a little. Ralph Landsell's nature was not unlike Liz's own. He was invariably swayed by the passing circumstance,--only, perhaps, he was a trifle more easily moved by an evil impulse than a good one. The beauty of the girl's tearful face, too, overbalanced his first feeling of irritation at seeing her and finding that he was in a difficult position. Then he did not want her to run away and perhaps betray him in her agitation, so he put out his hand and laid it on her shoulder.

"Hush," he said. "Don't cry. What a poor little goose you are. Somebody will hear you."

The girl made an effort to free herself from his detaining hand, but it was useless. Light as his grasp was, it held her.

"Let me a-be," she cried, sobbing petulantly. "Yo' ha' no reet to howd me. Yo' were ready enow to let me go when--when I wur i' trouble."

"Trouble!" he repeated after her. "Wasn't I in trouble, too? You don't mean to say you did not know what a mess I was in? I'll own it looked rather shabby, Liz, but I was obliged to bolt as I did. I hadn't time to stay and explain. The governor was down on us, and there'd have been an awful row. Don't be hard on a fellow, Lizzie. You're--you're too nice a little girl to be hard on a fellow."

But Liz would not listen.

"Yo' went away an' left me wi'out a word," she said; "yo' went away an' left me to tak' care o' mysen when I could na do it, an' had na strength to howd up agen th' world. I wur turned out o' house an' home, an' if it had na been fur th' hospytal, I might ha' deed i' th' street. Let me go. I dunnott want to ha' awt to do wi' yo'. I nivver wanted to see yore face agen. Leave me a-be. It's ower now, an' I dun-not want to get into trouble agen."

He drew his hand away, biting his lip and frowning boyishly. He had been as fond of Liz as such a man could be. But she had been a trouble to him in the end, and he had barely escaped, through his cowardly flight, from being openly disgraced and visited by his father's wrath.

"If you had not gone away in such a hurry, you would have found that I did not mean to treat you so badly after all," he said. "I wrote to you and sent you money, and told you why I was obliged to leave you for the time, but you were gone, and the letter was returned to me. I was not so much to blame."

"Th' blame did na fa' on yo'," said Liz. "I tell yo' I wur turnt out, but--it--it does na matter now," with a sob.

Now that she was out of his reach, he discovered that she had not lost all her old attractions for him. She was prettier than ever,--the shawl had slipped from her curly hair, the tears in her eyes made them look large and soft, and gave her face an expression of most pathetic helplessness,--and he really felt that he would like to defend, if not clear himself. So, when she made a movement as if to leave him, he was positively anxious to detain her.

"You are not going?" he said. "You won't leave a fellow in this way, Lizzie?"

The old tone, half caressing, half reproachful, was harder for the girl to withstand than a stronger will could comprehend. It brought back so much to her,--those first bright days, her poor, brief little reign, her childish pleasures, his professed love for her, all her lost delight. If she had been deliberately bad, she would have given way that instant, knowing that she was trifling on the brink of sin once more. But she was

not bad, only emotional, weak and wavering. The tone held her one moment and then she burst into fresh tears.

"I wunnot listen to yo'," she cried. "I wunnot listen to yo-. I wunnot--I wunnot," and before he had time to utter another word, she had turned and fled down the lane back toward Joan's cottage, like some hunted creature fleeing for life.

Joan, sitting alone, rose in alarm, when she burst open the door and rushed in. She was quivering from head to foot, panting for breath, and the tears were wet upon her cheeks.

"What is it?" cried Joan. "Lizzie, my lass, what ails yo'?"

She threw herself down upon the floor and hid her face in the folds of Joan's dress.

"I--ha'--I ha' seed a ghost, or--summat," she panted and whimpered.

"I--I met summat as feart me."

"Let me go and look what it wur," said Joan. "Was it i' th' lane? Tha art tremblin' aw o'er, Lizzie."

But Liz only clung to her more closely.

"Nay--nay," she protested. "Tha shall na go. I'm feart to be

left--an'--an' I dunnot want yo' to go. Dunnot go, Joan, dunnot."

And Joan was fain to remain.

She did not go out into the village for several days after this, Joan observed. She stayed at home and did not even leave the cottage. She was not like herself, either. Up to that time she had seemed to be forgetting her trouble, and gradually slipping back into the enjoyments she had known before she had gone away. Now a cloud seemed to be upon her. She was restless and nervous, or listless and unhappy. She was easily startled, and now and then Joan fancied that she was expecting something unusual to happen. She lost color and appetite, and the child's presence troubled her more than usual. Once, when it set up a sudden cry, she started, and the next moment burst into tears.

"Why, Liz!" said Joan, almost tenderly. "Yo' mun be ailin', or yo' hannot gotten o'er yo're fright yet Yo're not yoresen at aw. What a simple little lass yo' are to be feart by a boggart i' that way."

"I dunnot know what's the matter wi' me," said Liz, "I dunnot feel reet, somehow. Happen I shall get o'er it i' toime."

But though she recovered herself somewhat, she was not the same girl again. And this change in her it was that made Joan open her heart to Anice. She saw that something was wrong, and noted a new influence at work even after the girl began to go out again and resume her visits

to her acquaintances. Then, alternating with fretful listlessness, were tremulous high spirits and feverish fits of gayety.

There came a day, however, when Joan gained a clue to the meaning of this change, though never from her first recognition of it until the end did she comprehend it fully. Perhaps she was wholly unconscious of what narrower natures experience. Then, too, she had little opportunity for hearing gossip. She had no visitors, and she was kept much at home with the child, who was not healthy, and who, during the summer months, was constantly feeble and ailing.

Grace, hearing nothing more after the first hint of suspicion, was so far relieved that he thought it best to spare Joan the pain of being stung by it.

But there came a piece of news to Joan that troubled her.

"Theer's a young sprig o' one o' th' managers stayin' at th' 'Queen's Arms,'" remarked a pit woman one morning. "He's a foine young chap, too--dresses up loike a tailor's dummy, an' looks as if he'd stepped reet square out o' a bandbox. He's a son o' owd Landsell's."

Joan stopped a moment at her work.

"Are yo' sure o' that?" she asked, anxiously.

"Sure he's Mester Landsell's son? Aye, to be 'sure it's him. My mester towd me hissen."

This was Liz's trouble, then.

At noon Joan went home full of self-reproach because sometimes her patience had failed her. Liz looked up with traces of tears in her eyes, when Joan came in. Joan did not hesitate. She only thought of giving her comfort. She went and sat down in a chair near by--she drew the curly head down upon her lap, and laid her hand on it caressingly.

"Lizzie, lass," she said; "yo' need na ha' been afeard to tell me."

There was a quick little pant from Liz, and then stillness.

"I heard about it to-day," Joan went on, "an' I did na wonder as yo' wur full o' trouble. It brings it back, Liz, I dare say."

The pant became a sob--the sob broke into a low cry.

"Oh, Joan! Joan! dunnot blame me--dunnot. It wur na my fault as he coom, an'--an' I canna bear it."

Even then Joan had no suspicion. To her mind it was quite natural that such a cry of pain should be wrung from the weak heart. Her hand lost its steadiness as she touched the soft, tangled hair more tenderly than

before.

"He wur th' ghost as yo' seed i' th' lane," she said. "Wur na he?"

"Aye," wept Liz, "he wur, an' I dare na tell yo'. It seemit loike it tuk away my breath, an' aw my heart owt o' me. Nivver yo' blame me, Joan--nivver yo' be hard on me--ivverything else is hard enow. I thowt I wur safe wi' yo'--I did fur sure."

"An' yo' are safe," Joan answered. "Dost tha' think I would turn agen thee? Nay, lass; tha'rt as safe as th' choild is, when I hold it i' my breast. I ha' a pain o' my own, Liz, as 'll nivver heal, an' I'd loike to know as I'd held out my hond to them as theer is healin' fur. I'd thank God fur th' chance--poor lass--poor lass--poor lass!" And she bent down and kissed her again and again.