

CHAPTER XXXI - The Last Blow

"He won't live," the doctor said to Derrick. "He's not the man to get over such injuries, powerful as he looks. He has been a reckless, drunken brute, and what with the shock and reaction nothing will save him. The clumsy rascals who attacked him meant to do him harm enough, but they have done him more than they intended, or at least the man's antecedents will help them to a result they may not have aimed at. We may as well tell the girl, I suppose--fine creature, that girl, by the way. She won't have any sentimental regrets. It's a good riddance for her, to judge from what I know of them."

"I will tell her," said Derrick.

She listened to him with no greater show of emotion than an increased pallor. She remembered the wounded man only as a bad husband and a bad father. Her life would have been less hard to bear if he had died years ago, but now that death stood near him, a miserable sense of desolateness fell upon her, inconsistent as such a feeling might seem.

The village was full of excitement during this week. Everybody was ready with suggestions and conjectures, everybody wanted to account for the assault. At first there seemed no accounting for it at all, but at length some one recollected that Lowrie had been last seen with Spring and Braddy. They had "getten up a row betwixt theirsens, and t'others had punsed him."

The greatest mystery was the use of vitriol. It could only be decided that it had not been an ordinary case of neighborly "punsing," and that there must have been a "grudge" in the matter. Spring and Braddy had disappeared, and all efforts to discover their whereabouts were unavailing.

On the subject of Liz's flight Joan was silent, but it did not remain a secret many hours. A collier's wife had seen her standing, crying, and holding a little bundle on her arm at the corner of a lane, and having been curious enough to watch, had also seen Landsell join her a few minutes later.

"She wur whimperin' afore he coom," said the woman, "but she cried i' good earnest when he spoke to her, an' talked to him an' hung back as if she could na mak' up her moind whether to go or no. She wur a soft thing, that wench, it wur allus whichivver way th' wind blowed wi' her. I could nivver see what that lass o' Lowrie's wanted wi' her. Now she's gotten th' choild on her honds."

The double shock had numbed Joan. She went about the place and waited upon her father in a dull, mechanical way. She said but little to the curious crowd, who, on pretence of being neighborly, flocked to the house. She had even had very little to say to Anice. Perhaps after all, her affection for poor Liz had been a stronger one than she had thought.

"I think," Grace said gently to Anice, "that she does not exactly need us yet."

He made the remark in the Rector's presence and the Reverend Harold did not agree with him.

"I am convinced that you are mistaken, Grace," he said. "You are a little too--well, too delicately metaphysical for these people. You have sensitive fancies about them, and they are not a sensitive class. What they want is good strong doctrine, and a certain degree of wholesome frankness. They need teaching. That young woman, now--it seems to me that this is the time to rouse her to a sense of her--her moral condition. She ought to be roused, and so ought the man. It is a great pity that he is unconscious."

Of Joan's strange confession of faith, Anice had told him something, but he had been rather inclined to pronounce it "emotional," and somehow or other could not quite divest himself of the idea that she needed the special guidance of a well-balanced and experienced mind. The well-balanced and experienced mind in view was his own, though of course he was not aware of the fact that he would not have been satisfied with that of any other individual. He was all the more disinclined to believe in Joan's conversion because his interviews with her continued to be as unsatisfactory as ever. Her manner had altered; she had toned down somewhat, but she still caused him to feel ill at ease. If she did not defy him any longer or set his teachings at naught, her grave eyes,

resting on him silently, had sometimes the effect of making his words fail him; which was a novel experience with the Rector.

In a few days Lowrie began to sink visibly. As the doctor predicted, the reaction was powerful, and remedies were of no avail. He lay upon the bed, at times unconscious, at times tossing to and fro in delirium.

During her watching at the bedside, Joan learned the truth. Sometimes he fancied himself tramping the Knoll Road homeward through the rain, and then he muttered sullenly of the "day" that was coming to him, and the vengeance he was returning to take; sometimes he went through the scene with Joan herself, and again, he waited behind the hedge for his enemy, one moment exultant, the next striving to struggle to his feet with curses upon his lips and rage in his heart, as he caught the sound of the advancing steps he knew so well. As he went over these scenes again and again, it was plain enough to the listener that his vengeance had fallen upon his own head.

The day after he received his hurts a collier dropped into "The Crown" with a heavy stick in his hand.

"I fun this knob-stick nigh a gap i' th' hedge on th' Knoll Road," he said. "It wur na fur fro' wheer they fun Lowrie. Happen them chaps laid i' wait fur him an' it belongs to one o' 'em."

"Let's ha' a look at it," said a young miner, and on its being handed to him he inspected it closely.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "It's Lowrie's own. I seed him wi' it th' day afore he wur hurt. I know th' shape o' th' knob. How could it ha' coom theer?"

But nobody could guess. It was taken to Joan and she listened to the story without comment. There was no reason why they should be told what she had already discovered.

When Lowrie died, Anice and Grace were in the room with Joan. After the first two days the visitors had dropped off. They had satisfied their curiosity. Lowrie was not a favorite, and Joan had always seemed to stand apart from her fellows, so they were left to themselves.

Joan was standing near the bed when there came to him his first and last gleam of consciousness. The sun was setting, and its farewell glow streaming through the window fell upon his disfigured face and sightless eyes. He roused him-self, moving uneasily.

"What's up wi' me?" he muttered. "I conna see--I conna--"

Joan stepped forward.

"Feyther," she said.

Then memory seemed to return to him. An angry light shot across his face. He flung out his hands and groaned:

"What!" he cried, "tha art theer, art tha?" and helpless and broken as he was, he wore that moment a look Joan had long ago learned to understand.

"Ay, feyther," she answered.

It appeared as if, during the few moments in which he lay gasping, a full recognition of the fact that he had been baffled and beaten after all--that his plotting had been of no avail--forced itself upon him. He made an effort to speak once or twice and failed, but at last the words came.

"Tha went agen me, did tha?" he panted. "Dom thee!" and with a struggle to summon all his strength, he raised himself, groping, struck at her with his clenched hand, and failing to reach her, fell forward with his face upon the bed.

It was all over when they raised him and laid him back again. Joan stood upright, trembling a little, but otherwise calm.