

Divided Devotion

(Concluded from page 8.)

was wanting you, and he was as drunk as drunk. He's not been gone long—went off swearin' what he'd do an—"

Peggy's eyes flashed. "The brute—to frighten you like this!" She thought of Jim and her refusals. "But never mind, he won't come back—"

"Wait. He's that bitter against you and Jim. An' he said he was off to Mr. Branksome's to fire the house."

Peggy laughed. "Not he. He's a brave man when he's drunk, it seems. Besides, Mr. Branksome—"

"But it's true. He's got it all arranged. He told me how 'twas to be done. An' the blame'll fall on Jim and the folk as are marching there to-night."

For a moment Peggy was silent; then she drew her aunt to a chair by the fire. "You sit there quiet," she said; "and don't worry about things. I'll run to Branksome's and warn them. It's not very far."

It was four miles to Mr. Branksome's house, a solitary, rambling place, flanking an unfrequented road. Peggy ran on, and on, stopping now and again only to gain breath.

Darkness had fallen, and the chill wind carried with it sudden showers of rain. Not a soul was abroad, for everybody was either taking part in the demonstration or watching those who were. Once Peggy thought she heard shouts borne on the wind, and she stopped, her heart beating wildly, wondering if she were too late.

The noise resolved itself into a confused murmur, and Peggy, looking across the fields, could see in the distance twinkling lights. They were the lamps carried by the demonstrators.

It seemed as if her leaden feet could carry her no further, when she saw in front of her the lights of Mr. Branksome's house. Redoubling her efforts, she reached the door, almost collapsing with her supreme effort, and rapped loudly and often.

A maidservant opened the door. "Mr. Branksome," panted Peggy. "I want to speak to Mr. Branksome."

The maid looked at Peggy's dishevelled and mud-stained clothes, and tossed her head. "Well, you can't!" she snapped. "He's engaged!"

"I must see him. Tell him I'm Peggy—Peggy from the mills. He'll see me. Quick, quick!"

The maidservant hesitated, and then, impressed by Peggy's earnestness, went to inquire. In a minute or two she returned.

"Come in," she said, grudgingly.

Peggy was shown into the dining-room. Round the table were sitting four elderly men with papers in front of them. Mr. Branksome looked up.

"What is it?" he asked; then he altered his tone: "Is anything the matter, Peggy?"

Peggy forced herself to speak. "To-night," she panted, "the workers are coming here—"

"Yes, yes; we know that," said Mr. Branksome, with a slight smile. "Is that your message?"

"Wait. Dan Gray was at my aunt's house before I got home. He was drunk. He said he was coming on here to fire the house. He meant that Jim should get the blame." She stopped, catching at her throat for breath.

"And so you came to warn me, Peggy. That was good of you. You must let me—" He broke off. Through the windows came the sound of a great multitude. "Here they are," he said to the men beside him. "Let us meet them at once."

THEY rose and went out of the room, followed by Peggy. Mr. Branksome threw open the front door. The light streaming upon them from the hall revealed them to the crowd. A tired, cold, hungry crowd it was, and Mr. Branksome's glance softened when his eyes fell upon it. For a moment there was silence, and then a voice cried out: "Come out o' that house. Peggy Maitland, an' no' shame yer man!"

And Peggy, listening, distraught, heard the words repeated.

"Aye, come out—come out!"

She hung back, frightened at the angry words that were hurled at her. She saw, prominent among the crowd,

the white, stern face of Jim, and she longed for words to explain her presence.

But at that moment the attention of the crowd was attracted by a thin wreath of smoke that curled up from the adjoining stables and was swept away by the wind. It was followed by a denser volume that blew in their faces. Mr. Branksome rushed to the door of the outhouse and opened it. He was driven back by a suffocating column of smoke.

"Fire!" The cry was taken up and echoed by the crowd. The stable contained no horses, but it adjoined the house, and the danger of the fire spreading was appreciated by all. In a moment Jim Newton had dashed forward, with two other men, to the task of extinguishing the fire. Quickly pails were found, filled with water, and passed along a chain of willing workers.

Mr. Branksome and his friends worked as well. As he hurried past Jim, the latter touched his arm.

"This is no work of ours," he said, eagerly. "We—"

"Of course it isn't. Wait—"

A THOUGHT struck him. Wrapping his coat round his arm with which he shielded his face, he darted into the stable from which no flames now appeared, but which was full of smoke.

He was gone but a few minutes, but Jim was anxious.

"What did he do that for?" he muttered. Then he hurried after Mr. Branksome. Almost at the doorway he stumbled against him. He was bending down, endeavouring to raise in his arms the figure of a man. The next moment, with Jim's assistance, they had the man outside.

"Dan Gray!" Again Jim thought of Peggy. What had brought these two to Mr. Branksome's house? A thousand suspicions filled his brain. Mr. Branksome bent over the figure. "He's not dead," he said, "but it was touch and go." He rose to his feet. "The fire's out now," he said, turning to Jim. "Thank you. Thank you all for your help. And now I've something to say to you all."

The crowd which, save for the active workers, had fallen back so as to give room to those engaged in putting out the fire, now came nearer. Mr. Branksome raised his hand for silence.

"I expected you here to-night," he cried, "and I have news for you. But first let me tell you that you did wrong to accuse the best girl in or out of the mills with treachery. She came here to warn me of an attempt to fire the house. She came because she was afraid that you might be blamed for it. She ran here all the way to help you and to help me."

Jim heard the words, ashamed. He was standing beside the speaker. He hesitated for a moment, and then, "Where is she?" he cried, eagerly.

"You will see her in a moment. My news is this: These gentlemen are the executive of the Millowners' Association. We have agreed to-night to stop the lock-out. We have agreed to recognize your union. We will meet your leaders to-morrow and discuss the other points. You've won. I congratulate you."

He said more, but Jim did not listen. The lock-out was over, the victory was with the workers, and Peggy—quickly he turned away in search of her. He met her coming out of the house. "Did you hear, Peggy?" he said, softly, "the war is over."

"I heard, Jim. It's grand, isn't it?"

"And you and me, Peggy—are we to be friends again? Oh, I haven't been kind to you, Peggy. Will you forgive me? I can't do without you."

"It was my fault, Jim. And I can't do without you."

They were out of sight. From the other side of the house came the voice of Mr. Branksome and the shouts of the crowd. Then someone began to sing, and a hoarse chorus joined in, "For he's a jolly good fellow."

Peggy and Jim, holding each other's hands, listened. "Friends again," he said. "Thank Heaven! It's give and take makes the world go round, give and take and a power of sympathy."

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