

LISA LENA: THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF AN OUT-CAST.

CHAPTER VII.

THE ADULT TO FARMER MASON'S.

For sometime after the happening of the incident related in the last chapter, there was a change in the conduct of the farmer and his wife towards me. Dragon would no longer be his part in the affairs, but he had been sent away or shot, had he not been invaluable to Mrs. Mason, who was often left alone in the solitary house, and was a rather timid woman. The dog never showed them any ill-will, but it was clear to me from the manner in which he was treated that Farmer Mason would not again venture to correct him with a whip. Though I had not forgotten it, I was afraid to remind them of their promise to send me away. I was beginning to grow, and my work grew easier to me. So things went on in their old line.

Meantime, a man came into their service who, though in a very simple manner, had a very material influence on my after-life. He was called Bob Shafto, and was a middle-sized, ugly-looking, but light, strong, and dapper Englishman, who dropped his head as fearfully as anyone I ever met. I can remember it was my pleasure in laughing at him for this habit that made us friends, for as a rule I kept clear of the farm hands, being afraid of them. He, however, was a jovial little fellow, fond of singing, and what people call "lark," and certainly, from his antecedents, he was not a desirable tutor or companion for a young girl. He had been a stable groom in a circus. I never knew why he was obliged to seclude himself in the Western States, but I fancy there was some reason for it which he would not have liked to divulge. He was the only man we ever had that could manage Jeshurun, and I found him very useful to me, because, while he was there, the wicked brute, which seemed to have a special spite against me, was kept in order. Mrs. Mason, afraid to correct me before old Jeshurun, had his upon a diabolical mode of punishing me, which would seem to be almost incredible, especially in a woman of her professed principles. Noticing my terror of Jeshurun, which was extreme, she used to revenge herself on me by looking me into the stables. No sooner would the wicked brute observe that I was there, than his eyes would start from his head, his ears stick up, and he would paw and kick ferociously, while I, in a state of abject terror, lest he should get loose and tear me to pieces with his teeth, crouched trembling in a corner. I can remember now the awful trial, the pains and terrors, of the hours I spent in this way, never daring to take my eyes off the maddened horse, and expecting every moment to see him tear away his halter.

From this Shafto saved me, because, when he knew I was being punished in this way, he used to come and whistle to the horse, outside the stable, and he would instantly become quiet.

Although I was forbidden to speak to the men, I would slip out into the corn, and hold many a talk with this man. He was a great rascal, I believe. Later on he ran away with some money belonging to one of the other harvest men, who had hid it in the loft; but he never said anything to me of a bad or corrupting character. He only told me stories of his strange life, of the circus with which he had travelled, of the beautiful young ladies who used to ride the horses, and perform so many graceful and dangerous feats. Amongst other things, he told me that "the thing" for a young woman in that line of life was to be a trapezist; that, in his view, that was going to be the "star thing to do," and he even expressed his regret that he was not a "young gal" going in for the business. These remarks of his, said, I believe, innocently enough, produced a powerful impression on my mind. I dreamt of myself as a fascinating trapezist, with long hair and a beautiful spangled dress, swinging through the air, as he had described to me; and thus, next to a Pilgrim's Progress, this man's stories became my chief thoughts and admiration. He also taught me one or two acrobatic feats—to walk on a rail, to swing on a round stick, and to stand on my head. I was very sorry when he went away.

Such, then, was the education which I had obtained at Farmer Mason's when I was nearly nine years of age. A crisis now occurred in my life.

As I grew older I became more hardy and defiant. My strength of body increased, and I cared not a jot for a beating. I loved movement, but I also loved to be lazy. Anything that was not settled work pleased me. I doubt not, from the point of view of Mrs. Mason, with her strict ideas and the notion that Providence had given me to her to use as a little slave, I was an unsatisfactory character. She could hardly have thought me an angel. I robbed the miserable little patch of garden, broke off the favourite flowers, stole pieces of stuff to clothe my wooden dolls which the men had made me, and which I used to hide in the basket of a nurse in secret with trembling ecstasy. There was no outlet afforded to my childish nature. I was expected to forego all the little follies and amusements of childhood, and to be over on the strain of quietness and rigidity. Conceive of a poor, little, passionate nature, fostered as mine has been by my mother, placed in such conditions.

One Sunday Farmer Mason hitched up and drove over with his wife to meeting. It was always a curious thing to me, young as I was, to see these people going to such a place with such a devil as Jeshurun between the shafts. It was a sultry day, and, as I thought happily for me, they were to stay over for tea and some religious service afterwards. The two farm men had leave to go to Gashuta village, from which they would return home pretty drunk at a late hour. So Dragon and I had a charming afternoon all to ourselves. I remember it as if it were yesterday. There seemed to me a peculiar lightness and joy about it. I had plenty of bread and milk. We-I and the dog-looked out to the hay stack and ate it together. My two or three dolls were brought from their hiding to take an airing on Dragon's back. Now and then he took them up and gave them an affectionate grip between his teeth. Then I grew tired, and went roving about for something to do. Naturally I was mischief, according to Dr. Watts's opinion. To stroke me I could make myself some coffee. All went well until I reached up to a shelf in the cupboard where the tea things were. I could just touch them; a large jug toppled over, carrying one or two pieces with it. They fell to the floor and were smashed to atoms. Dragon and I looked at the remains aghast. He snelt at them, and then looked at me, and shook his head as if to say—

"This is a bad business."

But I was too hardened by this time to remain in very bad spirits. After sweeping up the pieces, I got a cup and took my coffee, and then went out to watch for the people's return. The sun had already set when they came back. I was afraid to go in. I saw Farmer Mason take the horse into the stable. Dragon was with me, and seemed in a very strange humour. The lights were lit. I could see Mrs. Mason's figure moving busily about in the big kitchen. I knew she would not be long in finding out what had happened; she was as sharp as a weasel.

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