

Divided Devotion

What Peggy Did When the Mill Hands Struck

By MARK ALLERTON

"I CAN'T, Jim; I can't."
"Is that your last word, Peggy, lass?"
"Yes, Jim." The girl raised her tearful eyes to the tall, handsome man in working clothes by her side.

He moistened his lips, and tried to speak coaxingly, although there was some anger in his tone. "You know what you are doing? You are taking sides against our people—your people and mine—against the good folk who have been our friends. If they lose it will be starvation for many of them. They have worked in Marston's Mills all their lives. They know no other work. Are you going to have them turned away, left to beg on the roadside?"

"But that needn't be, Jim," the girl interrupted eagerly; "it needn't be. It is all so useless. What quarrel have they with the mills? What quarrel have you with the mills, Jim? Tell me that. They have been a good friend to you. Why, Mr. Branksome—"

"I have no quarrel with Mr. Branksome, Peggy. I have told you that time and again. He's a good sort, is Branksome, and I own he's been a good friend to me; but it's the principle. The workers must stand together. If Marston's Mills are all right, there are others where cruel injustice is being done, and we must stand by our pals. They need our help."

"And you know, Jim, I'd help them all I could. I do help them, you know," she added, softly, and Jim nodded. "But I can help them best if I am earning full money. Besides"—she raised her head proudly—"I'm not going back on the mills. They need me, too. I'm not going to forget what Mr. Branksome did for the dad when he was too ill to work. I'm not going to forget what his good lady did for me—and for you, too, Jim. I'm going to stand by the mills, I am; and it's more I'd like to do for them—not less."

Jim Newton was silent; then, with a sudden gesture, he seemed to brace himself up. "Very good, Peggy," he said, quietly. "It seems queer that you and I, who are hoping to be wed very soon, should be on opposite sides; but there it is. I'd give my left hand that this shouldn't be; but I'm not going back on what I've said, and I'll not desert the work folk." He broke off, and his face darkened. "Peggy, lass," he asked, eagerly, "tell me—tell me, fair and square, you haven't been influenced by that—by Dan Gray, have you?"

The girl laughed. "Not me," she cried. "If you can't influence me—well, Dan can't."

"He's staying on," growled Jim. "After all his boasting and big words, he's staying on. He's been promoted to a fat job, too. The mills are nothing to him, neither. A new man to come in and support the strike and then sneak another fellow's job—ugh, the blackleg!"

Jim Newton's eyes blazed. He had no love for the man who had deserted the cause he espoused. And his dislike was intensified by the fact that Dan had cast admiring eyes at Peggy—his Peggy, the cleverest and bonniest girl in Oldeburgh.

He bent low over the girl till his lips touched her hair. "This'll mean a kind of parting, Peggy, till the quarrel's over," he whispered. "You'll never forget your Jim, will you?"

She caught his arm, and two blue eyes full of love looked into his. "No, Jim," she said, quietly, "I will never forget you—no, not as long as I live."

And so they parted.

DOWN in the valley outside Oldeburgh stood the grey walls of Marston's Mills, with the tall chimney stacks standing sentinels. Year in, year out, the old and young, men and women, boys and girls, of Oldeburgh swarmed in and out of the big yard gates of the mills.

For Marston was a good master. Marston never waited for legislation, but always anticipated it. To get a billet at Marston's meant to get a billet for life so long as the work was well done. Marston's was old fashioned. The managing director, Mr. Branksome, hated the changes of the times, and distrusted the growing power of the trades unions and their influence with the management of his mills. And that was how the trouble began.

The storm broke in the neighbouring towns where the workers had, indeed, their grievances. And then came the day when an imperative demand was

laid by the union officials on the desks of the managers of all the mills. Mr. Branksome put it in his waste-paper basket.

"If my workers have anything to say to me," he said, grimly, "let them say it themselves. I'm not going to recognize these people."

The quarrel progressed, as do all these quarrels, but Mr. Branksome, roused from his kindly tolerance, adopted strong measures. He did not wait for those who disagreed from him to strike. He locked them out.

The fight had been in progress for some weeks, with hard and bitter feeling on both sides. Outside the walls of the mills stern-faced men and sad-faced women hung about idly. Inside, Mr. Branksome went about his work with sterner eyes and a face on which had appeared new and deep lines.

He was going his round one morning when he stopped to exchange a few words with Peggy. Peggy's father had been one of his most trusted employees, and Peggy herself was a favourite with all she met.

"Everything going on all right?" he inquired.

Peggy looked up and nodded, and Mr. Branksome saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"What's the matter, Peggy, my girl?" he asked, dropping his voice.

Peggy dashed away the tears. "Nothing, sir," she said, in a low voice.

"You may as well tell me," he urged. "Are the folk outside annoying you?"

"I don't heed them," she replied. "And they leave me alone."

"Then what is it? Is it—Jim?"

She nodded, and the tears welled up into her eyes afresh, "if he'd only come back here," she said, "it'd be all right. But he's firmer than ever."

"Are you so very anxious that he should come back here?"

"Yes, because—because he's got that strange. He thinks that I—that I—" She stopped, confused.

"That you have made up with someone else? Ah, is that it? Never mind, Peggy, Jim will learn his mistake in good time. Be easy with him. I daresay he's worrying badly about things." Mr. Branksome sighed. "He's a good fellow. He's worth being patient with."

"He is that, but—but he's got so hard and bitter, and he says that I—that I am an enemy of the people. And it's all because—"

"Because you are loyal to us? Never mind, Peggy. This trouble will all be forgotten soon. A strike is a kind of war, and if we fight hard we'll fight fair, and the side that's beaten must bear no ill will. Jim'll come round all right. Don't worry, my lass."

MR. BRANKSOME smiled kindly and passed on his way. The days were short, and when Peggy left the mills to go to the house where she lived with an ailing aunt, dusk had fallen. She walked bravely between the ranks of pickets standing grim and stern, and struck the lane between the bare hedges that led to the town.

As she hurried along quick footsteps behind her met her ear, and she heard her name called softly.

She turned round to meet the admiring gaze of the newcomer, Dan Gray.

"I'm always in a hurry to get home," she replied, shortly.

"Yes, worse luck," he grinned. "I've tried to get a word with you for a week, but you've been off like a hare."

"And what were you wanting to say to me?" she asked, coldly.

"Heaps o' things. And it's not right that a pretty girl like you should be walking home alone."

"I can look after myself, thanks."

"But you'd be none the worse o' someone to look after you."

Peggy did not reply, but hastened her steps.

"You might give a fellow a chance of a word with you, Peggy." He came closer to her in spite of her efforts to draw apart. After a pause he continued: "I hear that Jim Newton has arranged a big demonstration in front of Mr. Branksome's house. He's going to catch the old man unawares and give him a fright. It's a great idea."

Peggy stared at the speaker. "I don't believe a word of it. Jim would never do that."

"Well, it's a fact. I don't approve of it myself. It's a cowardly sort of thing to do, I think. Fight fair and square is my motto. But there you are."

"I tell you I don't believe it. Jim would never do a cowardly action."

"All right, leave it at that. But a fellow who can take sides against his girl—well—"

"Don't say one word against Jim to me," flashed Peggy. "Whatever he does he does for the right."

"Oh, does he?" sneered Dan. "Well, I could tell you a few things you might like to hear."

"But I don't like," snapped Peggy.

Dan laughed. "You're bonnier when you're in a temper, Peggy. Did you know that?" He caught her hand and held it, despite her endeavours to free herself. "Yes, you do. Now, look here, don't be hard on a fellow. One kiss now—"

Peggy struggled violently. But the man caught her in a firm embrace and kissed her on the lips. She cried aloud, and for a moment he released her. She sprang back and stumbled against a tall figure that had suddenly appeared, and that was standing grimly silent. "Jim!"

She rushed to his side, clinging to him. He looked past her at the man, who was grinning shamefacedly.

"Clear out!"

The tone in which Jim spoke was so ominous that Dan's grin vanished.

"I thought you two had spilt partnership long ago," he blustered. "In any case—"

"Clear out!"

Dan hesitated. Then, "All right," he snarled, and turned on his heel.

"Oh, I'm so glad you appeared just now," panted Peggy. "But—what's the matter, Jim?"

Jim glanced at her coldly. "You've only got yourself to blame," he said.

"What do you mean, Jim?"

"It's your own fault. You encouraged the cad."

"Jim! How can you say that? Encouraged him! I haven't spoken two words to him for weeks."

"Peggy, Peggy!"

"But I haven't. Don't you believe me, Jim?"

"But they tell me—"

Peggy flung back her head. "You've been listening to tales, Jim. You'd rather believe them than me. If I had been friendly with Dan Gray it would be no wonder. You've never been near me for days and days. All your time is spent in keeping up this wicked strike with the mills."

"Peggy—"

"And now, when we do meet, you scold me, and for nothing."

The girl was distraught, and spoke unthinkingly. "You had better get back to the lazy folk you think so much of."

"You don't mean that, Peggy."

"Oh, yes, I do. And I hear you're going to demonstrate outside Mr. Branksome's house, frightening the life out of his wife and children."

"We'll not frighten them. We're only going to let them see the faces they have made white and hungry. We're—"

"If people won't work they must expect to be hungry. I've no patience with them. And I'm off home."

She turned away at the words. Jim did not speak. With eyes full of pain he watched her till she disappeared in the darkness, and then, with a heavy sigh, he turned and went down to the gates of the mills.

Had he waited a moment longer he would have been rejoined by Peggy, penitent and eager to take back the hasty words. But he was gone, and Peggy retraced her steps sadly.

THE "demonstration" was arranged to take place on the following night. It was Jim's idea. He was going to bring to the door of the manager the gaunt men and women against whom the doors of the mills had been shut. He believed that where argument had failed, the sight of these hungry folk would touch Mr. Branksome's heart.

Jim Newton's heart was full of a deep love for the people and their cause, and he refused to think of defeat. But his heart was sore because of Peggy. He longed for her comradeship. He brooded over her angry words.

When Peggy left the mills that night she noticed that the accustomed crowd of idle men and women round the gates was absent, and she knew the reason. They were gathering together in preparation for Jim's demonstration.

The cottage where Peggy's aunt lived was some distance from any other house. She was alarmed when she was met at the door by the old woman, trembling with excitement.

"Why! What's the matter?" she cried.

"Dan Gray's been here," panted the woman. "He

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