

That Lass o' Lowrie's,

A STORY OF THE LANCASHIRE COAL MINES.

By FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE PACKAGES RETURNED.

As Joan turned the corner of a lane leading to the high road, she found herself awkwardly trying to pass a man who confronted her—a fine young fellow far too elegant and well-dressed to be a Rigganite.

"Beg pardon!" he said abruptly, as if he were not in the least of humors. And then she recognised him.

"It's Mester Ralph Landsell," she said to herself as she went on. "What is he doin' here?"

But before she had finished speaking, she started at the sight of a figure hurrying on before her,—Liz herself, who had evidently just parted from her lover, and was walking rapidly homeward.

It was a shock to Joan, though she did not suspect the whole truth. She had trusted the girl completely; she had been generously lenient toward her on every point, and her pang at finding herself deceived was keen. Her sudden discovery of the subterfuge filled her with alarm. What was the meaning of it? Surely it could not mean that this man was digging fresh pitfalls for the poor, straying feet. She could not believe this,—she could only shudder at the ominous thought suggested itself.

And Liz—may, even Liz could not be weak enough to triffl with danger again. But it was not Liz who was hurrying on before her, and who was walking so fast that both were breathless when Joan reached her side and laid a detaining hand upon her shoulder.

"Liz," she said, "are yo' afraid o' me?"

Liz turned her face around, colorless and frightened. There was a tone in the voice she had never heard before, a reproach in Joan's eyes before which she faltered.

"I did na know it wur yo'," she said, almost peevishly. "What fur should I be afereed o' yo'?"

Joan's hand dropped.

"Yo' know best," she answered. "I did na say yo' wur."

—Liz pulled her shawl closer about her shoulders, as if in a nervous protest.

"I dunnot see why I should be, though to be sure it's enow to fear one to be followed i' this way. Canna I go out fur a minnit wi'out—wi'out—"

"Nay, lass," Joan interfered, "that's willtalk."

Liz began to whimper.

"The child wur asleep," she said, "an' it wur so lonesome i' th' house. Theer wur no harm i' comin' out."

"I hope to God theer wur na," exclaimed Joan. "I'd rather see thy dead face lying by th' little un's on th' pillow than think as theer wur. Yo' know what I mean, Liz. Yo' know I could na ha' caught up wi' yo' wi'out passin' that mon theer,—th' man as yo' ha' been meetin' on th' way.—God knows why, lass, but I canna see, unless yo' want to fa' back to shame an' ruin."

They were at home by this time, and she opened the door to let the girl walk in before her.

"Get thee marrie, Liz," she said. "I mun hear what the lass has to say, fur I canna rest i' fear for thee. I am na angered, fur I pity thee too much. The art naught but a cholee at th' best, an' th' world is fu' o' traps an' snares."

Liz took off her hat and shawl and sat down. She covered her face with her hands, and sobbed appealingly.

"I ha' na done no harm," she protested. "I niver meant a-ny. It wur his fault. He cannot let me a-be, an'—an' he said he wanted to hear summat about th' child, an' gie me summat to help along. He said as he wur ashamed o' hissen to ha' left me wi'out money, but he wur hard run at the toime, an' now he wanted to gie me some."

"Money?" said Joan. "Did he offer yo' money?"

"Aye, he said—"

"Wait!" said Joan. "Did yo' tak' it?"

"What would yo' ha' me do?" restlessly. "Theer wur no harm—"

"Ha' yo' gotten it on yo'?" interrupting her again.

"Aye," stopping to look up questioningly.

Joan held out her hand.

"Gie it to me," she said, steadily.

Mr. Ralph Landsell, who was sitting in his comfortable private parlour at the principal hotel of the little town, was disturbed, in the enjoyment of his nightly cigar, by the abrupt announcement of a visitor,—a young woman, who surprised him by walking into the room and straight up to the table near which he sat.

She was such a handsome young woman, with her large eyes and many cut face, and heavy nut-brown hair, and, despite her common dress, so very imposing a young man was quite startled, especially when she laid upon the tablecloth a little package, which he

knew had only left his hands half an hour before.

"I ha' browt it back to yo'," she said calmly.

He glanced down at the package and then up at her, irritated and embarrassed.

"You have brought it back to me," he said. "May I ask what it is?"

"I dunnot think yo' need ask; but sin' yo' do so I can answer. It's th' money, Mester Landsell,—th' money yo' gave to poor Lizzie."

"And may I ask again, what the money I gave to poor Lizzie has to do with yo'?"

"Yo' may ask again, an' I can answer. I am th' poor lass's friend,—happen th' only friend she has i' th' world. Because God has made me the stronger o' the two, I ha' stood by her; an' because I am th' stronger o' the two I stond by her now, an' tell yo' as I will na see yo' play her false again."

"The devil!" he broke forth angrily. "You speak as—as if you thought I meant her harm."

He coloured and faltered, even as he spoke. Joan fronted him with bright and scornful eyes.

"If yo' dunnot mean her harm, dunnot lead her to underhand ways o' deceivin' them as means her well. If yo' dunnot mean her harm, tak' yo're belongings and leave Riggan to-morrow morning."

He answered her by a short uneasy laugh.

"By Jove," he said. "You are a cool hand, young woman—but you can set your mind at rest. I shall not leave Riggan to-morrow morning, as you modestly demand—not only because I have further business to transact, but because I choose to remain. I shall not make any absurd promises about not seeing Lizzie, which, it seems to me, is more my business than yours, under the circumstances—and I shall not take the money back."

"Yo' will na?"

"No, I will not."

"Very well. I ha' no more to say, and she went out of the room, leaving the package lying on the table.

When she reached home, Liz was still sitting as she had left her, and she looked up tearful and impatient.

"Well?" she said.

"He has th' money," was Joan's answer, "an' he ha' shown me as he is a villain."

She came and stood near the girl, a strong emotion in her half-pitying, half-appealing look.

"Lizzie, lass!" she said. "The mun listen to me,—tha mun. Tha mun mak' me a promise before tha taks thy choild upo' thy breast to-need."

"I dunnot care," protested Liz, weeping fretfully. "I dunnot care what I do. It's aw as bad as iver now. I dunnot care for nowt. I've everybody's at me—noan on yo' will let me a-be. What will first one an' then another, I'm almost drove wild."

"God help thee!" said Joan with a heavy sigh. "I dunnot mean to behard lass, but yo' mun promise me. It is na mich, Lizzie, if—if things is na worse wi' yo' than I would iver believe. Yo're safe so far, promise me as yo' will na run i' danger—promise me as yo' will na see that man again, that yo'll keep out o' his way till he leaves Riggan."

"I'll promise owt," cried Liz. "I dunnot care, I tell yo'. I'll promise owt yo'll ax, if yo'll let me a-be," and she hid her face upon her arms and wept aloud.

CHAPTER XXVII.

SAMMY CRADDOCK'S "MANY-ENSIS."

At least twice a week Jud Bates made a pilgrimage to Haviland Park. Having been enlightened to the extent of two or three chapters of "Robinson Crusoe," Sammy Craddock was athirst for more.

He regarded the adventures of the hero as valuable information from foreign shores, as information that might be used in political debates, and brought forth on state occasions to floor a presumptuous antagonist. Accordingly, he held out inducements to Jud such as the boy was not likely to think lightly of. A penny a night, and a good supper for himself and Nib, held solid attractions for Jud, and at this salary he found himself engaged in the character of what "Owd Sammy" called "a many-ensis."

"What's that theer?" inquired Mrs. Craddock on first hearing this imposing title. "A many—what?"

"A many-ensis, owd lass," said Sammy chuckling. "Did tha iver hear o' a private gentleman as had na a many-ensis?"

"Nay, I know nowt about thy many-ensises, an' I'll warrant tha does na know what such loike is thysen."

"It means a power o' things," answered Sammy; "a power o' things. It's a word as is comprehensive, as they ca' it, an' it's one as will do as well as any fur th' lad. A many-ensis!" and many-ensis it remained.

Surley the adventures of the island solitary had never given such satisfaction as they gave in the cherry house-room of the lodge. Sammy listened to them over numerous pipes with a respect for literature such as had never before been engendered in his mind by the most imposing display of bindings.

"I've allus thowt as th' newspaper wur enow for a mon to tackle," he would say reflectively; "but theer's summat outside o' th' newspapers. I niver seed a paper as had owt in it about de sert islands, let alone cannibles."

"Cannibles, indeed," replied Mrs. Craddock, who was occasionally one of the audience. "I conna mak' no sense owt o' thee an' thy cannibles. I wonder they a na sham o' theirsens, goin' about wi'out so mich as a hat on, an' eatin' each other, as if there were na a bit o' good victual i' th' place. I wonder th' Queen dunnot but a stop to it hensen if th' parlyment ha' not gotten the sense to do it. It's noan respectable, let alone Christian."

"Eh!" said Sammy; "but tha't i' a muddle! Tha'dst allus be i' a muddle if I'd let thee mak' things out thyself an' noan explain 'em to thee. Does tha think aw this here happen i' England? It wur i' furrin' lands, owd wench, i' a desert island i' th' midst o' th' sea."

"Well, I wur hoppin' it wur na i' Lancashire, I mun say!"

"Lancashire! Why, it happen further off nor Lunnon, i' a place as it's loike th' Queen has niver seed nor heard tell on."

The old woman looked dubious, if not disapproving. A place that was not in Lancashire, and that the Queen had nothing to do with, was to her a place quite "off colour."

"Well! well!" she resumed, with the manner of an unbeliever. "thee go on thy way readin' if tha con tak' comfort i' it. But I mun say again as it does na sound Christian to me. That's the least I can say owt."

"Tha't slow i' understandin', owd lass," was her husband's tolerant comment. "Tha does na know enow o' literary toor to appreciate. Th' female intellect is na strong at th' best, an' tha niver wur more than ordinary. Get into it, Manyensis. It gotten late, and I'm fain to hear more about th' mon Friday, an' how the poor chap managed."

Both reader and audience were so full of interest that Jud's story was prolonged beyond the usual hour. But to the boy this was a matter of small consequence. He had trumped the odds too often with Nib for a companion to feel fear at any time. He had slept under a hedge many a night from choice, and had enjoyed his slumber like a young vagabond, as he was.

He set out on this occasion in high good humour. There were no clouds to hide the stars; he had an excellent supper, and he had enjoyed this evening.

He trudged along cheerily, his enjoyment as yet unabated. The trees and hedges, half stripped of their leaves, were so suggestive of birds' nests, that now and then he stopped aside to examine them more closely. The nests might be there yet, though the birds had flown. Where thistles had built this year, it was just possible others might build again, and at any rate, it was as well to know where their haunts had been. So, having objects enough to attract his attention, the boy did not find the way long. He was close upon the name before he had time to feel fatigue possible, and, nearing the mine, he was drawn from his path again by a sudden remembrance brought up by the sight of a hedge surrounding a field near it.

"Theer wur a bid as built i' that hedge i' th' spring," he said. "She wur a new kind. I'd forgotten her. I meant to ha' watched her. I wonder if any other fell'y fur her. I'll go an' see if th' nest is theer."

He crossed the road to the place where he fancied he had seen this treasure; but not being quite certain as to the exact spot, he found his search lengthened by this uncertainty.

"It wur here," he said to himself; "at least, I thowt it wur. Some chap mun ha' fun it an' tuk' it."

At this moment he paused, as if listening.

"What's that theer?" he said. "Theer's some one on th' other side o' th' hedge."

He had been attracted by the sound of voices—men's voices—the voices of men who were evidently crouching under the shadow of the hedge on the other side, and whose tones in a moment more reached him distinctly, and were recognized.

The first was Dan Lowrie's and before he had heard him utter a dozen words, Jud dropped upon his knees, and laid his hand warningly upon Nib's neck. The dog pricked his pointed ears, and looked up at him restlessly. All the self-control of his nature could scarcely help him to suppress a whine.

"Then as is feared to stand by Dan Lowrie," said the voice, with an oath, "let 'em say so."

"Theer's not a mon here as is feart," was the gruff answer.

"Them theer's no need to gab no more," returned Lowrie. "Yo' know what yo' ha' gotten to do. Yo' ha' th' vitriol an' th' sticks. Wat yo' fur him at th' second corner an' I'll wait at th' first. If he does na tak' one turn into th' road he'll tak' th' other, an' so which turn he tak's we'll be ready for him. Blast him! He'll be done wi' engineerin' fur a while if he fa's into my hands, an' he'll mak' no more rows about th' Davies."

Impatient for the word of command, Nib stirred uneasily among the dead leaves, and the men heard him. Not a moment's space was given to the two listeners, or they would have saved themselves. There was a smothered exclamation from three voices at once, a burst of profanity, and Dan Lowrie had leaped the low hedge and caught Jud by the collar. The man was ghastly with rage. He shook the lad until even he himself was breathless.

"Yo' young devil!" he cried, hoarsely, "yo've been listenin', ha' yo'? Nay, theer's no use o' yo' tryin' to brave it out. Yo've done for yo' mon, by God!"

"Let me a-be," said Jud, but he was as pale as his captor. "I wur na doin' thee no harm. I only coom to look fur a bird's nest."

"Yo' listened," said Lowrie; "yo' heard what we said."

"Let me a-be," was Jud's sullen reply.

At this moment a man's face rose above the whitethorn hedge.

"Who is it?" asked the fellow, in a low voice.

"A dom'd young rascal as has been eavesdroppin'. Yo' may as well coom out, lads. We've gotten to settle wi' him, or we'n fun ourselves in th' worst box yet."

The man scrambled over the hedge without further comment, and his companion followed him; and seeing who they were, Jud felt that his position was even more dangerous than he fancied at first. The three plotters who grouped themselves about him were three of the most desperate fellows in the district—brutal, revengeful, vicious, combining all the characteristics of a bad class. The two last looked at him with evident discomfort and bewilderment.

"Here's a pretty go," said one.

"Aye, by the Lord Harry!" added the other. "How long's he bin here?"

"How long at bin here," demanded Lowrie, with another shake.

"Long enow to look for a bird's nest an' not find it," said Jud, trying to speak stoutly.

The three exchanged glances and odds.

"He's heard iverly word," said Lowrie, in a savage answer.

There was a moment's silence, and then Lowrie broke out again.

"Theer's on'y one road to stop his gab," he said. "Pitch him into th' mine an' be dom'd to him. He shall na spoil th' job, if I ha' to swing fur it."

Nib gave a low whine, and Jud's heart leaped within him. Every lad in Riggan knew Dan Lowrie and feared him. There was not a soul within hearing, and people were not fond of visiting the mine at night, so if they chose to dispose of him in any way, they would have time and opportunity to do it without risk of being interfered with. But it happened that upon the present occasion Lowrie's friends were not as heated as himself. It was not a strictly personal grudge they were going to settle, and consequently some remnant of humanity got the better of them.

"Nay," said the youngest, "one's enow."

"Nay," Lowrie put in; "one's not enow fur me, if theer's another as is goin' to meddle. Summat's gotten to be done, an' done quick."

"Mak' him promise to keed his mouth shut," suggested No. 3. "He'll do it sooner nor get hissen into trouble."

"Will th'?" demanded the young one.

Jud looked up at him. He had the stubborn North-country blood in him, and the North-country courage. Having heard what he had, he was sharp enough to comprehend it. There was only one engineer whom Lowrie could have a grudge against, and that one was Derrick. They were going to work some harm against "Mester Derrick," who was his friend and Miss Anice's.

"Will th'?" repeated his questioner, feeling quite sure of him. The youth of Riggan were generally ready enough for mischief, and troubled by no scruples of conscience, so the answer he received took him by surprise.

"Nay," said Jud, "I will na."

"Tha will na?"

"Nay."

The fellow fell back a step or two to stare at him.

"Well, tha't a plucky one at any rate," he growled, discomfited.

Jud stood his ground.

"Mester Derrick's bin good to me," he said, "an' he's bin good to Nib. Th' rest o' ha' a kick fur Nib whenever he rits i' yo're way; but he never so much as spoke rough to him. He's gin me a penny more nor owt to buy him summat to eat. Chuck me down the shaft, if yo' want to."

[TO BE CONTINUED]

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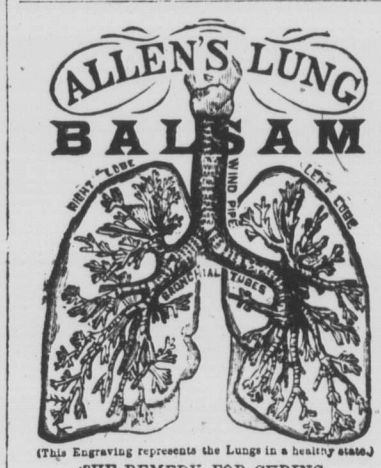
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