

"You won't be afraid to go out to them, Allie?"

"Afraid? I? Why should I be? Of course I go out. I must get to them if possible before Edmund. By this time," she added grimly, "he will not be master either of his actions or his speech."

They parted to their separate rooms, and dressed as quickly as possible. But by the time they had got ready to go down, the smell of burning had increased, and the smoke was beginning to creep through the house. Tibbie, now thoroughly affrighted, ran downstairs and undid the bolts of the front door at the very instant that Ricketts, disturbed in his little bedroom next to his pantry, had rushed out to see what was happening.

"The house is on fire, Ricketts," said Tibbie quite calmly. "There are a lot of people outside. I'm going to speak to them."

Tibbie was absolutely without fear of Birtley folk, and she knew them all. There was hardly a house represented on that fateful night which she had not visited at one period or another on an errand of mercy or kindness. Others, who did not know them, called them the roughest and most dangerous set of people in the world. Tibbie had not found them so. She had not the smallest hesitation in facing them, nor did she feel that she was in any special danger. When, with Rickett's aid, the heavy bolts were drawn back, and the doors thrown open wide, she did not find any formidable crowd to greet her. They had moved to the other side of the house as if drawn thither by some magnet. It only occurred to her a minute later that the library, which, presumably, the master of the house still occupied, was at the back of the house.

She ran back through the house, and at the library door encountered Alison wringing her hands.

"Edmund is gone, Tibbie, I don't know where. Haven't you seen him anywhere?"

Tibbie shook her head.

"I must go and ring up the fire-engines," she said