

TWO FOOLISH HEARTS

A SCENE OF RUSTIC LIFE



UMMER had passed, the harvest was ingathered, and the days began to close in.

At the Hill Farm was heard the euphonious boom of the threshing machine. It was music to many in the neighbourhood, but to none more than to the little boy Reggie.

He had become a fixture, so to speak, at the Farm. Since the day when he crept through the hole in the orchard hedge, he had grown to be one of the family. Everybody liked the boy: two on the farm—Letty and Clem—had come to love him.

There is so much to love in a child—his smile, his general prettiness, his bright and often saucy tongue, his way of looking at things, his mode of doing them, and his highly ingenious plan of obtaining his desires. These are some of the arts and charms of child life, and they win, yes, they win—often against the adult's better judgment.

Letty had grown to love the boy as her own. If he had not made his appearance on the Farm just after breakfast, she would go out first into the Croft and then into the Pond Close and call "Reg—gie, Reg—gie," in the same cooing sort of way as she used to call Clem in his childhood; and if the little fellow was within earshot, he would gallop to her and spring into her open arms with a warbling laugh which did the heart good to hear.

He was the revived sweets of old days to Letty; a new bit of colouring on her picture. He was more than this to her sometimes—he was Luce in knickerbockers.

She did not like that fancy so well, though her feeling against Luce was softening through contact with her child. She had not seen Luce, however. Though Reggie had been a daily visitor to the farm since the end of June, and it was now the end of September, the red-haired flame of Clem had not once put in an appearance.

Her Rubens-like beauty had blushed unseen by Letty. She bestowed it chiefly upon her mother in their little cottage in Radbrooke Bottom; it was only at times—in the silent and long summer nights when few people were visible—that she went more than a stone's throw from her home.

The shorter days drew her out more. It was natural that it should be so, though eminently displeasing that so fair a flower should perforce have to exist under a cloud. This angered Clem. Luce at Radbrooke, indoors, and away from him and the farm, was no better than Luce at Brookington.

Many girls, similarly situated to Luce, would have "brazened it out." Luce might, perhaps, have felt less the necessity of hiding herself away from everybody, had she not heard the opinion entertained of her by Letty Martin. She had heard that—and it was sufficient for her to almost nail herself to the table leg in her mother's kitchen.

But now that the days began to be chary of their light towards six o'clock in the evening, Luce began to be a little more prodigal of her presence. Three years ago, or rather more, she used to court the sunlight; now she haunted the shades. To a really pure girl the knowledge of having committed an offence against society, if not against Nature, is all that is needed to bring the blush to the cheek at every awkward or trivial meeting. Luce, though a mother, had by no means lost her purity. In the evening dusk she could blush without detection.

So she sauntered down the garden path on this warm and calm evening at the end of September; on the evening of the annual village wake.

"You baint goin' to the wake, be ye, Luce, lass?" said her mother as she stepped out.

"I should like to go, mother, for sake of the dancin'; but I donna think I will."

"If I was thee, my gel, I should'na. Theer'll be all the village theer, besides Brookington folk; an' summat 'ull be sure to be said 'bout thee. An' as for dancin', Luce—well, you might nor be short o' partners, my gel; but I should'na—no, I should'na."

"I'll walk i' the lane a bit, mother," replied Luce, slowly. "If Reg cries, I'll come in."

"Donna thee fret about little waxwork, deary; I'll see to 'im."

When Luce was out of hearing, Mrs. Cowland wiped a tear out of the corner of her eye, and sighed to herself: "The beautifulest peaches be the fust to goo spect. Poor Luce, beautiful Luce! To think as I should hev 'ad

such a beauty, the envy of all the mothers i' Radbrooke, an' then for she to hev come to this. It breaks me heart when I think on't."

True, honest, motherly instinct is not so common that one can afford to smile at the simple sentiments of Mrs. Cowland. They are rare in humble spheres, far rarer in higher circles. The lowliest flowers are the tenderest, the sweetest, the truest, the purest.

Meanwhile, with a full heart, and a set of confusing thoughts, which seemed born only to be killed, Luce sauntered along the lane.

There were no dwellings eastward beyond Luce's cottage. There was a pond, called "The Green Pond" by the children, on account of its entire surface being covered with a thin green film, on the north side, dangerously near the footpath, and left open for any luckless child to fall into; there was also a curve in the lane northward; but no more domiciles.

Beyond Luce's cottage the lane was a pure lane: hedges each side, composed of hawthorn, blackthorn, buckthorn, blackberry, bramble, and elder; with, at intervals, a tall elm, ash, or oak, whose spreading branches almost shut out the sky from above, and made the lane shady even in the strongest light.

It was a pure lane—a leafy lover's lane.

To-night it wore an intensely delightful aspect. It was moonlit. Few trees grew at the west end, and when the moon reached a certain altitude it shot a ray of effulgence down that avenue-like Warwickshire lane like a light in a railway tunnel. Luce looked like an animated poppy walking through the light into darkness, for the moonrays did not penetrate to the lane's end.

Luce had no intention of going to the wake. There were reasons why she should not. Yet she had implanted in her the natural rustic longing to attend the annual festivity on the green waste near the church.

The wake was a great occasion at Radbrooke: a loved occasion, a merry occasion, and an occasion looked forward to for weeks beforehand. It was the one time of the year when all the villagers and the occupants of the surrounding farms met together for a day's junketting and pleasantry. There were shows, merry-go-rounds, shooting galleries, cocoa-nut throwing, and, to crown all, dancing on the green to the often discordant music of the Brookington band.

These pleasures are rustic, Bohemian if you will; but they are the natural pleasures of Strephon and Phyllis, and they attract—yes, they attract. They are the sole amusements of the peasant, isolated in his own greenwood; and though the gaily-painted caravan and roundabout are incongruous ex-

crescences upon the landscape, their coming is an exciting event in the life of the villager.

The roadway or street of the village ran parallel with Radbrooke Bottom, and at its eastward end it sloped southward so decidedly that the lane and the street at that end were not more than twenty yards apart. As Luce stood at the junction the sounds of the blaring music of the roundabouts floated to her ear, mingled with the peals of laughter and the shouts of merry-makers.

She was but a young thing, full of life, and with a taste for enjoyment. She did not intend to take part in the wake, but the alluring sounds of the pleasures provided there drew her feet round the bend of the road to a point where it joined the village street, and commanded a fine view of the motley fair.

What a sight it was, just on the outskirts of silence !

To the contemplative being who stood where Luce was standing, the contrast between the two scenes would have seemed extraordinary, not to say terrible. Two distinct worlds, they were separated from each other only by a few yards. Luce was standing in a silent world, which gave forth no sound ; the world before her blazed with light, colour, and movement, and dinned the ears with its noise.

And above the flaming oil-lamps, the madly-circling roundabouts, the wildly dancing people, who seemed never to tire through dance after dance, above the shouts of the showmen, the scream of the steam-whistle, the laugh of the light-hearted, looking down on a scene so foreign to the landscape in which it was set, was the square, lichen-grown tower of the parish church of Radbrooke ; looking down with a calm, dignified, and venerable air through its eye-like window upon this saturnalia of village life.

Luce was transfixed at her point of vantage. She never moved an inch more forward, but stood there gazing wistfully at the scene, and especially at the dancers, like one who would have liked to mingle with them, but was too shy to enter. If anyone on the edge of the fair and in its full blaze of light, had looked towards the bend in the road which led downward to Radbrooke Bottom, they would have beheld a lovely young face framed in a garland of red hair, looking out through the darkness—Luce's Rubens-like face.

"Thy partner inna theer, Luce," said a voice in the shadow behind her.

Luce turned quickly round, for she was rather startled, and saw beside her the fine face and large form of Moll Rivers. She, like Luce, was without her hat, and when she came forward and stood on a level with Luce, so that the

light from the fair flashed full upon their faces, the contrast in their appearance was very striking.

Moll with her superb height and mass of raven black hair might have passed for the Queen of Night ; she was in her element, her latitude, her clime—lusty-limbed and strong. Luce, with her smaller stature and red hair could pass for Aurora, the Queen of the Morning. She had the appearance of being out of her element, her latitude, her clime ; she was dainty-limbed and younger in years than Moll.

Both looked at each other curiously and in some confusion. Moll had a melancholy look and a rather untidy air ; the hooks of her bodice were undone, showing a portion of her rounded breasts panting beneath. A cloud of inexpressible weariness sat in her eyes and upon her forehead. She looked tired of living.

“Thy partner inna theer, Luce,” she repeated, inclining her head towards the dancers.

“My partner, Molly ?” replied Luce, in some surprise.

“Yes, I’ve bin all round the wake, in an’ out the footers, round the doobby horses, an’ by the shooting galleries, an’ canna find ’im. Let ’s go away.”

They turned down the lane into the shadow. Then Luce spoke.

“It seems from what you say, Moll, that you’ve been lookin’ for a partner. I hanna got no partner, an’ hanna been seeking for one.”

“Maybe you might soon hev ’ad one, Luce ?” returned Moll with a meaning look.

“May be,” said Luce, with some attempt at dignity.

“That is if you hanna left yourn behind at Brookington.”

It was one of those deadly thrusts often dealt out by uncultured natures. If it had been daylight the beholder would have seen the colour rush headlong into Luce’s face and spread all down her neck ; as it was moonlight, the effect of Moll’s words was not observed in her face, though her voice shook when she next spoke.

“My business is my business, Moll, if so be it’s at Radbrooke or Brookington. I donna think you ought to trouble yourself about it.”

“Perhaps not,” said Moll. “I’ve no call to say anything, I hevn’t. I must see all an’ say nothing. I mun bear all an’ do nothin’.”

“I donna know what you mean.”

“No, nobody knows what I mean. ’Tis as the parson said in his sarment on Sunday—yes, Miss Luce, I did go to church on Sunday, an’ you’ve no call to look so dubersome, for some folks inna so black as they’re painted ; he said

in his sarment as none be so blind as them as wanna see, an' that's it. You know what I mean, you can see what I mean, yet you make believe ye donna know."

Luce did not reply. She was burning and trembling at the same time.

She sauntered quietly on, with the commanding figure of Moll at her side like her elongated shadow. Every now and then they walked out of the darkness into a thin line of moonlight which came through a gap in the trees; then it was seen that both their faces were flushed, and that Moll's in particular had a cloud of anger growing over it.

"You donna speak, Luce?" she went on. "Perhaps you be ashamed to. You were such a good little gell once, an'—I wish I may die if I'm tellin' a lie—I was very fond on thee. But you've turned out a faggot, Luce; yes, a very faggot."

"And pray, what hev I done to thee, Moll, to be called a faggot by thee?"

Luce was nearly breaking down; the vehemence of Moll she had not bargained for. Poor girl, she was receiving punishment for her sin all round—from her own sex. It was first her mother, then Letty Martin, and now Moll. Why was it, she inwardly inquired, that women are so cruel to women? She expected pity and obtained punishment.

A ray of moonlight fell upon her while Moll was in shadow. It glorified her. It even lit up the glistening tears in the corners of her eyes and made them shine like diamonds. Moll looked out of the darkness at her with great admiration.

"Thou art a pretty faggot, Luce, a very pretty faggot; but thou'rt a faggot all the same. I canna wonder at men bein' fond on thee. Giv' me thy hair, Luce, thy bonnie red hair as he be so in love with, an' I'll never call thee a faggot no more."

She caught hold of Luce's hair, and held it by her own, comparing the colours.

"Mine's longer and thicker nor yourn, beautiful hair, inna it? But not showy like yourn. Men like showy things. Then you've got blue eyes, Luce, an' mine be dull an' dark. You're altogether more pretty to look at nor I am. Men like pretty things, little toy things like you, an' I'm big an' bold, an' dowdy—no wonder he doesna like me."

She paused a moment, looking steadfastly at Luce.

"But he might hev come to like me, if you had'na turned up here agen like the bad penny that you are. Yes," she added almost fiercely, and with uncontrollable bitterness, "you are a faggot, Luce, else you'd hev stopped at

Brookington with your misgotten brat, an' not come here agen with your winnin' ways, pretty face, an' carrotty hair, to 'ang yourself on Clem agen."

Luce's spirit was bent but not broken. She looked at Moll with an awakening glance and with a flushed and defiant air.

"Oh! I see what you mean now, Molly. You want Clem, an' because I've come back you think you shanna get him. Well, my home 's at Radbrooke. I came home, not to try and win Clem away from you or anyone else, but to try and live in peace."

"You've bewitched 'im—you, another man's light-o'-love."

That epithet again! It stabbed Luce to the heart like a knife.

She had done wrong, she had sinned, she had prayed for forgiveness. Was her punishment never to be completed? Why should she be condemned to be brow-beaten by this girl? Had she not suffered enough in her own heart for her folly, but that she must be let down before every villager and made to ask pardon from them all?

Here was this girl, this Moll Rivers, who was known by all the village to have been many and many a time at the New Inn; she was pointing the finger of scorn at her. And no doubt all the others would do it as well. She had been "the good girl" of the village, the girl who had been cited by the parson as an example of pure and upright girlhood; she had been the belle of Radbrooke: and now she had come to be taunted and insulted by everybody in the parish.

Oh! virtue, virtue, what a severe shape you do assume in such little Bethels as the village of Radbrooke! Luce felt it, bent to it, and broke under it.

"I won't hear you, Moll, I won't hear you," she sobbed, placing her hands to her ears, and taking quicker steps down the lane towards her home. "You are bitter, cruel, and wicked to me. I have done you no wrong; I've done nobody wrong but myself. I have not come back to Radbrooke to 'ang myself on Clem. I don't 'ang myself on him. You know very well I have not bin to the Farm once since I came home."

"But he comes to see thee."

"I canna help it; I canna order him not to come; I canna send him away. It's too bad on all of you to be at me for comin' back home again. Did you want me to die at Brookington? It seems like it; an' I wish I had, I wish I had. I should have been better off now. An' all on you used to be so fond on me, or said so. Belike all the time you was glad to be shut on me."

“Wunce in awhile I was very fond on thee, Luce ; very fond indeed.”

Moll was not a bad girl ; she had in her the makings of a grand character. Education would not have done it ; changed circumstances might. If she had been able to look upon life from a different standpoint, if her life had been a little less hard or her feelings less in opposition to the surroundings of her existence, she might have been held forward as the type of a great-hearted woman.

But Nature had fettered her. She had bound her down to narrow circumstances, and for one strong trait in her character, she had given her six weak ones. Moll was nevertheless a soft-hearted girl—hot, hasty, passionate, and not entirely selfish ; yet she was a very woman, full of her mother’s milk, ready to cry out one minute and storm the next ; ready to sacrifice others to her selfishness, and in turn to sacrifice herself to the selfishness of others.

“Yes,” she went on, looking down from her superb height at Luce with a pitying and tender glance, “wunce in a while, Luce, I loved thee well. Doesna remember the day when thou were made the Queen o’ May, an’ how it come on to drizzle w’ rain ? An’ how thy mother were afraid for thee, ’cause thou wert a bit nesh an’ tisiky i’ the chest ? Dost mind how I, such a slummock as I were i’ my work-a-day clothes, cotched thee up an’ covered thee wi’ my ’urden apron to keep the wet off on thee, an’ carried thee to the housen i’ that way, w’out gettin a spot on thee ; an’ how, when we went to Letty’s, she had all we gels in an’ gived us a drop o’ beistin’s all round ?”

“I mind it, Luce, gel,” she said sadly, after a pause. “Thou wert as innercent as a cade lamb, an’ as pretty as one o’ they tulips i’ thy mother’s gardin. Yea, thou wert as sweet as a little angel then—like one on them round the christening basin i’ the church yon.”

“Oh ! Molly, donna, donna,” implored Luce.

“Donna what, Luce ?”

“Donna liken me to a angel. I’m not that ; I’m not that.”

“You was then.”

If Luce was stung into anger and bitterness before by the insulting and bold words of Moll, she suffered martyrdom now.

The picture which her companion had drawn of her—no more than a thumb-nail sketch of her as she really was when they made her Queen of the May—brought back with vivid colouring and acute pain the days of her innocence ; the days of her purity ; and it sufficed to crush her.

It was like looking back on a lost Heaven.

Being blessed or cursed with a sense of the power of goodness and

virtue, Luce saw from what sublime heights she had fallen. The sight overwhelmed her. To the right-thinking mind there is such a gulf between unsullied innocence and sin-stained beauty! Luce saw this and shivered.

"If you liked me then, Moll," she said in a manner exquisitely pretty and touching, "why donna you like me now? I like you just the same."

"I love Clem," replied Moll; that was the answer to everything.

Luce sighed and so did Moll; it was an awkward and painful position for them both. Few positions can be more painful than that in which two girls, associated with each other since childhood, and being fairly fond of one another, are brought to the awkward point of loving the same man.

To quick and pregnant minds which know no other impulses than those given them by bounteous and indiscriminating Nature, there is tragedy in that position. There are elements in it worse and more deadly even than the actual blood-spilling on the village green. There are withered and broken hearts in it; dispositions warped and made ugly; good natures destroyed; warm blood congealed.

This was the position of Moll and Luce, and the influences of it had made themselves felt. Moll had grown ugly and ill-gendered excrescences upon a disposition which, in its natural state, was kind, warm, open, and loving. For her the position was worse and more trying than for Luce; and the Radbrooke field-girl, though unblessed with the cleverness and polish which education is supposed to give, had the discernment to see it.

She loved Clem with a consuming passion which threatened to seriously affect her health, as it had already affected her well-being; she knew also, only too well, that he loved another, and thought no more of her than the lady-smock—typical of her physical elegance—which he crushed beneath his heel in field, croft, and meadow.

The thought, nay, the absolute knowledge of this, was as gall and wormwood to the passionate village girl. Vague fancies arose from the knowledge. She had one fancy that if Luce had not come back, she could in time have moulded Clem to her will. She encouraged this fancy till it became a faith, decided, strong, and durable. Luce had come back; that was the cause of it all. And there she stood beside her, so sweet, pretty, and winning, that even a masculine anger became almost gentleness under her influence.

"I love Clem!"

What could Luce say to that? She had been weak, vain, foolish, and as her own sad heart told her, downright wicked. She had been led astray; she bore about with her the burden of a knowledge that the fidelity of Clem was

of such a quality as to be worth a far better girl than she was—yet there was the awkward fact that Clem had no eyes for any girl but her—that he still loved her as dearly as before her falling away ; and, to crown all, and make the position more painful than ever, there was the fact that *she* loved Clem with a feeling which she could never have for any other man !

“ I am so sorry, Moll,” she said, simply and earnestly, looking at her companion.

“ Art thee so, Luce ? Then perhaps thee ’lt ’elp, lass, in this ill-convenient kaszhulty. I canna abear my life as it be now. I’ve bin thinkin’, Luce, as belike Clem ’ood look on me wi’ more favourable eyes if it weren’t for thee bein’ here. Couldst thee not go rimming to thy uncle’s at Rodbridge ? ”

Luce did not speak, and Moll paused. The silver light of the moon which now moved from Luce’s face and settled upon hers, showed upon it an intensely wearied and helpless expression. Moll looked like one upon whom an inexorable fate had passed sentence of death ; her face was a picture of deeply-rooted, permanent, and melancholy resignation.

“ Nay,” she said, “ I see that wanna do. Two miles apart ’ood be nothin’ for ’im to walk o’ nights. He’d come an’ see thee theer every day arter the work were done. I could’na bear that as much as this. Now I can meet ’im sometimes an’ see ’im unbeknown to ’im ; but then I could’na. He’d be entirely away from Radbrooke, an’ I should be moilin’ mysen to death at not seein’ a sight on ’im. No, Luce, ’twood never do for thee to go rimming to thy uncle’s at Rodbridge. You mun stay here, such be my unaccountable fortin’.”

“ But, Luce,” she added more quietly, and with a more dejected air, “ remember that you be differend to me. I hanna got anythink to love, not a single livin’ thing i’ the world—not, I mean, i’ the way that you love—not the same sort o’ love, like as people feels to one another when they be young like as we be. I’ve got my poor old dad, an’ Fan, o’ course, but they donna bring the same feeling as what I mean. You’ve got *’im*, Luce, an’ you’ve got that little cade lamb o’ thine as comes on the farm every day like a flash o’ sunshine. Remember me then, lass, an’ donna let *’im* see thee oftener than be needed, for I shall know it, an’ ’twill be ’ard for me to bear, lovin’ ’im as I do. Oh ! Luce, Luce, give me thy red hair. Give me— Oh ! why dinna God mek ’im love me instead o’ thee ! ”

She bent down with the anguish she was enduring, right over the form of Luce, and clasped her big arms round her smaller companion’s neck. It was

like a great oak wrapping its shielding limbs round a tender sapling—like Despair clinging to the smallest Hope.

Luce was herself moved to tears.

“I dinna know you loved him like this, Moll. Poor wench, I’ll ease it for thee if I can. Yes, I will, lass, I will,” and the little red-haired girl there and then formed a resolution, which she was determined to keep, if—if—the power within her lay.

“Luce, Luce!” cried a voice at that moment from the direction of Mrs. Cowland’s cottage, “come in, lass, the little ’un’s waked up, an’ I canna coax ’im off agen.”

It was the voice of Luce’s mother. As the girls separated from their embrace, Mrs. Cowland in person met them at the foot of the dark stretch of lane.

“What, Molly! Be you wi’ Luce, then? Well, ’tis as glorious a night as I’ve sin for some time, an’ you canna do much harm rimming about. But the dag’s fallin’ now, an’ you hanna no ’ats on yer yeds. Come in, Luce. You mun hev bewitched the little waxwork, for I canna manage to raggle on wi’ ’im nohow. He wants ’is muther, ’is muther, an’ no ’un else ’ull do for he. You mun surely hev bewitched ’im wi’ your winnin’ ways, I doubt.”

“Her bewitches all on us, Mrs. Cowland, Luce do,” said Moll, with a sad smile.

“Oh, Moll!” cried Luce, prettily.

GEORGE MORLEY.