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THE MASTER OF THE HOUSE: By Sir Jack Caine

An Outspoken and Moving Study of a Deep Sex Problem by the Noted Author of "The Manxman," "The Decanter," "The Eternal City," "The Woman Thou Gavest Me," Etc.

PERSONS OF THE STORY
VICTOR STOWELL—A brilliant young advocate, son of Chief Justice of the State, a man of high principles and noble, though in a moment of mutual passion he has, to great later penitence over the secret he had divulged, related with
BESSIE COLLIER—A handsome but illiterate peasant girl, who really loves Victor's claim,
ALICK GELL—Agreeable but somewhat weak, who persuades Bessie to betray her to him despite the opposition of her father
SPEAKER GELL—The rich and tyrannical head of the House of Commons
FENELLA STANLEY—A great-hearted and beautiful girl with advanced ideas on women's rights, who is in love with Victor and he with her. She is the daughter of
GENERAL STANLEY—Governor of the Isle of Man.
DAN BALDROMMA—A brutal lawyer, stepfather of Bessie, and who tries to see her killed, but she thinks Gell is responsible, as a lever to advance his own fortunes.



The rain flogged her face as with a whipcord and the wind tore at her skirts

CHAPTER XXI
Mother's Law or Judge's Law?
BESSIE had passed a miserable night. Having been awake after five in the morning, she was asleep when somebody knocked at her bedroom door. It was old Miss Ethel with a telegram. Bessie opened it with trembling fingers.
"Nonsense dear am coming up as arranged Allick."
With fingers that trembled still more noticeably Bessie returned the telegram to its envelope and hid it under her pillow, saying (with a twitching of the mouth which always came when she was telling an untruth):
"It's from Mr. Gell. He wants me to meet him in Douglas. I am to go up immediately."
"That's nice," said Miss Ethel. "The change will do you a world of good, dear. I'll run down and hurry your breakfast, so that you can catch the 10.30."
Bessie dressed hastily, put a few things into a little handbag, and then sat down to write her promised letter. It was a terrible ordeal. What could she say that would not betray her secret? At length she wrote:
"Dear Allick—Do forgive me. I must go away for a little while. It is an illness, and I suffered more than anybody can know. But God is good, and I will get my health and strength back soon, and then I will return and we can be married and everything will be all right. Do not think I do not love you because I am leaving you like this. I have never loved you so dear as now. But I am depressed, and I cannot get away from my thoughts. And please, Allick dear, don't try to find me. I shall be quite all right, and I shall think of you every night before I go to sleep, and every morning when I awake. So now I must close with all my love and kisses. BESSIE. XXXXX"

Her first fear was the fear of being overtaken and carried back. At Silverburn, where a deep river gurgled under the shadow of a dark bridge, she saw the crack of whips, the clatter of horses' hoofs and the whoop of loud voices.
It was nothing. Only two farm handmaids, the first containing a couple of farm girls, and the second a couple of farm lads, racing home after market, laughing wildly and shouting. It was like something out of her former life—one of the outbreaks of animal instinct that had brought her to where she was.
But no matter! She would be a proud and happy woman yet—the Sheean as Feaynid had said so.
After the fear of being pursued came the fear of being lost—becoming an outcast and a wanderer. She had tolled up to the Black Fort on the breast of the hill. The morning haze had vanished by this time, the sun had come out, the larks were singing in the cloudless sky, the smell of spring was rising from the young grass in the fields, the roadsides were yellow with primroses and daffodils, and the whole world was looking glad with the promise of the beautiful new year that was already on the wing. It was heart-breaking.
Feeling hot and tired after her climb, she sat on a stone. The sea was open from that point and on the farthest rim of it she could see a red-funnelled steamer and two black shafts of smoke. Stowell! Never before had she thought bitterly of him. But he was there, going to London in comfort, in luxury, while she . . .
It was cruel. But crueler than her bitter thoughts of Stowell were her tender thoughts of Gell. He would be at Derby Haven now, reading (with that twitching of the lower lip which she knew so well) the letter she had left behind for him; while she was here, running away from the arms of the man who loved her. But she must not think that. Either one day, two days, three days, a week perhaps, and she would return to him. She was to be a proud and happy woman yet—the Sheean as Feaynid had said so.
Hours passed. The road stretched out and out, became steeper and steeper. Bessie felt more and more tired. She was often compelled to sit by the wayside, and sometimes, being worn out by the want of sleep, she fell into a doze. The sky darkened and dropped; the sun went down behind the mountains to the west with a straight black bar across its face that was like a heavy lid over a sullen eye. Would she be able to reach home that night? She would! She must! Allick was waiting for her to come back. She dare not keep him long.
Evening had closed in before she reached the top of the hill. It was a long waste of bracken and black rock, with no farms anywhere, and only a few thatched cottages that crouched in the sheltered places like frightened cattle in a storm. Feeling weak and faint from long climbing and want of food, she was about to sit down again and cry, having lost hope of reaching the wet London in her stockings. It was a month old, which had strayed away from the flock and was too tired to go farther.
The poor creature bleated piteously into her face, and she lifted it up in her arms and carried it a long half mile (the lost carrying the lost, the desolate comforting the desolate) until she came to a high gate at which a mother sheep was plunging furiously in her efforts to get out to them. Bessie put the lamb to its feet, and it clambered through the bars, plucked at the teat, and then there was peace and silence.
This strengthened her and she went on for some time longer with a cheerful heart. Yes, she must reach home that night. And if it was as late as midnight before she got there, so much the better. Nobody must see her here, and then her mother would be able to conceal everything.
Night fell. It began to rain and the wind to rise. She had never been afraid of darkness or bad weather, but now she took a wild delight in them. Remembering what other women had done, she took off her shoes and walked on the wet roads in her stockings. It was risky, but she cared nothing about that. It might bring on a fever, but she was strong—she would soon get over it.
Farmers returning empty from market offered her a lift, but she declined and tolled on. The lighted windows of the farmhouses, gleaming through the darkness, called her into warm and shelter, but she struggled along. The soles of her stockings were soon worn to shreds and the stones of the roads were beginning to cut her feet, but she would not put on her shoes.
In her frenzy she hardly felt the pain. And besides, what she was suffering for Allick was as nothing compared to what Allick had suffered for her. Only one night! It would soon be over.
She had walked at her slow pace down a deep descent and through a valley when she came upon an inn and a great barn that was a scene of great festivity. She knew what it was. It was one of the "Bachelor Balls," which beginning with Orl Thomas Dho (the eye of Black Thomas) and going on through the spring of the year, the unmarried men in remote places gave to the unmarried girls of the parish.
The rain was now falling in torrents and the wind had risen to the strength of a gale, but it must have been close and hot inside the barn, for as Bessie passed on the other side of the way, the doors were thrown open. The ride place was down a crowded staircase. At the top of the stairs, where the musicians sat on a platform raised on barrels; at the other end girls in white blouses were serving tea from a long plank covered

with a tablecloth and resting on trestles. In the space between, a dense group of young men and women were dancing with furious energy.
This, too, was like something out of her own life. Ah! if somebody had told her that she would be so happy, she would have believed it. She would be a proud and happy woman yet—the Sheean as Feaynid had said so.
It was now midnight by the watch, which Allick had given her, and she had still another hill to climb, steeper than the last if shorter. While she was going up the rain flogged her face as with whipcord, and when she reached the top, the wind, sweeping across the low-lying lands from the sea, tore at her skirts as if it were trying to strip her naked. At one moment it brought her to her knees, and she thought she would never be able to rise to her feet again. It was very dark. She was feeling weak and helpless.
Once more she remembered Stowell. He would be on his way to London now. She could see him (Allick had often painted her) sitting in a brightly lit first-class railway carriage, smoking cigarettes and sipping coffee.
At this thought her whole soul rose in revolt. Why was he there while she was here? She had never loved him; he had never loved her; they had both done wrong. But why, for the same fault should there be such different punishment?
That passage in her life must be dead and buried, Victor Stowell must be wiped out forever. Then she could marry Allick Gell with a clean heart and conscience.
Therefore courage! She would be a proud and happy woman yet—the Sheean as Feaynid had said so.
Only the great thing was to get home before daybreak, so that nobody might see her until all was over.
Somewhere in the dead and vacant dawn a pale, forlorn-looking woman, whom nobody could have known for Bessie Collier, was approaching the village of the glen. She had been eighteen hours on her journey, most of the time on her feet. Her fur-lined cloak was sodden and heavy. Her black hair had been torn from its knot and was hanging dank over her neck and shoulders. Her feet, in her dry boots, were cold and bleeding. A silk scarf which had been tied over her closely-fitting fur cap was dripping, and a little bag on her arms was wet through with all that was contained in it.
She had expected to arrive before break of day, but nobody in the village was yet stirring. In the long street of whitewashed houses all the windows were blind down and looking like closed eyelids.
She tied up her hair, removed the scarf and put on a veil from her handbag, drew it closely over her face, and then walked with head down and a step as light as she could make it, through the sleeping village.
She met nobody. Not a door was open, not a blind was drawn aside; she had not been seen. She drew a long breath of relief. But suddenly, with the first sight of the mill, came a stab of memory.
Dan Baldromma!

To be continued tomorrow
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