

**That Lass O' Lowrie's,**

**By**

**Frances Hodgson Burnett**

## CHAPTER I - A Difficult Case

They did not look like women, or at least a stranger new to the district might easily have been misled by their appearance, as they stood together in a group, by the pit's mouth. There were about a dozen of them there--all "pit-girls," as they were called; women who wore a dress more than half masculine, and who talked loudly and laughed discordantly, and some of whom, God knows, had faces as hard and brutal as the hardest of their collier brothers and husbands and sweethearts. They had lived among the coal-pits, and had worked early and late at the "mouth," ever since they had been old enough to take part in the heavy labor. It was not to be wondered at that they had lost all bloom of womanly modesty and gentleness. Their mothers had been "pit-girls" in their time, their grandmothers in theirs; they had been born in coarse homes; they had fared hardly, and worked hard; they had breathed in the dust and grime of coal, and, somehow or other, it seemed to stick to them and reveal itself in their natures as it did in their bold unwashed faces. At first one shrank from them, but one's shrinking could not fail to change to pity. There was no element of softness to rule or even influence them in their half savage existence.

On the particular evening of which I speak, the group at the pit's mouth were even more than usually noisy. They were laughing, gossiping and joking,--coarse enough jokes,--and now and then a listener might have heard an oath flung out as if all were well used to the sound. Most of them were young women, though there were a few older ones among them,

and the principal figure in the group--the center figure, about whom the rest clustered--was a young woman. But she differed from the rest in two or three respects. The others seemed somewhat stunted in growth; she was tall enough to be imposing. She was as roughly clad as the poorest of them, but she wore her uncouth garb differently. The man's jacket of fustian, open at the neck, bared a handsome sunbrowned throat. The man's hat shaded a face with dark eyes that had a sort of animal beauty, and a well-molded chin. It was at this girl that all the rough jokes seemed to be directed.

"I'll tell thee, Joan," said one woman, "we'st ha' thee sweetheartin' wi' him afore th' month's out."

"Aye," laughed her fellows, "so we shall. Tha'st ha' to turn soft after aw. Tha conna stond out again' th' Lunnon chap. We'st ha' thee sweetheartin', Joan, i' th' face o' aw tha'st said."

Joan Lowrie faced them defiantly:

"Tha'st noan ha' me sweetheartin' wi' siccan a foo'," she said, "I amna ower fond o' men folk at no time. I've had my fill on 'em; and I'm noan loike to tak' up wi' such loike as this un. An' he's no an a Lunnoner neither. He's on'y fro' th' South. An th' South is na Lunnon."

"He's getten' Lunnon ways tho'," put in another. "Choppin' his words up an' mincin' 'em sma'. He's noan Lancashire, ony gowk could tell."

"I dunnot see as he minces so," said Joan roughly. "He dunnot speak our loike, but he's well enow i' his way."

A boisterous peal of laughter interrupted her.

"I thowt tha' ca'ed him a foo' a minute sin'," cried two or three voices at once. "Eh, Joan, lass, tha'st goin' t' change thy moind, I see."

The girl's eyes flashed.

"Theer's others I could ca' foo's," she said; "I need na go far to foind foo's. Foo' huntin's th' best sport out, an' th' safest. Leave th' engineer alone an' leave me alone too. It 'll be th' best fur yo'."

She turned round and strode out of the group.

Another burst of derisive laughter followed her, but she took no notice of it. She took no notice of anything--not even of the two men who at that very moment passed and turned to look at her as she went by.

"A fine creature!" said one of them.

"A fine creature!" echoed the other. "Yes, and you see that is precisely it, Derrick. 'A fine creature'--and nothing else."

They were the young engineer and his friend the Reverend Paul Grace, curate of the parish. There were never two men more unlike, physically and mentally, and yet it would have been a hard task to find two natures more harmonious and sympathetic. Still most people wondered at and failed to comprehend their friendship. The mild, nervous little Oxonian barely reached Derrick's shoulder; his finely cut face was singularly feminine and innocent; the mild eyes beaming from behind his small spectacles had an absent, dreamy look. One could not fail to see at the first glance, that this refined, restless, conscientious little gentleman was hardly the person to cope successfully with Riggan. Derrick strode by his side like a young son of Anak--brains and muscle evenly balanced and fully developed.

He turned his head over his shoulder to look at Joan Lowrie once again.

"That girl," said Grace, "has worked at the pit's mouth from her childhood; her mother was a pit girl until she died--of hard work, privation and ill treatment. Her father is a collier and lives as most of them do--drinking, rioting, fighting. Their home is such a home as you have seen dozens of since you came here; the girl could not better it if she tried, and would not know how to begin if she felt inclined. She has borne, they tell me, such treatment as would have killed most women. She has been beaten, bruised, felled to the earth by this father of hers, who is said to be a perfect fiend in his cups. And yet she holds to her place in their wretched hovel, and makes herself a slave to the fellow with a dogged, stubborn determination. What can I do with

such a case as that, Derrick?"

"You have tried to make friends with the girl?" said Derrick.

Grace colored sensitively.

"There is not a man, woman or child in the parish," he answered, "with whom I have not conscientiously tried to make friends, and there is scarcely one, I think, with whom I have succeeded. Why can I not succeed? Why do I always fail? The fault must be with myself----"

"A mistake that at the outset," interposed Derrick. "There is no 'fault' in the matter; there is simply misfortune. Your parishioners are so unfortunate as not to be able to understand you, and on your part you are so unfortunate as to fail at first to place yourself on the right footing with them. I say 'at first' you observe. Give yourself time, Grace, and give them time too."

"Thank you," said the Reverend Paul. "But speaking of this girl--'That lass o' Lowrie's,' as she is always called--Joan I believe her name is. Joan Lowrie is, I can assure you, a weight upon me. I cannot help her and I cannot rid my mind of her. She stands apart from her fellows. She has most of the faults of her class, but none of their follies; and she has the reputation of being half feared, half revered. The man who dared to approach her with the coarse love-making which is the fashion among them, would rue it to the last day of his life. She seems to defy all

the world."

"And it is impossible to win upon her?"

"More than impossible. The first time I went to her with sympathy, I felt myself a child in her hands. She never laughed nor jeered at me as the rest do. She stood before me like a rock, listening until I had finished speaking. 'Parson,' she said, 'if thal't leave me alone, I'll leave thee alone,' and then turned about and walked into the house. I am nothing but 'th' parson' to these people, and 'th' parson' is one for whom they have little respect and no sympathy."

He was not far wrong. The stolid heavy-natured colliers openly looked down upon 'th' parson.' A 'bit of a whipper snapper,' even the best-natured called him in sovereign contempt for his insignificant physical proportions. Truly the sensitive little gentleman's lines had not fallen in pleasant places. And this was not all. There was another source of discouragement with which he had to battle in secret, though of this he would have felt it almost dishonor to complain. But Derrick's keen eyes had seen it long ago, and, understanding it well, he sympathized with his friend accordingly. Yet, despite the many rebuffs the curate had met with, he was not conquered by any means. His was not an easily subdued nature, after all. He was very warm on the subject of Joan Lowrie this evening--so warm, indeed, that the interest the mere sight of the girl had awakened in Derrick's mind was considerably heightened. They were still speaking of her when they stopped before the

door of Grace's modest lodgings.

"You will come in, of course?" said Paul.

"Yes," Derrick answered, "for a short time. I am tired and shall feel all the better for a cup of Mrs. Burnie's tea," pushing the hair back from his forehead, as he had a habit of doing when a little excited.

He made the small parlor appear smaller than ever, when he entered it. He was obliged to bend his head when he passed through the door, and it was not until he had thrown himself into the largest easy chair, that the trim apartment seemed to regain its countenance.

Grace paused at the table, and with a sudden flush, took up a letter that lay there among two or three uninteresting-looking epistles.

"It is a note from Miss Anice," he said, coming to the hearth and applying his pen-knife in a gentle way to the small square envelope.

"Not a letter, Grace?" said Derrick with a smile.

"A letter! Oh dear, no! She has never written me a letter. They are always notes with some sort of business object. She has very decided views on the subject of miscellaneous letter-writing."

He read the note himself and then handed it to Derrick.



It was a compact, decided hand, free from the suspicion of an unnecessary curve.

"Dear Mr. Grace,--

"Many thanks for the book. You are very kind indeed. Pray let us hear something more about your people. I am afraid papa must find them very discouraging, but I cannot help feeling interested. Grandmamma wishes to be remembered to you,

"With more thanks,

"Believe me your friend,

"Anice Barholm."

Derrick refolded the note and handed it back to his friend. To tell the truth, it did not impress him very favorably. A girl not yet twenty years old, who could write such a note as this to a man who loved her, must be rather too self-contained and well balanced.

"You have never told me much of this story, Grace," he said.

"There is not much to tell," answered the curate, flushing again. "She

is the Rector's daughter. I have known her three years. You remember I wrote to you about meeting her while you were in India. As for the rest, I do not exactly understand myself how it is that I have gone so far, having so--so little encouragement--in fact having had no encouragement at all; but, however that is, it has grown upon me, Derrick,--my feeling for her has grown into my life. She has never cared for me. I am quite sure of that, you see. Indeed, I could hardly expect it. It is not her way to care for men as they are likely to care for her, though it will come some day, I suppose--with the coming man," half smiling. "She is simply what she signs herself here, my friend Anice Barholm, and I am thankful for that much. She would not write even that if she did not mean it."

"Bless my soul," broke in Derrick, tossing back his head impatiently; "and she is only nineteen yet, you say?"

"Only nineteen," said the curate, with simple trustfulness in his friend's sympathy, "but different, you know, from any other woman I have ever seen."

The tea and toast came in then, and they sat down together to partake of it Derrick knew Anice quite well before the meal was ended, and yet he had not asked many questions. He knew how Grace had met her at her father's house--an odd, self-reliant, very pretty and youthful-looking little creature, with the force and decision of half a dozen ordinary women hidden in her small frame; how she had seemed to like him; how

their intimacy had grown; how his gentle, deep-rooted passion had grown with it; how he had learned to understand that he had nothing to hope for.

"I am a little fearful for the result of her first visit here," said Grace, pushing his cup aside and looking troubled. "I cannot bear to think of her being disappointed and disturbed by the half-savage state in which these people live. She knows nothing of the mining districts. She has never been in Lancashire, and they have always lived in the South. She is in Kent now, with Mrs. Barholm's mother. And though I have tried, in my short letters to her, to prepare her for the rough side of life she will be obliged to see, I am afraid it is impossible for her to realize it, and it may be a shock to her when she comes."

"She is coming to Riggan then?" said Derrick.

"In a few weeks. She has been visiting Mrs. Galloway since the Rector gave up his living at Ashley wolde, and Mrs. Barholm told me to-day that she spoke in her last letter of coming to them."

The moon was shining brightly when Derrick stepped out into the street later in the evening, and though the air was somewhat chill it was by no means unpleasant. He had rather a long walk before him. He disliked the smoke and dust of the murky little town, and chose to live on its outskirts; but he was fond of sharp exercise, and regarded the distance between his lodging and the field of his daily labor as an advantage.

"I work off a great deal of superfluous steam between the two places," he said to Grace at the door. "The wind coming across Boggart Brow has a way of scattering and cooling restless plans and feverish fancies, that is good for a man. Half a mile of the Knoll Road is often enough to blow all the morbidness out of a fellow."

To-night by the time he reached the corner that turned him upon the Knoll Road, his mind had wandered upon an old track, but it had been drawn there by a new object,--nothing other than Joan Lowrie, indeed. The impression made upon him by the story of Joan and her outcast life was one not easy to be effaced. The hardest miseries in the lot of a class in whom he could not fail to be interested, were grouped about that dramatic figure. He was struck, too, by a painful sense of incongruity.

"If she had been in this other girl's niche," he said, "if she had lived the life of this Anice----"

But he did not finish his sentence. Something, not many yards beyond him, caught his eye--a figure seated upon the road-side near a collier's cottage--evidently a pit girl in some trouble, for her head was bowed upon her hands, and there was a dogged sort of misery expressed in her very posture.

"A woman," he said aloud. "What woman, I wonder. This is not the time

for any woman to be sitting here alone."

He crossed the road at once, and going to the girl, touched her lightly on the shoulder.

"My lass," he said good-naturedly, "what ails you?"

She raised her head slowly as if she were dizzy and bewildered. Her face was disfigured by a bruise, and on one temple was a cut from which the blood trickled down her cheek; but the moonlight showed him that it was Joan. He removed his hand from her shoulder and drew back a pace.

"You have been hurt!" he exclaimed.

"Aye," she answered deliberately, "I've had a hurt--a bad un."

He did not ask her how she had been hurt. He knew as well as if she had told him, that it had been done in one of her father's fits of drunken passion. He had seen this sort of thing before during his sojourn in the mining districts. But, shamefully repulsive as it had been to him, he had never felt the degradation of it as fiercely as he did now.

"You are Joan Lowrie?" he said.

"Aye, I'm Joan Lowrie, if it 'll do yo' ony good to know."

"You must have something done to that cut upon your temple."

She put up her hand and wiped the blood away, as if impatient at his persistence.

"It 'll do well enow as it is," she said.

"That is a mistake," he answered. "You are losing more blood than you imagine. Will you let me help you?"

She stirred uneasily.

Derrick took no notice of the objection. He drew his handkerchief from his pocket, and, after some little effort, managed to stanch the bleeding, and having done so, bound the wound up. Perhaps something in his sympathetic silence and the quiet consideration of his manner touched Joan. Her face, upturned almost submissively, for the moment seemed tremulous, and she set her lips together. She did not speak until he had finished, and then she rose and stood before him immovable as ever.

"Thank yo'," she said in a suppressed voice, "I canna say no more."

"Never mind that," he answered, "I could have done no less. If you could go home now----"

"I shall na go whoam to neet," she interrupted him.

"You cannot remain out of doors!" he exclaimed.

"If I do, it wunnot be th' first toime," meeting his startled glance with a pride which defied him to pity or question her. But his sympathy and interest must have stirred her, for the next minute her manner softened. "I've done it often," she added, "an' nowts nivver feared me. Yo' need na care, Mester, I'm used to it."

"But I cannot go away and leave you here," he said.

"You canna do no other," she answered.

"Have you no friends?" he ventured hesitatingly.

"No, I ha' not," she said, hardening again, and she turned away as if she meant to end the discussion. But he would not leave her. The spirit of determination was as strong in his character as in her own. He tore a leaf from his pocket-book, and, writing a few lines upon it, handed it to her. "If you will take that to Thwates' wife," he said, "there will be no necessity for your remaining out of doors all night."

She took it from him mechanically; but when he finished speaking, her calmness left her. Her hand began to tremble, and then her whole frame, and the next instant the note fell to the ground, and she dropped into

her old place again, sobbing passionately and hiding her face on her arms.

"I wunnot tak' it!" she cried. "I wunnot go no wheer an' tell as I'm turned loike a dog into th' street."

Her misery and shame shook her like a tempest. But she subdued herself at last.

"I dunnot see as yo' need care," she protested half resentfully. "Other folk dunnot. I'm left to mysen most o' toimes." Her head fell again and she trembled from head to foot.

"But I do care!" he returned. "I cannot leave you here and will not. If you will trust me and do as I tell you, the people you go to need know nothing you do not choose to tell them."

It was evident that his determination made her falter, and seeing this he followed up his advantage and so far improved it that at last, after a few more arguments, she rose slowly and picked up the fallen paper.

"If I mun go, I mun," she said, twisting it nervously in her fingers, and then there was a pause, in which she plainly lingered to say something, for she stood before him with a restrained air and downcast face. She broke the silence herself, however, suddenly looking up and fixing her large eyes full upon him.



"If I was a lady," she said, "happen I should know what to say to yo'; but bein' what I am, I dunnot. Happen as yo're a gentleman yo' know what I'd loike to say an' canna--happen yo' do."

Even as she spoke, the instinct of defiance in her nature struggled against that of gratitude; but the finer instinct conquered.

"We will not speak of thanks," he said. "I may need help some day, and come to you for it."

"If yo' ivver need help at th' pit will yo' come to me?" she demanded.

"I've seen th' toime as I could ha' gi'en help to th' Mesters ef I'd had th' moind. If yo'll promise that----"

"I will promise it," he answered her.

"An' I'll promise to gi' it yo'," eagerly. "So that's settled. Now I'll go my ways. Good neet to yo'."

"Good night," he returned, and uncovering with as grave a courtesy as he might have shown to the finest lady in the land, or to his own mother or sister, he stood at the road-side and watched her until she was out of sight.