CHAPTER II. - "Liz"

"Th' owd lad's been at his tricks again," was the rough comment made on Joan Lowrie's appearance when she came down to her work the next morning; but Joan looked neither right nor left, and went to her place without a word. Not one among them had ever heard her speak of her miseries and wrongs, or had known her to do otherwise than ignore the fact that their existence was well known among her fellow-workers.

When Derrick passed her on his way to his duties, she looked up from her task with a faint, quick color, and replied to his courteous gesture with a curt yet not ungracious nod. It was evident that not even her gratitude would lead her to encourage any advances. But, notwithstanding this, he did not feel repelled or disappointed. He had learned enough of Joan, in their brief interview, to prepare him to expect no other manner from her. He was none the less interested in the girl because he found himself forced to regard her curiously and critically, and at a distance.

He watched her as she went about her work, silent, self-contained and solitary.

"That lass o' Lowrie's!" said a superannuated old collier once, in answer to a remark of Derrick's. "Eh! hoo's a rare un, hoo is! Th' fellys is haaf feart on her. Tha' sees hoo's getten a bit o' skoolin'. Hoo con read a bit, if tha'll believe it, Mester," with a touch of

pride.

"Not as th' owd chap ivver did owt fur her i' that road," the speaker went on, nothing loath to gossip with 'one o' th' Mesters.' "He nivver did nowt fur her but spend her wage i' drink. But theer wur a neet skoo' here a few years sen', an' th' lass went her ways wi' a few o' th' steady uns, an' they say as she getten ahead on 'em aw, so as it wur a wonder. Just let her set her mind to do owt an' she'll do it."

"Here," said Derrick to Paul that night, as the engineer leaned back in his easy chair, glowering at the grate and knitting his brows, "Here," he said, "is a creature with the majesty of a Juno--though really nothing but a girl in years--who rules a set of savages by the mere power of a superior will and mind, and yet a woman who works at the mouth of a coal-pit,--who cannot write her own name, and who is beaten by her fiend of a father as if she were a dog. Good Heaven! what is she doing here? What does it all mean?"

The Reverend Paul put up his delicate hand deprecatingly.

"My dear Fergus," he said, "if I dare--if my own life and the lives of others would let me--I think I should be tempted to give it up, as one gives up other puzzles, when one is beaten by them."

Derrick looked at him, forgetting himself in a sudden sympathetic comprehension.

"You have been more than ordinarily discouraged to-day," he said. "What is it, Grace?"

"Do you know Sammy Craddock?" was the reply.

"'Owd Sammy Craddock'?" said Derrick with a laugh. "Wasn't it 'Owd Sammy,' who was talking to me to-day about Joan Lowrie?"

"I dare say it was," sighing. "And if you know Sammy Craddock, you know one of the principal causes of my discouragement. I went to see him this afternoon, and I have not quite--. quite got over it, in fact."

Derrick's interest in his friend's trials was stirred as usual at the first signal of distress. It was the part of his stronger and more evenly balanced nature to be constantly ready with generous sympathy and comfort.

"It has struck me," he said, "that Craddock is one of the institutions of Riggan. I should like to hear something definite concerning him. Why is he your principal cause of discouragement, in the first place?"

"Because he is the man of all others whom it is hard for me to deal with,--because he is the shrewdest, the most irreverent and the most disputatious old fellow in Riggan. And yet, in the face of all this, because he is so often right, I am forced into a sort of respect for

him."

"Right!" repeated Derrick, raising his eyebrows. "That's bad."

Grace rose from the chair, flushing up to the roots of his hair,--

"Right!" he reiterated. "Yes, right I say. And how, I ask you, can a man battle against the faintest element of right and truth, even when it will and must arraign itself on the side of wrong? If I could shut my eyes to the right, and see only the wrong, I might leave myself at least a blind content, but I cannot--i cannot. If I could look upon these things as Barholm does----" But here he stopped, suddenly checking himself.

"Thank God you cannot," put in Derrick quietly.

For a few minutes the Reverend Paul paced the room in silence.

"Among the men who were once his fellow-workers, Craddock is an oracle," he went on. "His influence is not unlike Joan Lowrie's. It is the influence of a strong mind over weaker ones. His sharp sarcastic speeches are proverbs among the Rigganites; he amuses them and can make them listen to him. When he holds up 'Th' owd parson' to their ridicule, he sweeps all before him. He can undo in an hour what I have struggled a year to accomplish. He was a collier himself until he became

superannuated, and he knows their natures, you see."

"What has he to say about Barholm?" asked Derrick--without looking at his friend, however.

"Oh!" he protested, "that is the worst side of it--that is miserable--that is wretched! I may as well speak openly. Barholm is his strong card, and that is what baffles me. He scans Barholm with the eye of an eagle. He does not spare a single weakness. He studies him--he knows his favorite phrases and gestures by heart, and has used them until there is not a Riggan collier who does not recognize them when they are presented to him, and applaud them as an audience might applaud the staple jokes of a popular actor."

Explained even thus far, the case looked difficult enough; but Derrick felt no wonder at his friend's discouragement when he had heard his story to the end, and understood it fully.

The living at Riggan had never been happily managed. It had been presented to men who did not understand the people under their charge, and to men whom the people failed to understand; but possibly it had never before fallen into the hands of a man who was so little qualified to govern Rigganites, as was the present rector, the Reverend Harold Barholm. A man who has mistaken his vocation, and who has become ever so faintly conscious of his blunder, may be a stumbling-block in another's

path; but restrained as he will be by his secret pangs of conscience, he can scarcely be an active obstructionist. But a man who, having mistaken the field of his life's labor, yet remains amiably self-satisfied, and unconscious of his unfitness, may do more harm in his serene ignorance than he might have done good if he had chosen his proper sphere. Such a man as the last was the Reverend Harold. A good-natured, broad-shouldered, tactless, self-sufficient person, he had taken up his work with a complacent feeling that no field of labor could fail to be benefited by his patronage; he was content now as always. He had been content with himself and his intellectual progress at Oxford; he had been content with his first parish at Ashley-wold; he had been content then with the gentle-natured, soft-spoken Kentish men and women; he had never feared finding himself unequal to the guidance of their souls, and he was not at all troubled by the prospect Riggan presented to him.

"It is a different sort of thing," he said to his curate, in the best of spirits, "and new to us--new of course; but we shall get over that--we shall get over that easily enough, Grace."

So with not a shadow of a doubt as to his speedy success, and with a comfortable confidence in ecclesiastical power, in whomsoever vested, he called upon his parishioners one after the other. He appeared at their cottages at all hours, and gave the same greeting to each of them. He was their new rector, and having come to Riggan with the intention of doing them good, and improving their moral condition, he intended to do them good, and improve them, in spite of themselves. They must come to

church: it was their business to come to church, as it was his business to preach the gospel. All this implied, in half an hour's half-friendly, half-ecclesiastical conversation, garnished with a few favorite texts and religious platitudes, and the man felt that he had done his duty, and done it well.

Only one man nonplussed him, and even this man's effect upon him was temporary, only lasting as long as his call. He had been met with a dogged resentment in the majority of his visits, but when he encountered 'Owd Sammy Craddock' he encountered a different sort of opposition.

"Aye," said Owd Sammy, "an' so tha'rt th' new rector, art ta? I thowt as mich as another ud spring up as soon as th' owd un wur cut down. Tha parsens is a nettle as dunnot soon dee oot. Well, I'll leave thee to th' owd lass here. Hoo's a rare un fur gab when hoo' taks th' notion, an' I'm noan so mich i' th' humor t' argufy mysen today." And he took his pipe from the mantelpiece and strolled out with an imperturbable air. But this was not the last of the matter. The Rector went again and again, cheerfully persisting in bringing the old sinner to a proper sense of his iniquities. There would be some triumph in converting such a veteran as Sammy Craddock, and he was confident of winning this laurel for himself. But the result was scarcely what he expected. 'Owd Sammy' stood his ground like an old soldier. The fear of man was not before his eyes, and 'parsens' were his favorite game. He was as contumacious and profane as such men are apt to be, and he delighted in scattering his clerical antagonists as a task worthy of his mettle. He encountered the

Reverend Harold with positive glee. He jeered at him in public, and sneered at him in private, and held him up to the mockery of the collier men and lads, with the dramatic mimicry which made him so popular a character. As Derrick had said, Sammy Craddock was a Riggan institution. In his youth, his fellows had feared his strength; in his old age they feared his wit. "Let Owd Sammy tackle him," they said, when a new-comer was disputatious, and hard to manage; "Owd Sammy's th' one to gi' him one fur his nob. Owd Sammy'll fettle him--graidely." And the fact was that Craddock's cantankerous sharpness of brain and tongue were usually efficacious. So he "tackled" Barholm, and so he "tackled" the curate. But, for some reason, he was never actually bitter against Grace. He spoke of him lightly, and rather sneered at his physical insignificance; but he did not hold him up to public ridicule.

"I hav' not quite settled i' my moind about th' little chap," he would say sententiously to his admirers. "He's noan siccan a foo' as th' owd un, for he's a graidely foo', he is, and no mistake. At any rate a little foo' is better nor a big un."

And there the matter stood. Against these tremendous odds Grace fought--against coarse and perverted natures,--worse than all, against the power that should have been ranged upon his side. And added to these discouragements, were the obstacles of physical delicacy, and an almost morbid conscientiousness. A man of coarser fibre might have borne the burden better--or at least with less pain to himself.

"A drop or so of Barholm's blood in Grace's veins," said Derrick, communing with himself on the Knoll Road after their interview--"a few drops of Barholm's rich, comfortable, stupid blood in Grace's veins would not harm him. And yet it would have to be but a few drops indeed," hastily. "On the whole I think it would be better if he had more blood of his own."

The following day Miss Barholm came. Business had taken Derrick to the station in the morning, and being delayed, he was standing upon the platform when one of the London trains came in. There were generally so few passengers on such trains who were likely to stop at Riggan, that the few who did so were of some interest to the bystanders. Accordingly he stood gazing, in rather a preoccupied fashion, at the carriages, when the door of a first-class compartment opened, and a girl stepped out upon the platform near him. Before seeing her face one might have imagined her to be a child of scarcely more than fourteen or fifteen. This was Derrick's first impression; but when she turned toward him he saw at once that it was not a child. And yet it was a small face, with delicate oval features, smooth, clear skin, and stray locks of hazel brown hair that fell over the low forehead. She had evidently made a journey of some length, for she was encumbered with travelling wraps, and in her hands she held a little flower-pot containing a cluster of early blue violets,--such violets as would not bloom so far north as Riggan for weeks to come. She stood upon the platform for a moment or so, glancing up and down as if in search of some one, and then, plainly deciding that the object of her quest had not arrived, she looked at

Derrick in a business-like, questioning way. She was going to speak to him. The next minute she stepped forward without a shadow of girlish hesitation.

"May I trouble you to tell me where I can find a conveyance of some sort?" she said. "I want to go to the Rectory."

Derrick uncovered, recognizing his friend's picture at once.

"I think," he said with far more hesitancy than she had herself shown, "that this must be Miss Barholm."

"Yes," she answered, "Anice Barholm. I think," she said, "from what Mr. Grace has said to me, that you must be his friend."

"I am one of Grace's friends," he answered, "Fergus Derrick."

She managed to free one of her small hands, and held it out to him.

She had arrived earlier than had been expected, it turned out, and through some mysterious chance or other, her letters to her friends had not preceded her, so there was no carriage in waiting, and but for Derrick she would have been thrown entirely upon her own resources. But after their mutual introduction the two were friends at once, and before he had put her into the cab, Derrick had begun to understand what it was that led the Reverend Paul to think her an exceptional girl. She knew

where her trunks were, and was quite definite upon the subject of what must be done with them. Though pretty and frail looking enough, there was no suggestion of helplessness about her. When she was safely seated in the cab, she spoke to Derrick through the open window.

"If you will come to the Rectory to-night, and let papa thank you," she said, "we shall all be very glad. Mr. Grace will be there, you know, and I have a great many questions to ask which I think you must be able to answer."

Derrick went back to his work, thinking about Miss Barholm, of course. She was different from other girls, he felt, not only in her fragile frame and delicate face, but with another more subtle and less easily defined difference. There was a suggestion of the development in a child of the soul of a woman.

Going down to the mine, Derrick found on approaching that there was some commotion among the workers at the pit's mouth, and before he turned in to his office, he paused upon the threshold for a few minutes to see what it meant. But it was not a disturbance with which it was easy for an outsider to interfere. A knot of women drawn away from their work by some prevailing excitement, were gathered together around a girl--a pretty but pale and haggard creature, with a helpless, despairing face--who stood at bay in the midst of them, clasping a child to her bosom--a target for all eyes. It was a wretched sight, and told its own story.

"Wheer ha' yo' been, Liz?" Derrick heard two or three voices exclaim at once. "What did you coom back for? This is what thy handsome face has browt thee to, is it?"

And then the girl, white, wild-eyed and breathless with excitement, turned on them, panting, bursting into passionate tears.

"Let me a-be:" she cried, sobbing. "There's none of yo' need to talk. Let me a-be! I didna coom back to ax nowt fro' none on you! Eh Joan! Joan Lowrie?"

Derrick turned to ascertain the meaning of this cry of appeal, but almost before he had time to do so, Joan herself had borne down upon the group; she had pushed her way through it, and was standing in the centre, confronting the girl's tormentors in a flame of wrath, and Liz was clinging to her.

"What ha' they been sayin' to yo', lass?" she demanded. "Eh! but yo're a brave lot, yo' are--women yo' ca' yo'rsens!--badgerin' a slip o' a wench loike this."

"I did na coom back to ax nowt fro' noan o' them," sobbed the girl. "I'd ray ther dee ony day nor do it! I'd raythe starve i' th' ditch--an' it's comin' to that."

"Here," said Joan, "gi' me th' choild."

She bent down and took it from her, and then stood up before them all, holding it high in her strong arms--so superb, so statuesque, and yet so womanly a figure, that a thrill shot through the heart of the man watching her.

"Lasses," she cried, her voice fairly ringing, "do yo' see this? A bit o' a helpless thing as canna answer back yo're jeers! Aye! look at it well, aw' on yo'. Some on yo's getten th' loike at whoam. An' when yo've looked at th' choild, look at th' mother! Seventeen year owd, Liz is, an' th' world's gone wrong wi' her. I wunnot say as th' world's gone ower reet wi' ony on us; but them on us as has had th' strength to howd up agen it, need na set our foot on them as has gone down. Happen theer's na so much to choose betwixt us after aw. But I've gotten this to tell yo'--them as has owt to say o' Liz, mun say it to Joan Lowrie!"

Rough, and coarsely pitiless as the majority of them were, she had touched the right chord. Perhaps the bit of the dramatic in her championship of the girl had as much to do with the success of her half-commanding appeal as anything else. But at least, the most hardened of them faltered before her daring, scornful words, and the fire in her face. Liz would be safe enough from them henceforth, it was plain.

That evening while arranging his papers before going home, Derrick was called from his work by a summons at the office door, and going to open

it, he found Joan Lowrie standing there, looking half abashed, half determined.

"I ha' summat to ax yo'," she said briefly, declining his invitation to enter and be seated.

"If there is anything I can do for--" began Derrick.

"It is na mysen," she interrupted him. "There is a poor lass as I'm fain to help, if I could do it, but I ha' not th' power. I dunnot know of any one as has, except yo'rsen and th' parson, an' I know more o' yo' than I do o' th' parson, so I thowt I'd ax yo' to speak to him about th' poor wench, an ax him if he could get her a bit o' work as ud help to keep her honest."

Derrick looked at her handsome face gravely, curiously.

"I saw you defend this girl against some of her old companions, a few hours ago, I believe," he said.

She colored, but did not return his glance.

"I dunnot believe in harryin' women down th' hill," she said.

Then, suddenly, she raised her eyes.

"Th' little un is a little lass," she said, "an' I canna bide th' thowt o' what moight fa' on her if her mother's life is na an honest un--I canna bide the thowt on it."

"I will see my friend to-night," said Derrick, "and I will speak to him. Where can he find the girl?"

"Wi' me," she answered. "I'm taken both on 'em whoam wi' me."