

CHAPTER VI - Joan and the Child

To the young curate's great wonder, on his first visit to her after the advent of Liz and her child, Joan changed her manner towards him. She did not attempt to repel him, she even bade him welcome in a way of her own. Deep in Joan's heart was hidden a fancy that perhaps the work of this young fellow who was "good enow fur a parson," lay with such as Liz, and those who like Liz bore a heavy burden.

"If yo' can do her any good," she said, "come and welcome. Come every day. I dunnot know much about such like mysen, but happen yo' ha' a way o' helpin' folk as canna help theirsens i' trouble--an' Liz is one on 'em."

Truly Liz was one of these. She clung to Joan in a hopeless, childish way, as her only comfort. She could do nothing for herself, she could only obey Joan's dictates, and this she did in listless misery. When she had work to do, she made weak efforts at doing it, and when she had none she sat and held the child upon her knee, her eyes following her friend with a vague appeal. The discomfort of her lot, the wretchedness of coming back to shame and tears, after a brief season of pleasure and luxury, was what crushed her. So long as her lover had cared for her, and she had felt no fear of hunger or cold, or desertion, she had been happy--happy because she could be idle and take no thought for the morrow, and was almost a lady. But now all that was over. She had come to the bitter dregs of the cup. She was thrown on her own resources,

nobody cared for her, nobody helped her but Joan, nobody called her pretty and praised her ways. She was not to be a lady after all, she must work for her living and it must be a poor one too. There would be no fine clothes, no nice rooms, no flattery and sugar-plums. Everything would be even far harder, and more unpleasant than it had been before. And then, the baby? What could she do with it?--a creature more helpless than herself, always to be clothed and taken care of, when she could not take care of herself, always in the way, always crying and wailing and troubling day and night. She almost blamed the baby for everything. Perhaps she would not have lost her lover if it had not been for the baby. Perhaps he knew what a trouble it would be, and wanted to be rid of her before it came, and that was why he had gone away. The night Joan had brought her home she had taken care of the child, and told Liz to sit down and rest, and had sat down herself with the small creature in her arms, and after watching her for a while, Liz had broken out into sobs, and slipped down upon the floor at her feet, hiding her wretched, pretty face upon her friend's knee.

"I canna abide the sight o' it," she cried. "I canna see what it wur born fur, mysen. I wish I'd deed when I wur i' Lunnon--when he cared fur me. He wor fond enow o' me at th' first. He could na abide me to be out o' his sight. I niv-ver wur so happy i' my life as I wur then. Aye! I did na think then, as th' toime ud come when he'd cast me out i' th' road. He had no reet to do it," her voice rising hysterically. "He had no reet to do it, if he wur a gentleman; but it seems gentlefolk can do owt they please. If he did na mean to stick to me, why could na he ha'

let me a-be."

"That is na gentlefolks' way," said Joan bitterly, "but if I wur i' yo're place, Liz, I would na hate th' choild. It has na done yo' as much harm as yo' ha' done it."

After a while, when the girl was quieter, Joan asked her a question.

"You nivver told me who yo' went away wi', Liz," she said. "I ha' a reason fur wantin' to know, or I would na ax, but fur a' that if yo' dun-not want to tell me, yo' need na do it against yo're will."

Liz was silent a moment.

"I would na tell ivverybody," she said. "I would na tell nobody but yo'. It would na do no good, an' I dunnot care to do harm. You'll keep it to yo'rsen, if I tell yo', Joan?"

"Aye," Joan answered, "as long as it needs be kept to mysen. I am na one to clatter."

"Well," said Liz with a sob, "it wur Mester Landsell I went wi'--young Mester Landsell--Mester Ralph."

"I thout as much," said Joan, her face darkening.

She had had her suspicions from the first, when Mr. Ralph Landsell had come to Riggan with his father, who was one of the mining company. He was a graceful, fair-faced young fellow, with an open hand and the air of a potentate, and his grandeur had pleased Liz. She was not used to flattery and "fine London ways," and her vanity made her an easy victim.

"He wur allus after me," she said, with fresh tears. "He nivver let me be till I promised to go. He said he would make a lady o' me an' he wur allus givin' me things. He wur fond o' me at first,--that he wur,--an' I wur fond o' him. I nivver seed no one loike him afore. Oh! it's hard, it is.--Oh! it's bitter hard an' cruel, as it should come to this."

And she wailed and sobbed until she wore herself out, and wearied Joan to the very soul.

But Joan bore with her and never showed impatience by word or deed. Childish petulances and complaints fell upon her like water upon a rock--but now and then the strong nature was rasped beyond endurance by the weak one. She had taken no small task upon herself when she gave Liz her word that she would shield her. Only after a while, in a few weeks, a new influence began to work upon Liz's protectress. The child for whom there seemed no place in the world, or in any pitying heart--the child for whom Liz felt nothing but vague dislike and resentment--the child laid its light but powerful hand upon Joan. Once or twice she noticed as she moved about the room that the little creature's eyes would follow her in a way something like its mother's, as if with appeal to her

superior strength. She fell gradually into the habit of giving it more attention. It was so little and light, so easily taken from Liz's careless hold when it was restless, so easily carried to and fro, as she went about her household tasks. She had never known much about babies until chance had thrown this one in her path; it was a great novelty. It liked her strong arms, and Liz was always ready to give it up to her, feeling only a weak bewilderment at her fancy for it. When she was at home it was rarely out of her arms. It was no source of weariness to her perfect strength. She carried it here and there, she cradled it upon her knees, when she sat down by the fire to rest; she learned in time a hundred gentle woman's ways through its presence. Her step became lighter, her voice softer--a heavy tread, or a harsh tone might waken the child. For the child's sake she doffed her uncouth working-dress when she entered the house; for the child's sake she made an effort to brighten the dulness, and soften the roughness of their surroundings.

The Reverend Paul, in his visits to the house, observed with tremor, the subtle changes wrought in her. Catching at the straw of her negative welcome, he went to see Liz whenever he could find a tangible excuse. He had a sensitive dread of intruding even upon the poor privacy of the "lower orders," and he could rarely bring himself to the point of taking them by storm as a mere matter of ecclesiastical routine. But the oftener he saw Joan Lowrie, the more heavily she lay upon his mind. Every day his conscience smote him more sorely for his want of success with her. And yet how could he make way against her indifference. He even felt himself a trifle spell-bound in her presence. He often found

himself watching her as she moved to and fro,--watching her as Liz and the child did.

But "th' parson" was "th' parson" to her still. A good-natured, simple little fellow, who might be a trifle better than other folks, but who certainly seemed weaker; a frail little gentleman in spectacles, who was afraid of her, or was at least easily confounded; who might be of use to Liz, but who was not in her line,--better in his way than his master in his; but still a person to be re-garded with just a touch of contempt.

The confidence established between Grace and his friend Fergus Derrick, leading to the discussion of all matters connected with the parish and parishioners, led naturally to the frequent discussion of Joan Lowrie among the rest. Over tea and toast in the small parlor the two men often drew comfort from each other. When Derrick strode into the little place and threw himself into his favorite chair, with knit brows and weary irritation in his air, Grace was always ready to detect his mood, and wait for him to reveal himself; or when Grace looked up at his friend's entrance with a heavy, pained look on his face, Derrick was equally quick to comprehend. There was one trouble in which Derrick specially sympathized with his friend. This was in his feeling for Anice.

Duty called Paul frequently to the house, and his position with regard to its inhabitants was necessarily familiar. Mr. Barholm did not spare his curate; he was ready to delegate to him all labor in which he was not specially interested himself, or which he regarded as scarcely

worthy of his mettle.

"Grace makes himself very useful in some cases," he would say; "a certain kind of work suits him, and he is able to do himself justice in it. He is a worthy enough young fellow in a certain groove, but it is always best to confine him to that groove."

So, when there was an ordinary sermon to be preached, or a commonplace piece of work to be done, it was handed over to Grace, with a few tolerant words of advice or comment, and as commonplace work was rather the rule than the exception, the Reverend Paul's life was not idle, Anice's manner toward her father's curate was so gentle and earnest, so frank and full of trust in him, that it was not to be wondered at that each day only fixed her more firmly in his heart. Nothing of his conscientious labor was lost upon her; nothing of his self-sacrifice and trial was passed by indifferently in her thoughts of him; his pain and his effort went to her very heart. Her belief in him was so strong that she never hesitated to carry any little bewilderment to him or to speak to him openly upon any subject. Small marvel, that he found it delicious pain to go to the house day after day, feeling himself so near to her, yet knowing himself so far from any hope of reaching the sealed chamber of her heart.

Notwithstanding her knowledge of her inability to alter his position, Anice still managed to exert some slight influence over her friend's fate.

"Do you not think, papa, that Mr. Grace has a great deal to do?" she suggested once, when he was specially overburdened.

"A great deal to do?" he said. "Well, he has enough to do, of course, my dear, but then it is work of a kind that suits him. I never leave anything very important to Grace. You do not mean, my dear, that you fancy he has too much to do?"

"Rather too much of a dull kind," answered Anice. "Dull work is tiring, and he has a great deal of it on his hands. All that school work, you know, papa--if you could share it with him, I should think it would make it easier for him."

"My dear Anice," the rector protested; "if Grace had my responsibilities to carry on his shoulders,--but I do not leave my responsibilities to him. In my opinion he is hardly fitted to bear them--they are not in his line;" but seeing a dubious look on the delicate face opposite him--"but if you think the young fellow has really too much to do, I will try to take some of these minor matters upon myself. I am equal to a good deal of hard work,"--evidently feeling himself somewhat aggrieved.

But Anice made no further comment; having dropped a seed of suggestion, she left it to fructify, experience teaching her that this was her best plan. It was one of the good rector's weaknesses, to dislike to find his course disapproved even by a wholly uninfluential critic, and his

daughter was by no means an uninfluential critic. He was never exactly comfortable when her views did not strictly accord with his own. To find that Anice was regarding a favorite whim with questioning, was for him to begin to falter a trifle inwardly, however testily rebellious he might feel. He was a man who thrived under encouragement, and sank at once before failure; failure was unpleasant, and he rarely contended long against unpleasantness; it was not a "fair wind and no favor" with him, he wanted both the fair wind and the favor, and if either failed him he felt himself rather badly used. So it was, through this discreetly exerted influence of Anice's, that Grace, to his surprise, found some irksome tasks taken from his shoulders at this time. He did not know that it was Anice he had to thank for the temporary relief.