

CHAPTER XII - On Guard

Though they saw comparatively little of each other, the friendly feeling established between Anice and Joan, in their first interview, gained strength gradually as time went on. Coming home from her work at noon or at night, Joan would see traces of Anice's presence, and listen to Liz's praises of her. Liz was fond of her and found comfort in her. The days when the gray pony came to a stop in his jog-trot on the roadside before the gate had a kind of pleasurable excitement in them. They were the sole spice of her life. She understood Anice as little as she understood Joan, but she liked her. She had a vague fancy that in some way Anice was like Joan; that there was the same strength in her,--a strength upon which she herself might depend. And then she found even a stronger attraction in her visitor's personal adornments, in her graceful dress, in any elegant trifle she wore. She liked to look at her clothes and ask questions about them, and wonder how she would look if she were the possessor of such beautiful things.

"She wur loike a pictur," she would say mournfully to Joan. "She had a blue gown on, an' a hat wi' blue-bells in it, an' summat white an' soft frilled up round her neck. Eh! it wur pretty. I wish I wur a lady. I dunnot see why ivverybody canna be a lady an' have such loike."

Later Joan got up and went to the child, who lay upon the bed in a corner of the room.

There were thoughts at work within her of which Liz knew nothing. Liz only looked at her wondering as she took the sleeping baby in her arms, and began to pace the floor, walking to and fro with a slow step.

"Have I said owt to vex yo'?" said Liz.

"No, lass," was the answer, "it is na thee as worrits me. I con scarce tell what it is mysen, but it is na thee, nivver fear."

But there was a shadow upon her all the rest of the night. She did not lay the child down again, but carried it in her arms until they went to bed, and even there it lay upon her breast.

"It's queer to me as yo' should be so fond o' that choild, Joan," said Liz, standing by the side of the bed.

Joan raised her head from the pillow and looked down at the small face resting upon her bosom, and she touched the baby's cheek lightly with her finger, flushing curiously.

"It's queer to me too," she answered, "Get thee into bed, Liz."

Many a battle was fought upon that homely couch when Liz was slumbering quietly, and the child's soft regular breathing was the only sound to be heard in the darkened room. Amid the sordid cares and humiliations of Joan's rough life, there had arisen new ones. She had secret

struggles--secret yearnings,--and added to these, a secret terror. When she lay awake thinking, she was listening for her father's step. There was not a night in which she did not long for, and dread to hear it. If he stayed out all night, she went down to her work under a load of foreboding. She feared to look into the faces of her work-fellows, lest they should have some evil story to tell, she feared the road over which she had to pass, lest at some point, its very dust should cry out to her in a dark stain. She knew her father better than the oldest of his companions, and she watched him closely.

"He's what yo' wenches ud ca' a handsum chap, that theer," said Lowrie to her, the night of his encounter with Derrick. "He's a tall chap an' a strappin' chap an' he's gotten a good-lookin' mug o' his own, but," clenching his fist slowly and speaking, "I've not done wi' him yet--I has not quite done wi' him. Wait till I ha', an' then see what yo'll say about his beauty. Look yo' here, lass,"--more slowly and heavily still,--"he'll noan be so tall then nor yet so straight an' strappin'. I'll smash his good-lookin' mug if I'm dom'd to hell fur it. Heed tha that?"

Instead of taking lodgings nearer the town or avoiding the Knoll Road, as Grace advised him to do when he heard of Joan's warning, Derrick provided himself with a heavy stick, stuck a pistol into his belt every night when he left his office, and walked home as usual, keeping a sharp lookout, however.

"If I avoid the fellow," he said to Grace, "he will suspect at once that I feel I have cause to fear him; and if I give him grounds for such a belief as that I might as well have given way at first."

Strange to say he was not molested. The excitement seemed to die a natural death in the course of a few days. Lowrie came back to his work looking sullen and hard, but he made no open threats, and he even seemed easier to manage. Certainly Derrick found his companions more respectful and submissive. There was less grumbling among them and more passive obedience. The rules were not broken, openly, at least, and he himself was not defied. It was not pleasant to feel that what reason and civility could not do, a tussle had accomplished, but this really seemed to be the truth of the matter, and the result was one which made his responsibilities easier to bear.

But during his lonely walks homeward on these summer nights, Derrick made a curious discovery. On one or two occasions he became conscious that he had a companion who seemed to act as his escort. It was usually upon dark or unpleasant nights that he observed this, and the first time he caught sight of the figure which always walked on the opposite side of the road, either some distance before or behind him, he put his hand to his belt, not perceiving for some moments that it was not a man but a woman. It was a woman's figure, and the knowledge sent the blood to his heart with a rush that quickened its beatings. It might have been chance, he argued, that took her home that night at this particular time; but when time after time, the same thing occurred, he saw that

his argument had lost its plausibility. It was no accident, there was purpose in it; and though they never spoke to each other or in any manner acknowledged each other's presence, and though often he fancied that she convinced herself that he was not aware of her motive, he knew that Joan's desire to protect him had brought her there.

He did not speak of this even to Grace.

One afternoon in making her visit at the cottage, Anice left a message for Joan. She had brought a little plant-pot holding a tiny rose-bush in full bloom, and when she went away she left her message with Liz.

"I never see your friend when I am here," she said, "will you ask her to come and see me some night when she is not too tired?"

When Joan came home from her work, the first thing that caught her eye was a lovely bit of color,--the little rose-bush blooming on the window-sill where Anice herself had placed it.

She went and stood before it, and when Liz, who had been temporarily absent, came into the room, she was standing before it still.

"She browt it," explained Liz, "she wur here this afternoon."

"Aye," she answered, "wur she?"

"Aye," said Liz. "An', Joan, what do yo' think she towd me to tell yo'?"

Joan shook her head.

"Why, she said I were to tell yo' to go and see her some neet when yo' wur na tired,--just th' same as if yo' wur a lady. Shanna yo' go?"

"I dunnot know," said Joan awakening, "I canna tell. What does she want o' me?"

"She wants to see thee an' talk to thee, that's what,"--answered Liz,--"just th' same as if tha was a lady, I tell thee. That's her way o' doin' things. She is na a bit loike the rest o' gentlefolk. Why, she'll sit theer on that three-legged stool wi' the choild on her knee an' laff an' talk to me an' it, as if she wur nowt but a common lass an' noan a lady at aw. She's ta'en a great fancy to thee, Joan. She's allus axin me about thee. If I wur thee I'd go. Happen she'd gi' thee some o' her owd cloas as she's ta'en to thee so."

"I dunnot want no owd cloas," said Joan brusquely, "an' she's noan so daft as to offer 'em to me."

"Well, I nivver did!" exclaimed Liz. "Would na tha tak' 'em? Tha nivver means to say, tha would na tak' 'em, Joan? Eh! tha art a queer wench! Why, I'd be set up for th' rest o' my days, if she'd offer 'em to me."

"Thy ways an' mine is na loike," said Joan. "I want no gentlefolks' finery. An' I tell you she would na offer 'em to me."

"I nivver con mak' thee out," Liz said, in a fret. "Tha'rt as grand as if tha wur a lady thy-sen. Tha'lt tak' nowt fro' nobody."

"Wheer's th' choild?" asked Joan.

"She's laid on th' bed," said Liz. "She wur so heavy she tired me an' I gave her a rose-bud to play wi' an' left her. She has na cried sin'. Eh! but these is a noice color," bending her pretty, large-eyed face over the flowers, and inhaling their perfume; "I wish I had a bit o' ribbon loike 'em."