

CHAPTER XIII - Joan and the Picture

Notwithstanding Anice's interference in his behalf, Paul did not find his labors become very much lighter. And then after all his labor, the prospect before him was not promising. Instead of appearing easier to cope with as he learned more of it and its inhabitants, Riggan seemed still more baffling. His "district" lay in the lower end of the town among ugly back streets, and alleys; among dirt and ignorance and obstinacy. He spent his days in laboring among people upon whom he sometimes fancied he had obtained no hold. It really seemed that they did not want him--these people; and occasionally a more distressing view of the case presented itself to his troubled mind,--namely, that to those who might chance to want him he had little to offer.

He had his temporal thorn too. He found it difficult to read, hard to fix his mind on his modest sermons; occasionally he even accused himself of forgetting his duty. This had come since the night when he stood at the door and listened to his friend's warning concerning the Rector's daughter. Derrick's words were simple enough in themselves, but they had fallen upon the young Curate's ears with startling significance. He had given this significance to them himself,--in spite of himself,--and then all at once he had fallen to wondering why it was that he had never thought of such a possible denouement before. It was so very possible, so very probable; nay, when he came to think of it seriously, it was only impossible that it should not be. He had often told him-self, that some day a lover would come who would be worthy of the woman he had not

even hoped to win. And who was more worthy than Fergus Derrick--who was more like the hero to whom such women surrender their hearts and lives. If he himself had been such a man, he thought with the simplicity of affection, he would not have felt that there was need for fear. And the two had been thrown so much together and would be thrown together so frequently in the future. He remembered how Fergus had been taken into the family circle, and calling to mind a hundred trifling incidents, smiled at his own blindness. When the next day he received Anice's message, he received it as an almost positive confirmation. It was not like her to bestow favors from an idle impulse.

It was not so easy now to meet the girl in his visits to the Rectory: it was not easy to listen to Mr. Barholm while Anice and Fergus Derrick sat apart and talked. Sometimes he wondered if the time could ever come, when his friend would be less his friend because he had rivalled him. The idea of such a possibility only brought him fresh pain. His gentle chivalric nature shrank within itself at the thought of the bereavement that double loss would be. There was little room in his mind for the envies of stronger men. Certainly Fergus had no suspicion of the existence of his secret pain. He found no alteration in his gentle friend.

Among the Reverend Paul's private ventures was a small night school which he had managed to establish by slow degrees. He had picked up a reluctant scholar here, and one there,--two or three pit lads, two or

three girls, and two or three men for whose attendance he had worked so hard and waited so long that he was quite surprised at his success in the end. He scarcely knew how he had managed it, but the pupils were there in the dingy room of the National School, waiting for him on two nights in the week, upon which nights he gave them instruction on a plan of his own. He had thought the matter so little likely to succeed at first, that he had engaged in it as a private work, and did not even mention it until his friends discovered it by chance.

Said Jud Bates to Miss Barholm, during one of their confidential interviews:

"Did tha ivver go to a neet skoo?"

"No," said Anice.

Jud fondled Nib's ears patronizingly.

"I ha', an' I'm goin' again. So is Nib. He's gotten one."

"Who?" for Jud had signified by a gesture that he was not the dog, but some indefinite person in the village.

"Th' little Parson."

"Say, Mr. Grace," suggested Anice. "It sounds better."

"Aye--Mester Grace--but ivverybody ca's him th' little Parson. He's gotten a neet skoo i' th' town, an' he axed me to go, an' I went I took Nib an' we larned our letters; leastways I larned mine, an' Nib he listened wi' his ears up, an' th' Par--Mester Grace laffed. He wur na vext at Nib comin'. He said 'let him coom, as he wur so owd-fashioned.'"

So Mr. Grace found himself informed upon, and was rather abashed at being confronted with his enterprise a few days after by Miss Barholm.

"I like it," said Anice. "Joan Lowrie learned to read and write in a night school. Mr. Derrick told me so."

A new idea seemed to have been suggested to her.

"Mr. Grace," she said, "why could not I help you? Might I?"

His delight revealed itself in his face. His first thought was a selfish, unclerical one, and sudden consciousness sent the color to his forehead as he answered her, though he spoke quite calmly.

"There is no reason why you should not--if you choose," he said, "unless Mr. Barholm should object. I need not tell you how grateful I should be."

"Papa will not object," she said, quietly.

The next time the pupils met, she presented herself in the school-room.

Ten minutes after Grace had given her work to her she was as much at home with it as if she had been there from the first.

"Hoo's a little un," said one of the boys, "but hoo does na seem to be easy feart. Hoo does not look a bit tuk back."

She had never been so near to Paul Grace during their friendship as when she walked home with him. A stronger respect for him was growing in her,--a new reverence for his faithfulness. She had always liked and trusted him, but of late she had learned to do more. She recognized more fully the purity and singleness of his life. She accused herself of having underrated him.

"Please let me help you when I can, Mr. Grace," she said; "I am not blaming anybody--there is no real blame, even if I had the right to attach it to any one; but there are mistakes now and then, and you must promise me that I may use my influence to prevent them."

She had stopped at the gate to say this, and she held out her hand. It was a strange thing that she could be so utterly oblivious of the pain she inflicted. But even Derrick would have taken her hand with less self-control. He was so fearful of wounding or disturbing her, that he was continually on his guard in her presence, and especially when she

was thus warm and unguarded herself.

He had fancied before, sometimes, that she had seen his difficulties, and sympathized with him, but he had never hope'd that she would be thus unreserved. His thanks came from the depths of his heart; he felt that she had lightened his burden.

After this, Miss Barholm was rarely absent from her place at the school.

The two evenings always found her at work among her young women, and she

made very steady progress among them.

By degrees the enterprise was patronized more freely. New pupils dropped in, and were usually so well satisfied that they did not drop out again.

Grace gave all the credit to Anice, but Anice knew better than to accept it. She had been his "novelty" she said; time only would prove whether her usefulness was equal to her power of attraction.

She had been teaching in the school about three weeks, when a servant came to her one night as she sat reading, with the information that a young woman wished to see her.

"A fine-looking young woman, Miss," added the girl. "I put her into your own room, as you give orders."

The room was a quiet place, away from the sounds of the house, which had

gradually come to be regarded as Miss Barholm's. It was not a large room but it was a pretty one, with wide windows and a good view, and as Anice liked it, her possessions drifted into it until they filled it,--her books, her pictures,--and as she spent a good deal of her time there, it was invariably spoken of as her room, and she had given orders to the servants that her village visitors should be taken to it when they came.

Carrying her book in her hand, she went upstairs. She had been very much interested in what she was reading, and had hardly time to change the channel of her thought. But when she opened the door, she was brought back to earth at once.

Against the end wall was suspended a picture of Christ in the last agony, and beneath it was written, "It is finished." Before it, as Anice opened the door, stood Joan Lowrie, with Liz's sleeping child on her bosom. She had come upon the picture suddenly, and it had seized on some deep, reluctant emotion. She had heard some vague history of the Man; but it was different to find herself in this silent room, confronting the upturned face, the crown, the cross, the anguish and the mystery. She turned toward Anice, forgetting all else but her emotion. She even looked at her for a few seconds in questioning silence, as if waiting for an answer to words she had not spoken.

When she found her voice, it was of the picture she spoke, not of the real object of her visit.

"Tha knows," she said, "I dunnot, though I've heerd on it afore. What is it as is finished? I dunnot quite see. What is it?"

"It means," said Anice, "that God's Son has finished his work."

Joan did not speak.

"I have no words of my own, to explain," continued Anice. "I can tell you better in the words of the men who loved him and saw him die."

Joan turned to her.

"Saw him dee!" she repeated.

"There were men who saw him when he died you know," said Anice. "The New

Testament tells us how. It is as real as the picture, I think. Did you never read it?"

The girl's face took an expression of distrust and sullenness.

"Th' Bible has na been i' my line," she answered;

"I've left that to th' parsons an' th' loike; but th' pictur' tuk my eye. It seemt different."

"Let us sit down," said Anice, "you will be tired of standing."

When they sat down, Anice began to talk about the child, who was sleeping, lowering her voice for fear of disturbing it. Joan regarded the little thing with a look of half-subdued pride.

"I browt it because I knowed it ud be easier wi' me than wi' Liz," she said. "It worrits Liz an' it neer worrits me. I'm so strong, yo' see, I con carry it, an' scarce feel its weight, but it wears Liz out, an' it seems to me as it knows it too, fur th' minute she begins to fret it frets too."

There was a certain shamefacedness in her manner, when at last she began to explain the object of her errand. Anice could not help fancying that she was impelled on her course by some motive whose influence she reluctantly submitted to. She had come to speak about the night school.

"Theer wur a neet skoo here once afore as I went to," she said; "I larnt to reed theer an' write a bit, but--but theer's other things I'd loike to know. Tha canst understand," she added a little abruptly, "I need na tell yo'. Little Jud Bates said as yo' had a class o' yore own, an' it come into my moind as I would ax yo' about it. If I go to th' skoo I--I'd loike to be wi' ye."

"You can come to me," said Anice. "And do you know, I think you can help me." This thought had occurred to her suddenly. "I am sure you can help

me," she repeated.

When Joan at last started to go away, she paused before the picture, hesitating for a moment, and then she turned to Anice again.

"Yo' say as th' book maks it seem real as th' pictur," she said.

"It seems so to me," Anice answered.

"Will yof lend me th' book?" she asked abruptly.

Anice's own Bible lay upon a side-table. She took it up and handed it to the girl, saying simply, "I will give you this one if you will take it
It was mine."

And Joan carried the book away with her.