

CHAPTER XV - A Discovery

The first time that Joan appeared at the night school, the men and girls looked up from their tasks to stare at her, and whisper among themselves; but she was, to all appearances, oblivious of their scrutiny, and the flurry of curiosity and excitement soon died out. After the first visit her place was never vacant. On the nights appointed for the classes to meet, she came, did the work allotted to her, and went her way again, pretty much as she did at the mines. When in due time Anice began to work out her plan of co-operation with her, she was not disappointed in the fulfilment of her hopes. Gradually it became a natural thing for a slow and timid girl to turn to Joan Lowrie for help.

As for Joan's own progress, it was not long before Miss Barholm began to regard the girl with a new wonder. She was absolutely amazed to find out how much she was learning, and how much she had learned, working on silently and by herself. She applied herself to her tasks with a determination which seemed at times almost feverish.

"I mun learn," she said to Anice once. "I will," and she closed her hand with a sudden nervous strength.

Then again there were times when her courage seemed to fail her, though she never slackened her efforts.

"Dost tha think," she said, "dost tha think as I could ivver learn as much as tha knows thysen? Does tha think a workin' lass ivver did learn as much as a lady?"

"I think," said Anice, "that you can do anything you try to do."

By very slow degrees she had arrived at a discovery which a less close observer might have missed altogether, or at least only arrived at much later in the day of experience. Anice's thoughts were moved in this direction the night that Derrick slipped into that half soliloquy about Joan. She might well be startled. This man and woman could scarcely have been placed at a greater distance from each other, and yet those half dozen words of Fergus Derrick's had suggested to his hearer that each, through some undefined attraction, was veering toward the other. Neither might be aware of this; but it was surely true. Little as social creeds influenced Anice, she could not close her eyes to the incongruous--the unpleasant features of this strange situation. And, besides, there was a more intimate and personal consideration. Her own feeling toward Fergus Derrick was friendship at first, and then she had suddenly awakened and found it something more. That had startled her, too, but it had not alarmed her till her eyes were opened by that accidental speech of Derrick's. After that, she saw what both Derrick and Joan were themselves blind to.

Setting her own pain aside, she stood apart, and pitied both. As for herself, she was glad that she had made the discovery before it was too

late. She knew that there might have been a time when it would have been too late. As it was, she drew back,--with a pang, to be sure; but still she could draw back.

"I have made a mistake," she said to herself in secret; but it did not occur to her to visit the consequences of the mistake upon any other than herself.

The bond of sympathy between herself and Joan Lowrie only seemed to increase in strength. Meeting oftener, they were knit more closely, and drawn into deeper faith and friendship. With Joan, emotion was invariably an undercurrent. She had trained herself to a stubborn stoicism so long, and with such determination, that the habit of complete self-control had become a second nature, and led her to hold the world aloof. It was with something of secret wonder that she awoke to the consciousness of the fact that she was not holding Anice Barholm aloof, and that there was no necessity for doing so. She even found that she was being attracted toward her, and was submitting to her influence as to a spell. She did not understand at first, and wondered if it would last; but the nearer she was drawn to the girl, the less doubting and reluctant she became. There was no occasion for doubt, and her proud suspiciousness melted like a cloud in the spring sunshine. Having armed herself against patronage and curiosity, she encountered earnest friendship and good faith. She was not patronized, she was not asked questions, she was left to reveal as much of herself as she chose, and allowed to retain her own secrets as if they were her own property.

So she went and came to and from the Rectory; and from spending a few minutes in Anice's room, at last fell into the habit of spending hours there. In this little room the books, and pictures, and other refinements appealed to senses unmoved before. She drew in some fresh experience with almost every breath.

One evening, after a specially discouraging day, it occurred to Grace that he would go and see Joan; and dropping in upon her on his way back to town, after a visit to a parishioner who lived upon the high-road, he found the girl sitting alone--sitting as she often did, with the child asleep upon her knee; but this time with a book lying close to its hand and her own. It was Anice's Bible.

"Will yo' set down?" she said in a voice whose sound was new to him.

"Theer's a chair as yo' con tak'. I conna move fur fear o' wakenin' th' choild. I'm fain to see yo' to-neet."

He took the chair and thanked her, and waited for her next words. Only a few moments she was silent, and then she looked up at him.

"I ha' been readin' th' Bible," she said, as if in desperation. "I dunnot know why, unless happen some un stronger nor me set me at it. Happen it coom out o' settin here wi' th' choild. An'--well, queer enow, I coom reet on summat about childer,--that little un as he tuk and set i' th' midst o' them, an' then that theer when he said 'Suffer th' little childer to coom unto me.' Do yo' say aw that's true? I niver

thowt on it afore,--but somehow I should na loike to think it wur na. Nay, I should na!" Then, after a moment's pause--"I nivver troubled mysen wi' readin' th' Bible afore," she went on, "I ha' na lived wi' th' Bible soart; but now--well that theer has stirred me up. If he said that--if he said it hissen--Ah! mester,"--and the words breaking from her were an actual cry,--"Aye, mester, look at th' little un here! I munnot go wrong--I munnot, if he said it hissen!"

He felt his heart beat quick, and his pulses throb. Here was the birth of a soul; here in his hands perhaps lay the rescue of two immortal beings. God help him! he cried inwardly. God help him to deal rightly with this woman. He found words to utter, and uttered them with courage and with faith. What words it matters not,--but he did not fail. Joan listened wondering, and in a passion of fear and belief.

She clasped her arms about the child almost as if seeking help from it, and wept.

"I munnot go wrong," she said over and over again. "How could I hold th' little un back, if he said hissen as she mun coom? If it's true as he said that, I'll believe aw th' rest an' listen to yo'. 'Forbid them not--'. Nay, but I wunnot--I could na ha' th' heart."