

CHAPTER XIX - Ribbons

The light in the cottage upon the Knoll Road burned late in these days, and when Derrick was delayed in the little town, he used to see it twinkle afar off, before he turned the bend of the road on his way home. He liked to see it. It became a sort of beacon light, and as such he began to watch for it. He used to wonder what Joan was doing, and he glanced in through the curtainless windows as he passed by. Then he discovered that when the light shone she was at work. Sometimes she was sitting at the wooden table with a book, sometimes she was laboring at some task with pen and ink, sometimes she was trying to use her needle.

She had applied to Anice for instruction in this last effort. It was not long before Anice found that she was intent upon acquiring the womanly arts her life had put it out of her power to learn.

"I'd loike to learn to sew a bit," she had said, and the confession seemed awkward and reluctant "I want to learn to do a bit o' woman's work. I'm tired o' bein' neyther th' one thing nor th' other. Seems loike I've allus been doin' men's ways, an' I am na content."

Two or three times Derrick saw her passing to and fro before the window, hushing the child in her arms, and once he even heard her singing to it in a low, and evidently rarely used voice. Up to the time that Joan first sang to the child, she had never sung in her life. She caught herself one day half chanting a lullaby she had heard Anice sing. The

sound of her own voice was so novel to her, that she paused all at once in her walk across the room, prompted by a queer impulse to listen.

"It moight ha' been somebody else," she said. "I wonder what made me do it. It wur a queer thing."

Sometimes Derrick met Joan entering the Rectory (at which both were frequent visitors); sometimes, passing through the hall on her way home; but however often he met her, he never felt that he advanced at all in her friendship.

On one occasion, having bidden Anice goodnight and gone out on the staircase, Joan stepped hurriedly back into the room and stood at the door as if waiting.

"What is it?" Anice asked.

Joan started. She had looked flushed and downcast, and when Anice addressed her, an expression of conscious self-betrayal fell upon her.

"It is Mester Derrick," she answered, and in a moment she went out.

Anice remained seated at the table, her hands clasped before her.

"Perhaps," at last she said aloud, "perhaps this is what is to be done with her. And then--" her lips tremulous,--"it will be a work for me to

do."

Derrick's friendship and affection for herself held no germ of warmer feeling. If she had had the slightest doubt of this, she would have relinquished nothing. She had no exaggerated notions of self-immolation. She would not have given up to another woman what Heaven had given to herself, any more than she would have striven to win from another woman what had been Heaven's gift to her. If she felt pain, it was not the pain of a small envy, but of a great tenderness. She was capable of making any effort for the ultimate good of the man she could have loved with the whole strength of her nature.

When she entered her room that night, Joan Lowrie was moved to some surprise by a scene which met her eyes. It was a simple thing, and under some circumstances would have meant little; but taken in connection with her remembrance of past events, it had a peculiar significance. Liz was sitting upon the hearth, with some odds and ends of bright-colored ribbon on her knee, and a little straw hat in her hand. She was trimming the hat, and using the scraps of ribbon for the purpose. When she heard Joan, she looked up and reddened somewhat, and then hung her head over her work again.

"I'm makin' up my hat agen," she said, almost deprecatingly. "It wur sich a faded thing."

"Are y o'?" said Joan.

She came and stood leaning against the fireplace, and looked down at Liz thoughtfully. The shallowness and simplicity of the girl baffled her continually. She herself, who was prompted in action by deep motive and strong feeling, found it hard to realize that there could be a surface with no depth below.

Her momentary embarrassment having died out, Liz had quite forgotten herself in the interest of her task. She was full of self-satisfaction and trivial pleasure. She looked really happy as she tried the effect of one bit of color after another, holding the hat up. Joan had never known her to show such interest in anything before. One would never have fancied, seeing the girl at this moment, that a blight lay upon her life, that she could only look back with shrinking and forward without hope. She was neither looking backward nor forward now,--all her simple energies were concentrated in her work. How was it? Joan asked herself. Had she forgotten--could she forget the past and be ready for petty vanities and follies? To Joan. Liz's history had been a tragedy--a tragedy which must be tragic to its end, There was something startlingly out of keeping in the present mood of this pretty seventeen-year-old girl sitting eager and delighted over her lapful of ribbons. Not that Joan begrudged her the slight happiness--she only wondered, and asked herself how it could be.

Possibly her silence attracted Liz's attention. Suddenly she looked up, and when she saw the gravity of Joan's face, her own changed.

"Yo're grudgin' me doin' it," she cried. "Yo' think I ha' no reet to care for sich things," and she dropped hat and ribbon on her knee with an angry gesture. "Happen I ha' na," she whimpered. "I ha' na getten no reet to no soart o' pleasure, I dare say."

"Nay," said Joan rousing herself from her revery. "Nay, yo' must na say that, Liz. If it pleases yo' it conna do no hurt; I'm glad to see yo' pleased."

"I'm tired o' doin' nowt but mope i' th' house," Liz fretted. "I want to go out a bit loike other foak. Theer's places i' Riggan as I could go to wi'out bein' slurred at--theer's other wenches as has done worse nor me. Ben Maxy towd Mary on'y yesterday as I was the prettiest lass i' th' place, fur aw their slurs."

"Ben Maxy!" Joan said slowly.

Liz twisted a bit of ribbon around her finger.

"It's not as I care fur what Ben Maxy says or what ony other mon says, fur th' matter o' that, but--but it shows as I need na be so mich ashamed o' mysen after aw, an' need na stay i' doors as if I dare na show my face."

Joan made no answer.

"An' yet," she said, smiling faintly at her own train of thought afterward, "I dunnot see what I'm complainin' on. Am I out o' patience because her pain is na deeper? Surely I am na wantin' her to mak' th' most o' her burden. I mun be a queer wench, tryin' to mak' her happy, an' then feelin' worried at her forgettin' her trouble. It's well as she con let things slip so easy."

But there came times when she could not help being anxious, seeing Liz gradually drifting out into her old world again. She was so weak, and pretty, and frivolous, so ready to listen to rough flatteries. Riggan was more rigid in its criticism than in its morality, and criticism having died out, offence was forgotten through indifference rather than through charity. Those who had been hardest upon Liz in her day of darkness were carelessly ready to take her up again when her fault was an old story overshadowed by some newer scandal.

Joan found herself left alone with the child oftener than she used to be, but in truth this was a relief rather than otherwise. She was accustomed to solitude, and the work of self-culture she had begun filled her spare hours with occupation.

Since his dismissal from the mines, she saw but little of her father. Sometimes she saw nothing of him for weeks. The night after he lost his place, he came into the house, and making up a small bundle of his personal effects, took a surly leave of the two women.

"I'm goin' on th' tramp a bit," he said. "If yo're axed, yo' con say I'm gone to look fur a job. My day has na coom yet, but it's on th' way."

Since then he had only returned once or twice, and his visits had always been brief and unexpected, and at night. The first time he had startled Joan by dropping in upon her at midnight, his small bundle on his knob-stick over his shoulder, his clothes bespattered with road-side mud. He said nothing of his motive in coming--merely asked for his supper and ate it without much remark.

"I ha' na had luck," he said. "Luck's not i my loine; I wur na born to it, loike some foak. Happen th' tide'll tak' a turn after a bit."

"Yore feyther wur axin me about th' engineer," Liz said to Joan the next morning. "He wanted to know if we seed him pass heer i' his road hoam. D'yo' think he's gotten a spite agen th' engineer yet, Joan?"

"I'm afeard," Joan answered. "Feyther's loike to bear a grudge agen them as put him out, whether they're reet or wrong. Liz----" hesitating.

"What is it, Joan?"

"Dunnot yo' say no more nor yo' con help when he axes yo' about th' engineer. I'm wor-ritin' mysen lest feyther should get hissen into trouble. He's hasty, yo' know."

In the evening she went out and left the child to its mother. She had business to look after, she told Liz, and it would keep her out late. Whatever the business was, it kept her out so late that Liz was tired of waiting, and went to bed worn out and a trifle fretted.

She did not know what hour it was when she awakened; voices and a light in the road roused her, and almost as soon as she was fully conscious, the door opened and Joan came in. Liz raised her head from the pillow to look at her. She was pale and seemed excited. She was even trembling a little, and her voice was unsteady as she asked,

"Has th' little un been quiet, Liz?"

"Quiet enow," said Liz. "What a toime yo' ha' been, Joan! It mun be near midneet. I got so worn out wi' waitin' fur yo' that I could na sit up no longer. Wheer ha' yo' been?"

"I went to Riggan," said Joan, "Theer wur summat as I wur obliged to see to, an' I wur kept beyond my toime by summat as happent. But it is na quoite midneet, though it's late enow."

"Was na theer a lantern wi' yo'?" asked Liz. "I thowt I seed th' leet fro' a lantern."

"Yes," Joan answered, "theer wur a lantern. As I wur turnin' into th'

road, I met Mester Derrick comin' fro' th' Rectory an'--an' he walked
alongside o' me."