

CHAPTER XXI - Derrick's Question

Derrick had had a great deal to think about of late. Affairs at the mines had been troublesome, as usual, and he had been often irritated by the stupidity of the men who were in authority over him. He began to feel, moreover, that an almost impalpable barrier had sprung up between himself and his nearest friend. When he came to face the matter, he was obliged to acknowledge to himself that there were things he had kept from Grace, though it had been without any positive intention of concealment. And, perhaps, being the sensitive fellow he had called him, Grace had felt that there was something behind his occasional abstraction and silence, and had shrunk within himself, feeling a trifle hurt at Derrick's want of frankness and confidence.

Hardly a day passed in which he did not spend some short time in the society of his Pythias. He rarely passed his lodgings without dropping in, and, to-night, he turned in on his way from the office, and fell upon Grace hard at work over a volume of theology.

"Lay your book aside," he said to him. "I want to gossip this evening, old fellow."

Grace closed his book and came to his usual seat, smiling affectionately. There was a suggestion of feminine affectionateness in his bearing toward his friend.

"Gossip," he remarked. "The word gos-sip----

"Oh," put in Derrick, "it's a woman's word; but I am in a womanish sort of humor. I am going to be--I suppose, one might say--confidential."

The Reverend Paul reddened a little but as Derrick rather avoided looking at him he did not observe the fact.

"Grace," he said, after a silence, "I have a sort of confession to make. I am in a difficulty, and I rather blame myself for not having come to you before."

"Don't blame yourself," said the Curate, faintly. "You--you are not to blame."

Then Derrick glanced up at him quickly. This sounded so significant of some previous knowledge of his trouble, that he was taken aback. He could not quite account for it.

"What!" he exclaimed. "Is it possible that you have guessed it already?"

"I have thought so--sometimes I have thought so--though I feel as if I ought almost to ask your pardon for going so far."

Grace had but one thought as he spoke. His friend's trouble meant his friend's honor and regard for himself. It was for his sake that Derrick

was hesitating on the brink of a happy love--unselfishly fearing for him. He knew the young man's impetuous generosity, and saw how under the circumstances, it might involve him. Loving Anice Barholm with the full strength of a strong nature, Derrick was generous enough still to shrink from his prospect of success with the woman his friend had failed to win.

Derrick flung himself back in his chair with a sigh. He was thinking, with secret irritation, that he must have felt even more than he had acknowledged to himself since he had in all unconsciousness, confessed so much.

"You have saved me the trouble of putting into words a feeling I have not words to explain," he said. "Perhaps that is the reason why I have not spoken openly before. Grace,"--abruptly,--"I have fancied there was a cloud between us."

"Between us!" said Grace, eagerly and warmly. "No, no! That was a poor fancy indeed; I could not bear that."

"Nor I," impetuously. "But I cannot be explicit even now, Grace--even my thoughts are not explicit. I have been bewildered and--yes, amazed--amazed at finding that I had gone so far without knowing it. Surely there never was a passion--if it is really a passion--that had so little to feed upon."

"So little!" echoed Grace.

Derrick got up and began to walk across the floor.

"I have nothing--nothing, and I am beset on every side."

There was something extraordinary in the blindness of a man with an absorbing passion. Absorbed by his passion for one woman, Grace was blind to the greatest of inconsistencies in his friend's speech and manner. Absorbed in his passion for another woman, Derrick forgot for the hour everything concerning his friend's love for Anice Barholm.

Suddenly he paused in his career across the room.

"Grace," he said, "I cannot trust myself; but I can trust you, I cannot be unselfish in this--you can. Tell me what I am to do--answer me this question, though God knows, it would be a hard one for any man to answer. Perhaps I ought not to ask it--perhaps I ought to have decision enough to answer it myself without troubling you. But how can I? And you who are so true to yourself and to me in other things, will be true in this I know. This feeling is stronger than all else--so strong that I have feared and failed to comprehend it. I had not even thought of it until it came upon me with fearful force, and I am conscious that it has not reached its height yet. It is not an ignoble passion, I know. How could a passion for such a creature be ignoble? And yet again, there

have been times when I have felt that perhaps it was best to struggle against it. I am beset on every side, as I have said, and I appeal to you. Ought love to be stronger than all else? I used to tell myself so, before it came upon me--and now I can only wonder at myself and tremble to find that I have grown weak."

God knows it was a hard question he had asked of the man who loved him; but this man did not hesitate to answer it as freely as if he had had no thought that he was signing the death-warrant of all hopes for himself. Grace went to him and laid a hand upon his broad shoulder.

"Come, sit down and I will tell you," he said, with a pallid face.

Derrick obeyed his gentle touch with a faint smile.

"I am too fiery and tempestuous, and you want to cool me," he said. "You are as gentle as a woman, Grace."

The Curate standing up before him, a slight, not at all heroic figure in his well worn, almost threadbare garments, smiled in return.

"I want to answer your question," he said, "and my answer is this: When a man loves a woman wholly, truly, purely, and to her highest honor,--such a love is the highest and noblest thing in this world, and nothing should lead to its sacrifice,--no ambition, no hope, no friendship."