

## CHAPTER XXXII - "Turned Methody!"

It had been generally expected that when all was over the cottage upon the Knoll Road would be closed and deserted, but some secret fancy held Joan to the spot. Perhaps the isolation suited her mood; perhaps the mere sense of familiarity gave her comfort.

"I should na be less lonely any wheer else," she said to Anice Barholm. "Theer's more here as I feel near to than i' any other place. I ha' no friends, yo' know. As to th' choild, I con carry it to Thwaite's wife i' th' mornin' when I go to th' pit, an' she'll look after it till neet, for a trifle. She's gotten childern o' her own, and knows their ways."

So she went backward and forward night and morning with her little burden in her arms. The child was a frail, tiny creature, never strong, and often suffering, and its very frailty drew Joan nearer to it. It was sadly like Liz, pretty and infantine. Many a rough but experienced mother, seeing it, prophesied that its battle with life would be brief. With the pretty face, it had inherited also the helpless, irresolute, appealing look. Joan saw this in the baby's eyes sometimes and was startled at its familiarity; even the low, fretted cry had in it something that was painfully like its girl-mother's voice. More than once a sense of fear had come upon Joan when she heard and recognized it. But her love only seemed to strengthen with her dread.

Day by day those who worked with her felt more strongly the change

developing so subtly in the girl. The massive beauty which had almost seemed to scorn itself was beginning to wear a different aspect; the defiant bitterness of look and tone was almost a thing of the past; the rough, contemptuous speech was less scathing and more merciful when at rare intervals it broke forth.

"Summat has coom over her," they said among themselves. "Happen it wur trouble. She wur different, somehow."

They were somewhat uneasy under this alteration; but, on the whole, the general feeling was by no means unfriendly. Time had been when they had known Joan Lowrie only as a "lass" who held herself aloof, and yet in a manner overruled them; but in these days more than one stunted, overworked girl or woman found her hard task rendered easier by Joan's strength and swiftness.

It was true that his quiet and unremitted efforts had smoothed Grace's path to some extent. There were ill-used women whom he had helped and comforted; there were neglected children whose lives he had contrived to brighten; there were unbelievers whose scoffing his gentle simplicity and long-suffering had checked a little. He could be regarded no longer with contempt in Riggan; he even had his friends there.

Among those who still mildly jeered at the little Parson stood foremost, far more through vanity than malice, "Owd Sammy Craddock." A couple of months after Lowrie's death, "Owd Sammy" had sauntered down to the mine

one day, and was entertaining a group of admirers when Grace went by.

It chanced that, for some reason best known to himself, Sammy was by no means in a good humor. Something had gone wrong at home or abroad, and his grievance had rankled and rendered him unusually contumacious.

Nearing the group, Grace looked up with a faint but kindly smile.

"Good-morning!" he said; "a pleasant day, friends!"

"Owd Sammy" glanced down at him with condescending tolerance. He had been talking himself, and the greeting had broken in upon his eloquence.

"Which on us," he asked dryly; "which on us said it wur na?"

A few paces from the group of idlers Joan Lowrie stood at work. Some of the men had noted her presence when they lounged by, but in the enjoyment of their gossip, they had forgotten her again. She had seen Grace too; she had heard his greeting and the almost brutal laugh that followed it; and, added to this, she had caught a passing glimpse of the Curate's face. She dropped her work, and, before the laugh had died out, stood up confronting the loungers.

"If theer is a mon among yo' as he has harmed," she said; "if theer's one among yo' as he's ivver done a wrong to, let that mon speak up."

It was "Owd Sammy" who was the first to recover himself. Probably he remembered the power he prided himself upon wielding over the weaker sex. He laid aside his pipe for a moment and tried sarcasm,--an adaptation of the same sarcasm he had tried upon the Curate.

"Which on us said theer wur?" he asked.

Joan turned her face, pale with repressed emotion, toward him.

"There be men here as I would scarce ha' believed could ha' had much agen him. I see one mon here as has a wife as lay nigh death a month or so ago, an' it were the Parson as went to see her day after day, an' tuk her help and comfort. Theer's another mon here as had a little un to dee, an' when it deed, it wur th' Parson as knelt by its bed an' held its hond an' talkt to it when it were feart. Theer's other men here as had help fro' him as they did na know of, an' it wur help from a mon as wur na far fro' a-bein' as poor an' hard worked i' his way as they are i' theirs. Happen th' mon I speak on dunnot know much about th' sick wife, an' deein choild, an' what wur done for 'em, an' if they dunnot, it's th' Parson's fault."

"Why!" broke in "Owd Sammy." "Blame me, if tha art na turned Methody! Blame me," in amazement, "if tha art na!"

"Nay," her face softening; "it is na Methody so much. Happen I'm turnin' woman, fur I conna abide to see a hurt gi'en to them as has na earned

it. That wur why I spoke. I ha' towd yo' th' truth o' th' little chap  
yo' jeered at an' throw'd his words back to."

Thus it became among her companions a commonly accepted belief that  
Joan

Lowrie had turned "Methody." They could find no other solution to her  
championship of the Parson.

"Is it true as tha's j'ined th' Methodys?" Thwaite's wife asked Joan,  
somewhat nervously.

She had learned to be fond of the girl, and did not like the idea of  
believing in her defection.

"No," she answered, "it is na."

The woman heaved a sigh of relief.

"I thowt it wur na," she said. "I towd th' Maxys as I did na believe  
it when they browt th' tale to me. They're powerful fond o' talebearing  
that Maxy lot."

Joan stopped in her play with the child.

"They dunnot understand," she said, "that's aw. I ha' learned to think  
different, an' believe i' things as I did na use to believe in. Happen

that's what they mean by talkin' o' th' Methodys."

People learned no more of the matter than this. They felt that in some way Joan had separated herself from their ranks, but they found it troublesome to work their way to any more definite conclusion.

"Hast heard about that lass o' Lowrie's?" they said to one another; "hoo's takken a new turn sin' Lowrie deed; hoo allus wur a queer-loike, high-handed wench."

After Lowrie's death, Anice Barholm and Joan were oftener together than ever. What had at first been friendship had gradually become affection.

"I think," Anice said to Grace, "that Joan must go away from here and find a new life."

"That is the only way," he answered. "In this old one there has been nothing but misery for her, and bitterness and pain."

Fergus Derrick was sitting at a table turning over a book of engravings. He looked up sharply.

"Where can you find a new life for her?" he asked. "And how can you help her to it? One dare not offer her even a semblance of assistance."

They had not spoken to him, but he had heard, as he always heard,

everything connected with Joan Lowrie. He was always restless and eager where she was concerned. All intercourse between them seemed to be at an end. Without appearing to make an effort to do so, she kept out of his path. Try as he might, he could not reach her. At last it had come to this: he was no longer dallying upon the brink of a great and dangerous passion,--it had overwhelmed him.

"One cannot even approach her," he said again.

Anice regarded him with a shade of pity in her face.

"The time is coming when it will not be so," she said.

The night before Joan Lowrie had spent an hour with her. She had come in on her way from her work, before going to Thwaite's, and had knelt down upon the hearth-rug to warm herself. There had been no light in the room but that of the fire, and its glow, falling upon her face, had revealed to Anice something like hag-gardness.

"Joan," she said, "are you ill?"

Joan stirred a little uneasily, but did not look at her as she answered:

"Nay, I am na ill; I nivver wur ill i' my loife."

"Then," said Anice, "what--what is it that I see in your face?"

There was a momentary tremor of the finely moulded, obstinate chin.

"I'm tired out," Joan answered. "That's all," and her hand fell upon her lap.

Anice turned to the fire.

"What is it?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

Joan looked up at her,--not defiant, not bitter, not dogged,--simply in appeal against her own despair.

"Is na theer a woman's place fur me i' th' world? Is it allus to be this way wi' me? Con I nivver reach no higher, strive as I will, pray as I will,--fur I have prayed? Is na theer a woman's place fur me i' th' world?"

"Yes," said Anice, "I am sure there is."

"I've thowt as theer mun be somewheer. Sometimes I've felt sure as theer mun be, an' then agen I've been beset so sore that I ha' almost gi'en it up. If there is such a place fur me I mun find it--I mun!"

"You will find it," said Anice. "Some day, surely."

Anice thought of all this again when she glanced at Derrick. Derrick was more than usually disturbed to-day. He had for some time been working his way to an important decision, fraught with some annoyance and anxiety to himself. There was to be a meeting of the owners in a few weeks, and at this meeting he had determined to take a firm stand.

"The longer I remain in my present position, the more fully I am convinced of the danger constantly threatening us," he said to Anice.

"I am convinced that the present system of furnaces is the cause of more explosions than are generally attributed to it. The mine here is a 'fiery' one, as they call it, and yet day after day goes by and no precautions are taken. There are poor fellows working under me whose existence means bread to helpless women and children. I hold their lives in trust, and if I am not allowed to place one frail barrier between them and sudden death, I will lead them into peril no longer,--I will resign my position. At least I can do that."

The men under him worked with a dull, heavy daring, born of long use and a knowledge of their own helplessness against their fate. There was not one among them who did not know that in going down the shaft to his labor, he might be leaving the light of day behind him forever. But seeing the blue sky vanish from sight thus during six days of fifty-two weeks in the year, engendered a kind of hard indifference. Explosions had occurred, and might occur again; dead men had been carried up to be stretched on the green earth,--men crushed out of all semblance to humanity; some of themselves bore the marks of terrible maiming; but

it was an old story, and they had learned to face the same hazard recklessly.

With Fergus Derrick, however, it was a different matter. It was he who must lead these men into new fields of danger.