

CHAPTER XXXIII - Fate

The time came, before many days, when the last tie that bound Joan to her present life was broken. The little one, who from the first had clung to existence with a frail hold, at last loosened its weak grasp. It had been ill for several days,--so ill that Joan had remained at home to nurse it,--and one night, sitting with it upon her knee in her accustomed place, she saw a change upon the small face.

It had been moaning continuously, and suddenly the plaintive sound ceased. Joan bent over it. She had been holding the tiny hand as she always did, and at this moment the soft fingers closed upon one of her own quietly. She was quite alone, and for an instant there was a deep silence. After her first glance at the tiny creature, she broke this silence herself.

"Little lass," she said in a whisper, "what ails thee? Is thy pain o'er?"

As she looked again at the baby face upturned as if in silent answer, the truth broke in upon her.

Folding her arms around the little form, she laid her head upon its breast and wept aloud,--wept as she had never wept before. Then she laid the child upon a pillow and covered its face. Liz's last words returned to her with a double force. It had not lived to forget or blame her.

Where was Liz to-night,--at this hour, when her child was so safe?

The next morning, on her way downstairs to the breakfast-room, Anice Barholm was met by a servant.

"The young woman from the mines would like to see you, Miss," said the girl.

Anice found Joan awaiting her below.

"I ha' come to tell yo'," she said, "that th' little un deed at midneet. Theer wur no one I could ca' in. I sat alone wi' it i' th' room aw th' neet, an' then I left it to come here."

Anice and Thwaite's wife returned home with her. What little there was to be done, they re-mained to do. But this was scarcely more than to watch with her until the pretty baby face was hidden away from human sight.

When all was over, Joan became restless. The presence of the child had saved her from utter desolation, and now that it was gone, the emptiness of the house chilled her. At the last, when her companions were about to leave her, she broke down.

"I conna bear it," she said. "I will go wi' yo'."

Thwaite's wife had proposed before that she should make her home with them; and now, when Mrs. Thwaite returned to Riggan, Joan accompanied her, and the cottage was locked up.

This alteration changed greatly the routine of her life. There were children in the Thwaite household--half a dozen of them--who, having overcome their first awe of her, had learned before the baby died to be fond of Joan. Her handsome face attracted them when they ceased to fear its novelty; and the hard-worked mother said to her neighbors:

"She's gotten a way wi' childer, somehow,--that lass o' Lowrie's. Yo'd wonder if yo' could see her wi' 'em. She's mony a bit o' help to me."

But as time progressed, Anice Barholm noted the constant presence of that worn look upon her face. Instead of diminishing, it grew and deepened. Even Derrick, who met her so rarely, saw it when he passed her in the street.

"She is not ill, is she?" he asked Anice once, abruptly.

Anice shook her head.

"No, she is not ill."

"Then she has some trouble that nobody knows about," he said. "What a splendid creature she is!" impetuously--"and how incomprehensible!"

His eyes chanced to meet Anice's, and a dark flush swept over his face. He got up almost immediately after and began to pace the room, as was his habit.

"Next week the crisis will come at the mines," he said. "I wonder how it will end for me."

"You are still determined?" said Anice.

"Yes, I am still determined. I wish it were over. Perhaps there will be a Fate in it"--his voice lowering itself as he added this last sentence.

"A Fate?" said Anice.

"I am growing superstitious and full of fancies," he said. "I do not trust to myself, as I once did. I should like Fate to bear the responsibility of my leaving Riggan or remaining in it."

"And if you leave it?" asked Anice.

For an instant he paused in his walk, with an uncertain air. But he shook this uncertainty off with a visible effort, the next moment.

"If I leave it, I do not think I shall return, and Fate will have settled a long unsettled question for me."

"Don't leave it to Fate," said Anice in a low tone. "Settle it for yourself. It does not--it is not--it looks----"

"It looks cowardly," he interrupted her. "So it does, and so it is. God knows I never felt myself so great a coward before!"

He had paused again. This time he stood before her. The girl's grave, delicate face turned to meet his glance and seeing it, a thought seemed to strike him.

"Anice," he said, the dark flush rising afresh. "I promised you that if the time should ever come when I needed help that it was possible you might give, I should not be afraid to ask you for it. I am coming to you for help. Not now--some day not far distant. That is why I remind you of the compact."

"I did not need reminding," she said to him.

"I might have known that," he answered,--"I think I did know it But let us make the compact over again."

She held out her hand to him, and he took it eagerly.