

CHAPTER XXXV - In the Pit

The next morning Derrick went down to the mine as usual. There were several things he wished to do in these last two days. He had heard that the managers had entered into negotiations with a new engineer, and he wished the man to find no half-done work. The day was bright and frosty, and the sharp, bracing air seemed to clear his brain. He felt more hopeful, and less inclined to view matters darkly.

He remembered afterward that, as he stepped into the cage, he turned to look at the unpicturesque little town, brightened by the winter's sun; and that, as he went down, he glanced up at the sky and marked how intense appeared the bit of blue, which was framed in by the mouth of the shaft.

Even in the few hours that had elapsed since the meeting the rumor of what he had said and done had been bruited about. Some collier had heard it and had told it to his comrades, and so it had gone from one to the other. It had been talked over at the evening and morning meal in divers cottages, and many an anxious woman had warmed into praise of the man who had "had a thowt for th' men."

In the first gallery he entered he found a deputation of men awaiting him,--a group of burly miners with picks and shovels over their shoulders,--and the head of this deputation, a spokesman burlier and generally gruffer than the rest, stopped him.

"Mester," he said, "we chaps 'ud loike to ha' a word wi' yo'."

"All right," was Derrick's reply, "I am ready to listen."

The rest crowded nearer as if anxious to participate as much as possible, and give their spokesman the support of their presence.

"It is na mich as we ha' gotten to say," said the man, "but we're fain to say it. Are na we, mates?"

"Ay, we are, lad," in chorus.

"It's about summat as we'n heerd. Theer wur a chap as tow'd some on us last neet, as yo'd gotten th' sack fro' th' managers--or leastways as yo'd turned th' tables on 'em an' gi'en them th' sack yo'rsen. An' we'n heerd as it begun wi' yo're standin' up fur us chaps--axin fur things as wur wanted i' th' pit to save us fro' runnin' more risk than we need. An' we heerd as yo' spoke up bold, an' argied fur us an' stood to what yo' thowt war th' reet thing, an' we set our moinds on tellin' yo' as we'd heerd it an' talked it over, an' we'd loike to say a word o' thanks i' common fur th' pluck yo' showed. Is na that it, mates?"

"Ay, that it is, lad!" responded the chorus.

Suddenly one of the group stepped out and threw down his pick.

"An' I'm dom'd, mates," he said, "if here is na a chap as 'ud loike to shake hands wi' him."

It was the signal for the rest to follow his example. They crowded about their champion, thrusting grimy paws into his hand, grasping it almost enthusiastically.

"Good luck to yo', lad!" said one. "We'n noan smooth soart o' chaps, but we'n stand by what's fair an' plucky. We shall ha' a good word fur thee when tha hast made thy flittin'."

"I'm glad of that lads," responded Derrick, heartily, by no means unmoved by the rough-and-ready spirit of the scene. "I only wish I had had better luck, that's all."

A few hours later the whole of the little town was shaken to its very foundations, by something like an earthquake, accompanied by an ominous, booming sound which brought people flocking out of their houses, with white faces. Some of them had heard it before--all knew what it meant. From the colliers' cottages poured forth women, shrieking and wailing,--women who bore children in their arms and had older ones dragging at their skirts, and who made their desperate way to the pit with one accord. From houses and workshops there rushed men, who, coming out in twos and threes joined each other, and, forming a breathless

crowd, ran through the streets scarcely daring to speak a word--and all ran toward the pit.

There were scores at its mouth in five minutes; in ten minutes there were hundreds, and above all the clamor rose the cry of women:

"My Mester's down!"

"An' mine!"

"An' mine!"

"Four lads o' mine is down!"

"Three o' mine!"

"My little un's theer--th' youngest--nobbut ten year owd--nobbut ten year owd, poor little chap! an' on'y been at work a week!"

"Ay, wenches, God ha' mercy on us aw'--God ha' mercy!" And then more shrieks and wails in which the terror-stricken children joined.

It was a fearful sight. How many lay dead and dying in the noisome darkness below, God only knew! How many lay mangled and crushed, waiting

for their death, Heaven only could tell!

In five minutes after the explosion occurred, a slight figure in clerical garb made its way through the crowd with an air of excited determination.

"The Parson's feart," was the general comment.

"My men," he said, raising his voice so that all could hear, "can any of you tell me who last saw Fergus Derrick?"

There was a brief pause, and then came a reply from a collier who stood near.

"I coom up out o' th' pit an hour ago," he said, "I wur th' last as coom up, an' it wur on'y chance as browt me. Derrick wur wi' his men i' th' new part o' th' mine. I seed him as I passed through."

Grace's face became a shade or so paler, but he made no more inquiries.

His friend either lay dead below, or was waiting for his doom at that very moment. He stepped a little farther forward.

"Unfortunately for myself, at present," he said, "I have no practical knowledge of the nature of these accidents. Will some of you tell me how long it will be before we can make our first effort to rescue the men who are below?"

Did he mean to volunteer--this young whipper-snapper of a parson? And if he did, could he know what he was doing?

"I ask you," he said, "because I wish to offer myself as a volunteer at once; I think I am stronger than you imagine and at least my heart will be in the work. I have a friend below,--my-self," his voice altering its tone and losing its firmness,--"a friend who is worthy the sacrifice of ten such lives as mine if such a sacrifice could save him."

One or two of the older and more experienced spoke up. Under an hour it would be impossible to make the attempt--it might even be a longer time, but in an hour they might, at least, make their first effort.

If such was the case, the Parson said, the intervening period must be turned to the best account. In that time much could be thought of and done which would assist themselves and benefit the sufferers. He called upon the strongest and most experienced, and almost without their recognizing the prominence of his position, led them on in the work. He even rallied the weeping women and gave them something to do. One was sent for this necessary article and another for that. A couple of boys were despatched to the next village for extra medical assistance, so that there need be no lack of attention when it was required. He took off his broadcloth and worked with the rest of them until all the necessary preparations were made and it was considered possible to descend into the mine.

When all was ready, he went to the mouth of the shaft and took his place quietly.

It was a hazardous task they had before them. Death would stare them in the face all through its performance. There was choking after-damp below, noxious vapors, to breathe which was to die; there was the chance of crushing masses falling from the shaken galleries--and yet these men left their companions one by one and ranged themselves, without saying a word, at the Curate's side.

"My friends," said Grace, baring his head, and raising a feminine hand.

"My friends, we will say a short prayer."

It was only a few words. Then the Curate spoke again.

"Ready!" he said.

But just at that moment there stepped out from the anguished crowd a girl, whose face was set and deathly, though there was no touch of fear upon it.

"I ax yo'," she said, "to let me go wi' yo' and do what I con. Lasses, some on yo' speak a word fur Joan Lowrie!"

There was a breathless start. The women even stopped their outcry to

look at her as she stood apart from them,--a desperate appeal in the very quiet of her gesture as she turned to look about her for some one to speak.

"Lasses," she said again. "Some on yo' speak a word fur Joan Lowrie!"

There rose a murmur among them then, and the next instant this murmur was a cry.

"Ay," they answered, "we con aw speak fur yo'. Let her go, lads! She's worth two o' th' best on yo'. Nowt fears her. Ay, she mun go, if she will, mun Joan Lowrie! Go, Joan, lass, and we'n not forget thee!"

But the men demurred. The finer instinct of some of them shrank from giving a woman a place in such a perilous undertaking--the coarser element in others rebelled against it.

"We'n ha' no wenches," these said, surlily.

Grace stepped forward. He went to Joan Lowrie and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"We cannot think of it," he said. "It is very brave and generous, and--God bless you!--but it cannot be. I could not think of allowing it myself, if the rest would."

"Parson," said Joan coolly, but not roughly, "tha'd ha' hard work to help thysen, if so be as th' lads wur willin'."

"But," he protested, "it may be death. I could not bear the thought of it. You are a woman. We cannot let you risk your life."

She turned to the volunteers.

"Lads," she cried, passionately, "yo' munnot turn me back. I--sin I mun tell yo'----" and she faced them like a queen,--"theer's a mon down theer as I'd gi' my heart's blood to save."

They did not know whom she meant, but they demurred no longer.

"Tak' thy place, wench," said the oldest of them. "If tha mun, tha mun."

She took her seat in the cage by Grace, and when she took it she half turned her face away. But when those above began to lower them, and they found themselves swinging downward into what might be to them a pit of death, she spoke to him.

"Theer's a prayer I'd loike yo' to pray," she said. "Pray that if we mun dee, we may na dee until we ha' done our work."

It was a dreadful work indeed that the rescuers had to do in those black galleries. And Joan was the bravest, quickest, most persistent of all.

Paul Grace, following in her wake, found himself obeying her slightest word or gesture. He worked constantly at her side, for he, at least, had guessed the truth. He knew that they were both engaged in the same quest. When at last they had worked their way--lifting, helping, comforting--to the end of the passage where the collier had said he last saw the master then, for one moment, she paused, and her companion, with a thrill of pity, touched her to attract her attention.

"Let me go first," he said.

"Nay," she answered, "we'n go together."

The gallery was a long and low one, and had been terribly shaken. In some places the props had been torn away, in others they were borne down by the loosened blocks of coal. The dim light of the "Davy" Joan held up showed such a wreck that Grace spoke to her again.

"You must let me go first," he said, with gentle firmness. "If one of these blocks should fall----"

Joan interrupted him,--

"If one on 'em should fall I'm th' one as it had better fall on. There is na mony foak as ud miss Joan Lowrie. Yo' ha' work o' yo're own to do."

She stepped into the gallery before he could protest, and he could only follow her. She went before, holding the Davy high, so that its light might be thrown as far forward as possible. Now and then she was forced to stoop to make her way around a bending prop; sometimes there was a fallen mass to be surmounted, but she was at the front still when they reached the other end without finding the object of their search.

"It--he is na there," she said. "Let us try th' next passage," and she turned into it.

It was she who first came upon what they were looking for; but they did not find it in the next passage, or the next, or even the next. It was farther away from the scene of the explosion than they had dared to hope. As they entered a narrow side gallery, Grace heard her utter a low sound, and the next minute she was down upon her knees.

"Theer's a mon here," she said, "It's him as we're lookin' fur."

She held the dim little lantern close to the face,--a still face with closed eyes, and blood upon it Grace knelt down too, his heart aching with dread.

"Is he-----" he began, but could not finish.

Joan Lowrie laid her hand upon the apparently motionless breast and waited almost a minute, and then she lifted her own face, white as the

wounded man's--white and solemn, and wet with a sudden rain of tears.

"He is na dead," she said. "We ha' saved him."

She sat down upon the floor of the gallery and lifting his head laid it upon her bosom, holding it close as a mother might hold the head of her child.

"Mester," she said, "gi' me th' brandy flask, and tak' thou thy Davy an' go fur some o' th' men to help us get him to th' leet o' day. I'm gone weak at last. I conna do no more. I'll go wi' him to th' top."

When the cage ascended to the mouth again with its last load of sufferers, Joan Lowrie came with it, blinded and dazzled by the golden winter's sunlight as it fell upon her haggard face.

She was holding the head of what seemed to be a dead man upon her knee. A great shout of welcome rose up from the bystanders.

She helped them to lay her charge upon a pile of coats and blankets prepared for him, and then she turned to the doctor who had hurried to the spot to see what could be done.

"He is na dead," she said. "Lay yo're hond on his heart. It beats yet, Mester,--on'y a little, but it beats."

"No," said the doctor, "he is not dead--yet," with a breath's pause between the two last words. "If some of you will help me to put him on a stretcher, he may be carried home, and I will go with him. There is just a chance for him, poor fellow, and he must have immediate attention. Where does he live?"

"He must go with me," said Grace. "He is my friend."

So they took him up, and Joan stood a little apart and watched them carry him away,--watched the bearers until they were out of sight, and then turned again and joined the women in their work among the sufferers.