

CHAPTER XXXVI - Alive Yet

In the bedroom above the small parlor a fire was burning at midnight, and by this fire Grace was watching. The lamp was turned low and the room was very quiet; a dropping cinder made quite a startling sound. When a moan or a movement of the patient broke the stillness--which was only at rare intervals--the Curate rose and went to the bedside. But it was only to look at the sufferer lying upon it, bandaged and unconscious. There was very little he could do. He could follow the instructions given by the medical man before he went away, but these had been few and hurried, and he could only watch with grief in his heart. There was but a chance that his friend's life might be saved. Close attention and unremitting care might rescue him, and to the best of his ability the Curate meant to give him both. But he could not help feeling a deep anxiety. His faith in his own skill was not very great, and there were no professional nurses in Riggan.

"It is the care women give that he needs," he said once, standing near the pillow and speaking to himself. "Men cannot do these things well. A mother or sister might save him."

He went to the window and drew back the curtain to look out upon the night. As he did so, he saw the figure of a woman nearing the house. As she approached, she began to walk more slowly, and when she reached the gates she hesitated, stopped and looked up. In a moment it became evident that she saw him, and was conscious that he saw her. The dim

light in the chamber threw his form into strong relief. She raised her hand and made a gesture. He turned away from the window, left the room quietly, and went down-stairs. She had not moved, but stood at the gate awaiting him. She spoke to him in a low tone, and he distinguished in its sound a degree of physical exhaustion.

"Yo' saw me," she said. "I thowt yo' did though I did na think o' yo' bein' at th' winder when I stopped--to--to see th' leet."

"I am glad I saw you," said Grace. "You have been at work among the men who were hurt?"

"Ay," pulling at a bush of evergreen nervously, and scattering the leaves as she spoke. "Theer's scarce a house o' th' common soart i' Riggan as has na trouble in it."

"God help them all!" exclaimed Grace, fervently.

"Have you seen Miss Barholm?" he asked next.

"She wur on th' ground i' ten minnits after th' explosion. She wur in th' village when it happent, an' she drove to th' pit. She's been workin' as hard as any woman i' Riggan. She saw us go down th' mine, but she did not see us come up. She wur away then wi' a woman as had a lad to be carried home dead. She would ha' come to him but she knowed yo' were wi' him, an' theer wur them as needed her. When th' cages coom up

theer wur women as screamed an' held to her, an' throwed theirsens on their knees an' hid their faces i' her dress, an' i' her honds, as if they thowt she could keep th' truth fro' 'em."

Grace trembled in his excitement.

"God bless her! God bless her!" he said, again and again.

"Where is she now?" he asked at length.

"Theer wur a little chap as come up i' the last cageful--he wur hurt bad, an' he wur sich a little chap as it went hard wi' him. When th' doctor touched him he screamed an' begged to be let alone, an' she heerd an' went to him, an' knelt down an' quieted him a bit. Th' poor little lad would na let go o' her dress; he held to it fur dear life, an' sobbed an' shivered and begged her to go wi' him an' howd his head on her lap while th' doctor did what mun be done. An' so she went, an' she's wi' him now. He will na live till day-leet, an' he keeps crying out for th' lady to stay wi' him."

There was another silence, and then Joan spoke:

"Canna yo' guess what I coom to say?"

He thought he could, and perhaps his glance told her so.

"If I wur a lady," she said, her lips, her hands trembling, "I could na ax yo' what I've made up my moind to; but I'm noan a lady, an' it does na matter. If yo' need some one to help yo' wi' him, will yo' let me ha' th' place? I dunnot ax nowt else but--but to be let do th' hard work."

She ended with a sob. Suddenly she covered her face with her hands, weeping wildly.

"Don't do that," he said, gently. "Come with me. It is you he needs."

He led the way into the house and up the stairs, Joan following him. When they entered the room they went to the bedside.

The injured man lay motionless.

"Is theer loife i' him yet?" asked Joan. "He looks as if theer might na be."

"There is life in him," Grace answered; "and he has been a strong man, so I think we may feel some hope."