

CHAPTER XXXVII - Watching and Waiting

The next morning the pony-carriage stopped before the door of the Curate's lodgings. When Grace went downstairs to the parlor, Anice Barholm turned from the window to greet him. The appearance of physical exhaustion he had observed the night before in Joan Lowrie, he saw again in her, but he had never before seen the face which Anice turned toward him.

"I was on the ground yesterday, and saw you go down into the mine," she said. "I had never thought of such courage before."

That was all, but in a second he comprehended that this morning they stood nearer together than they had ever stood before.

"How is the child you were with?" he asked.

"He died an hour ago."

When they went upstairs, Joan was standing by the sick man.

"He's worse than he wur last neet," she said. "An' he'll be worse still. I ha' nursed hurts like these afore. It'll be mony a day afore he'll be better--if th' toime ivver comes."

The Rector and Mrs. Barholm, hearing of the accident, and leaving

Browton hurriedly to return home, were met by half a dozen different versions on their way to Riggan, and each one was so enthusiastically related that Mr. Barholm's rather dampened interest in his daughter's protégé was fanned again into a brisk flame.

"There must be something in the girl, after all," he said, "if one could only get at it. Something ought to be done for her, really."

Hearing of Grace's share in the transaction, he was simply amazed.

"I think there must be some mistake," he said to his wife. "Grace is not the man--not the man physically" straightening his broad shoulders, "to be equal to such a thing."

But the truth of the report forced itself upon him after hearing the story repeated several times before they reached Riggan, and arriving at home they heard the whole story from Anice.

While Anice was talking, Mr. Barholm began to pace the floor of the room restlessly.

"I wish I had been there," he said. "I would have gone down myself."

(It is true: he would have done so.)

"You are a braver man than I took you for," he said to his Curate,

when he saw him,--and he felt sure that he was saying exactly the right thing. "I should scarcely have expected such dashing heroism from you, Grace."

"I hardly regarded it in that light," said the little gentleman, coloring sensitively. "If I had, I should scarcely have expected it of myself."

The fact that Joan Lowrie had engaged herself as nurse to the injured engineer made some gossip among her acquaintances at first, but this soon died out. Thwaite's wife had a practical enough explanation of the case.

"Th' lass wur tired o' pit-work; an' no wonder. She's made up her moind to ha' done wi' it; an' she's a first-rate one to nurse,--strong i' the arms, an' noan sleepy-headed. Happen she'll tak' up wi' it fur a trade. As to it bein' him as she meant when she said theer wur a mon as she meant to save, it wur no such thing. Joan Lowrie's noan th' kind o' wench to be runnin' after gentlefolk,--yo' know that yoresens. It's noan o' our business who the mon wur. Happen he's dead; an' whether he's dead or alive, you'd better leave him a-be, an' her too."

In the sick man's room the time passed monotonously. There were days and nights of heavy slumber or unconsciousness,--restless mutterings and weary tossings to and fro. The face upon the pillow was sometimes white, sometimes flushed with fever; but whatever change came to pass, Death

never seemed far away.

Grace lost appetite, and grew thin with protracted anxiety and watching. He would not give up his place even to Anice or Mrs. Barholm, who spent much of their time in the house. He would barely consent to snatch a few minutes' rest in the day-time; in truth, he could not have slept if he would. Joan held to her post unflinchingly. She took even less respite than Grace. Having almost forced her to leave the room one morning, Anice went downstairs to find her lying upon the sofa,--her hands clasped under her head, her eyes wide open.

"I conna sleep yet a while," she said. "Dunnot let it trouble yo'. I'm used to it."

Sometimes during the long night Joan felt his hollow eyes following her as she moved about the room, and fixed hungrily upon her when she stood near him.

"Who are you?" he would say. "I have seen you before, and I know your face; but--but I have lost your name. Who are you?"

One night, as she stood upon the hearth, alone in the room,--Grace having gone downstairs for something,--she was startled by the sound of Derrick's voice falling with a singular distinctness upon the silence.

"Who is it that is standing there?" he said.

"Do I know you? Yes--it is-----" but before he could finish, the momentary gleam of recognition had passed away, and he had wandered off again into low, disjointed murmurings.

It was always of the mine, or one other anxiety, that he spoke. There was something he must do or say,--some decision he must reach. Must he give up? Could he give up? Perhaps he had better go away,--far away. Yes; he had better go. No,--he could not,--he must wait and think again. He was tired of thinking,--tired of reasoning and arguing with himself. Let it go for a few minutes. Give him just an hour of rest. He was full of pain; he was losing himself, somehow. And then, after a brief silence, he would begin again and go the weary round once more.

"He has had a great deal of mental anxiety of late,--too much responsibility," said the medical man; "and it is going rather against him."