

CHAPTER XLII - Ashley-Wold

Two weeks after Joan left Riggan, she entered the village of Ashley-Wold on foot. With the exception of a few miles here and there, when a friendly wagoner had offered her a lift, she had made all her journey in this manner. She had met with discouragement and disappointment. She had

not fancied that it would be an easy matter to find work, though she had expressed no doubt to Anice, but it was even a more difficult matter than she had imagined. At some places work was not to be had, in others the fact that she was an utter stranger went against her.

It was evening when she came to Ashley-Wold; the rain was falling soft and slowly, and the air was chill. She was cold, and faint with hunger. The firelight that shone through the cottage windows brought to her an acute sense of her bodily weariness through its suggestion of rest and cheerfulness. The few passers-by--principally men and women returning from their daily labor--glanced at her curiously.

She had held to the letter as a last resource. When she could not help herself she would ask for assistance, but not until then. Still she had always turned her face toward Ashley-Wold, Now she meant to go to Mrs. Galloway and deliver the letter.

Upon entering the village she had stopped and asked a farmer for directions. He had stared at her at first, hardly comprehending her

northern dialect, but had finally understood and pointed out the house, whose gables could be seen from the road-side.

So Joan made her way toward it through the evening rain and mist. It was a pretty place, with a quaint picturesqueness. A hedge, which was a marvel of trimness, surrounded the garden, ivy clung to the walls and gables, and fancifully clipped box and other evergreens made a modest greenery about it, winter though it was. At her first glance at this garden Joan felt something familiar in it. Perhaps Anice herself had planned some portion of it. Joan paused a moment and stood looking over the hedge.

Mrs. Galloway, sitting at her work-table near the window, had found her attention attracted a few moments before by a tall young woman coming down the road which passed on one side of the hedge.

"There is something a little remarkable about her," she said. "She certainly does not belong to Ashley-Wold."

Then Joan stopped by the hedge and she saw her face and uttered a low exclamation of surprise at its beauty. She drew nearer to the window and looked out at her.

"She must be very cold," said Mrs. Galloway. "She looks as if she had made a long journey. I will send Hollis to her."

A few minutes later there tripped down the garden-walk a trimly attired young housemaid.

The mistress had seen her from the window and thought she looked cold and tired. Would she come into the house to rest?

Joan answered with a tinge of color on her cheek. She felt a little like a beggar.

"Thank yo'; I'll come," she said. "If th' mistress is Mrs. Galloway, I ha' a letter fur her fro' Lancashire."

Mrs. Galloway met them on the threshold.

"The young woman, ma'am," said the servant, "has a letter from Lancashire."

"From Lancashire!" said Mrs. Galloway.

"Fro' Riggan, mistress," said Joan. "Fro' Miss Anice. I'm Joan Lowrie."

That Joan Lowrie was a name familiar to her was evident by the change in Mrs. Galloway's face. A faint flush of pleasure warmed it, and she spoke quickly.

"Joan Lowrie!" she said. "My dear child's friend! Then I know you very

well. Come into the room, my dear."

She led her into the room and closed the door.

"You are very cold and your shawl is wet," laying a kind hand upon it.

"Give it to me, and take a seat by the fire. You must warm yourself thoroughly and have a cup of tea," she said, "and then I will begin to ask questions."

There was a wide, low-seated, low-armed, soft-cushioned chair at one side of the fire, and in this chair she had made Joan seat herself. The sudden change from the chill dampness of the winter day to the exquisite relief and rest, almost overcame the girl. She was deadly pale when Mrs. Galloway ceased, and her lips trembled; she tried to speak, and for a moment could not; tears rushed to her eyes and stood in them. But she managed to answer at last.

"I beg yo're pardon," she said. "Yo' ha' no need to moind me. Th' warmth has made me a bit faint, that's aw. I've noan been used to it lately."

Mrs. Galloway came and stood near her.

"I am sorry to hear that, my dear," she said.

"Yo're very kind, ma'am," Joan answered.

She drew the letter from her dress and handed it to her.

"I gotten that fro' Miss Anice the neet I left Riggan," she said.

When the tea was brought in and Joan had sat down, the old lady read the letter.

"Keep her with you if you can. Give her the help she needs most. She has had a hard life, and wants to forget it?"

"Now, I wonder," said Mrs. Galloway to herself, "what the help is that she needs most?"

The rare beauty of the face impressed her as it invariably impressed strangers, but she looked beneath the surface and saw something more in it than its beauty. She saw its sadness, its resolution.

When Joan rose from the table, the old lady was still standing with the letter in her hand. She folded it and spoke to her.

"If you are sufficiently rested, I should like you to sit down and talk to me a little. I want to speak to you about your plans."

"Then," said Joan, "happen I'd better tell yo' at th' start as I ha' none."

Mrs. Galloway put her hand upon her shoulder.

"Then," she returned, "that is all the better for me, for I have in my mind one of my own. You would like to find work to help you----"

"I mun find work," Joan interrupted, "or starve."

"Of any kind?" questioningly.

"I ha' worked at th' pit's mouth aw my life," said Joan. "I need na be dainty, yo' see."

Mrs. Galloway smoothed the back of the small, withered hand upon her knee with the palm of the other.

"Then, perhaps," she said slowly, "you will not refuse to accept my offer and stay here--with me?"

"Wi' yo'?" Joan exclaimed. "I am an old woman, you see," Mrs. Galloway answered. "I have lived in Ashley-Wold all my life, and have, as it were, accumulated duties, and now as the years go by, I do not find it so easy to perform them as I used to. I need a companion who is young and strong, and quick to understand the wants of those who suffer. Will you stay here and help me?"

"Wi' yo'?" said Joan again. "Nay," she cried; "nay--that is not fur me.

I am na fit."

On her way to her chamber some hours later Mrs. Galloway stopped at the room which had been Anice's, and looked in upon her guest. But Joan was not asleep, as she had hoped to find her. She stood at the fireside, looking into the blaze.

"Will you come here a minnit?" she said.

She looked haggard and wearied, but the eyes she raised to her hostess were resolute.

"Theer's summat as I ha' held back fro' sayin' to yo'," she said, "an' th' more I think on it, th' more I see as I mun tell yo' if I mean to begin fair an' clear. I ha' a trouble as I'm fain to hide; it's a trouble as I ha' fowt wi' an' ha' na helped mysen agen. It's na a shame," straightening herself; "it's a trouble such as ony woman might bear an' be honest. I coom away fro' Riggan to be out o' th' way on it--not to forget it, for I conna--but so as I should na be so near to--to th' hurt on it."

"I do not need another word," Mrs. Galloway answered. "If you had chosen to keep it a secret, it would have been your own secret as long as you chose that it should be so. There is nothing more you need? Very well Good-night, my dear!"