

CHAPTER XLIII - Liz Comes Back

"Miss," said Mrs. Thwaite, "it wur last neet, an' you mowt ha' knocked me down wi' a feather, fur I seed her as plain as I see yo'."

"Then," said Anice, "she must be in Riggan now."

"Ay," the woman answered, "that she mun, though wheer, God knows, I dunnot. It wur pretty late, yo' see, an' I wur gettin' th' mester's supper ready, an' as I turns mysen fro' th' oven, wheer I had been stoopin' down to look at th' bit o' bacon, I seed her face agen th' winder, starin' in at me wild loike. Ay, it wur her sure enow, poor wench! She wur loike death itsen--main different fro' th' bit o' a soft, pretty, leet-headed lass she used to be."

"I will go and speak to Mr. Grace," Anice said.

The habit of referring to Grace was growing stronger every day. She met him not many yards away, and before she spoke to him saw that he was not ignorant of what she had to say.

"I think you know what I am going to tell you," she said.

"I think I do," was his reply.

The rumor had come to him from an acquaintance of the Maxys, and he had

made up his mind to go to them at once.

"Ay," said the mother, regarding them with rather resentful curiosity, "she wur here this mornin'--Liz wur. She wur in a bad way enow--said she'd been out on th' tramp fur nigh a week--seemit a bit out o' her head. Th' mon had left her again, as she mowt ha' knowed he would. Ay, lasses is foo's. She'd ben i' th' Union, too, bad o' th' fever. I towd her she'd better ha' stayed theer. She wanted to know wheer Joan Lowrie wur, an' kept axin fur her till I wur tired o' hearin' her, and towd her so."

"Did she ask about her little child?" said Anice.

"Ay, I think she did, if I remember reet. She said summat about wantin' to know wheer we'd put it, an' if Joan wur dead, too. But it did na seem to be th' choild she cared about so much as Joan Lowrie."

"Did you tell her where we buried it?" Grace asked.

"Ay."

"Thank you. I will go to the church-yard," he said to Anice. "I may find her there."

"Will you let me go too?" Anice asked.

He paused a moment

"I am afraid that it would be best that I should go alone."

"Let me go," she pleaded. "Don't be afraid for me. I could not stay away. Let me go--for Joan's sake."

So he gave way, and they passed out together. But they did not find her in the church-yard. The gate had been pushed open and hung swing-ing on its hinges. There were fresh footprints upon the damp clay of the path that led to the corner where the child lay, and when they approached the little mound they saw that something had been dropped upon the grass near it. It was a thin, once gay-colored, little red shawl. Anice bent down and picked it up. "She has been here," she said.

It was Anice who, after this, first thought of going to the old cottage upon the Knoll Road. The afternoon was waning when they left the church-yard; when they came within sight of the cottage the sun had sunk behind the hills. In the red, wintry light, the place looked terribly desolate. Weeds had sprung up about the house, and their rank growth covered the very threshold, the shutters hung loose and broken, and a damp greenness had crept upon the stone step.

A chill fell upon her when they stood before the gate and saw what was within. Something besides the clinging greenness had crept upon the step,--something human,--a homeless creature, who might have staggered

there and fallen, or who might have laid herself there to die. It was Liz, lying with her face downward and with her dead hand against the closed door.

CHAPTER XLIV - Not Yet

Mrs. Galloway arose and advanced to meet her visitor with a slightly puzzled air.

"Mr. -----" she began.

"Fergus Derrick," ended the young man. "From Riggan, madam."

She held out her hand cordially.

"Joan is in the garden," she said, after a few moments of earnest conversation. "Go to her."

It was a day very different from the one upon which Joan Lowrie had come to Ashley-Wold. Spring had set her light foot fairly upon the green Kentish soil. Farther north she had only begun to show her face timidly, but here the atmosphere was fresh and balmy, the hedges were budding bravely, and there was a low twitter of birds in the air. The garden Anice had so often tended was flushing into bloom in sunny corners, and the breath of early violets was sweet in it. Derrick was conscious of their springtime odor as he walked down the path, in the direction Mrs. Galloway had pointed out. It was a retired nook where evergreens were growing, and where the violet fragrance was more powerful than anywhere else, for the rich, moist earth of one bed was blue with them. Joan was standing near these violets,--he saw her as he turned into the walk,--a

motionless figure in heavy brown drapery.

She heard him and started from her reverie. With another half-dozen steps he was at her side.

"Don't look as if I had alarmed you," he said. "It seems such a poor beginning to what I have come to say."

Her hand trembled so that one or two of the loose violets she held fell at his feet. She had a cluster of their fragrant bloom fastened in the full knot of her hair. The dropping of the flowers seemed to help her to recover herself. She drew back a little, a shade of pride in her gesture, though the color dyed her cheeks and her eyes were downcast.

"I cannot--I cannot listen," she said.

The slight change which he noted in her speech touched him unutterably. It was not a very great change; she spoke slowly and uncertainly, and the quaint northern burr still held its own, and here and there a word betrayed her effort.

"No, no," he said, "you will listen. You gave me back my life. You will not make it worthless. If you cannot love me," his voice shaking, "it would have been less cruel to have left me where you found me--a dead man,--for whom all pain was over."