

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."

He stopped. The woman trembled from head to foot. She raised her eyes from the ground and looked at him catching her breath.

"Yo' are askin' me to be yo're wife!" she said. "Me!"

"I love you," he answered. "You, and no other woman!"

She waited a moment and then turned suddenly away from him, and leaned against the tree under which they were standing, resting her face upon her arm. Her hand clung among the ivy leaves and crushed them. Her old speech came back in the quick hushed cry she uttered.

"I conna turn yo' fro' me," she said. "Oh! I conna!"

"Thank God! Thank God!" he cried.

He would have caught her to his breast, but she held up her hand to restrain him.

"Not yet," she said, "not yet. I conna turn you fro' me, but theer's summat I must ask. Give me th' time to make myself worthy--give me th' time to work an' strive; be patient with me until th' day comes when I can come to yo' an' know I need not shame yo'. They say I am na slow at learnin'--wait and see how I can work for th' mon--for th' mon I love."