

That Lass o' Lowrie's.

A STORY OF THE LANCASHIRE COAL MINES.

BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT.

CHAPTER XL.

JOAN LEAVES RIGGAN.

The first day Fergus Derrick was allowed to spend an hour in an easy-chair by the fire, he heard the story of his rescue from the lips of his friend, listening to it as he rested against the propping cushions.

"Don't be afraid of exciting me," he had said to Grace. "I have conjectured until I am tired of it. Tell me the whole story. Let me hear the end now."

Derrick's breath came quick and short as he listened, and his haggard face flushed. It was not only to his friend he owed his life, but to Joan Lowrie.

"I should like to see her," he said when Grace had finished. "As for you, Grace—well—words are poor things."

"They are very poor things between friends," was Grace's answer; "so let us have none of them. You are on this side of the grave, dear fellow—that is enough."

During the rest of the day Derrick was silent and abstracted, but plainly full of active thought. By nightfall a feverish spot burned upon his cheek, and his pulse had quickened dangerously.

"I must wait," he said to Grace "and it is hard work."

Just at that time Anice was sitting in her room at the Rectory, thinking of Joan also, when there came to her the sound of footsteps in the passage, and then a summons to the door.

"You may come in," she said. But it was not Anice who had called; it was Joan, with a bundle on her arm.

"You are going away, Joan?" she said. "To-night?"

"Ay," Joan answered, as she came and stood upon the hearth. "I'm going away to-night."

"You have quite made up your mind?"

"Ay," said Joan. "I'm unbreakable. I want to get as far from the old life as I can. I'd like to forget the most on it. I'm going to-night, because I don't want to be asked questions. If I passed thro' the town by day, there'd be some as would fret me with their talk."

"Have you seen Mr. Grace?" Anice asked.

"No. I shanna ha' th' chance to say good-by to him. I coom partly to ax yo' to say it for me."

"Yes, I will say it. I wish there were need that I should, though. I wish I could keep you."

There was a brief silence, and then Joan knelt on one knee by the fender. "I ha' bin thinkin' o' Liz," she said.

"I thought I'd ax yo'—if it wud happen so as she drift back here agin, wile I wud away—say a kind word to her, an' tell her about th' school, an' how as I niver tho't hard on her, as th' day niver wur as I did ney part o' th' bottom o' my soul. I niver wud th' south," she said agin after a while.

"They say as th' south is as d'ron' fro' th' north as th' day is fro' th' neet. I ha' money enow to help me on, an' when I stop I shall look fur work."

Anice's face lighted up suddenly. "To the south!" she said. "Why did I not think of that before. If you go toward the south, there is Ashley-Wold and grandamma, Mrs. Galloway. I will write to her now, if you will let me, rising to her feet.

"If yo'll gi' me th' letter, I'll tak' it an' thank yo'," said Joan. "If she could help me to work or th' loike, I should be glad enough."

Anice's mother had always been her safest resource in the past, and yet, curiously enough, she had not thought of turning towards her in this case until Joan's words had suggested such a course.

Joan took the letter and put it in the bosom of her dress.

"There's no more danger fur him?" she said. "Thwaite tow'd me he wur better."

She spoke questioningly, and Anice answered her.

"Yes, he is out of danger. Joan, what am I to say to him?"

Derrick tried to laugh, and moved restlessly upon his pillow.

"So I should imagine," said he. "The fact is—well, you see, I have been thinking."

"About—"

"Yes,—yes,—Grace, I cannot wait,—I must hear something. A hundred things might happen. I must at least be sure she is not far away. I shall never regain strength as long as I have not the rest that knowledge will bring me. Will you go to her and take her a few words of gratitude from me?"

"Yes, readily."

"Will you go now?"

"Yes."

Grace would have left the room, but Derrick stretched out his hand and touched her.

"Stay—"

Grace turned to him again.

"You know,—in the old resolute way—'you know what I mean the end to be if it may be?'"

"I think I do."

Grace appeared at the Rectory very soon afterward, and asked for Miss Barholm. Anice came down into the parlour to meet him at once. She could not help guessing that for some reason or other he had come to speak of Joan, and his first words confirmed that impression.

"I have just left the Thwaite's," he said. "I went there to see Joan Lowrie, and find that she is not there. Mrs. Thwaite told me that she had left Riggan. Is that true?"

"Yes. She went away last night. She came here to bid me good-by, and leave a farewell message for you."

Grace was both troubled and embarrassed.

"I—," he faltered. "Do you understand it?"

"Yes," Anice answered.

Their eyes met, and she went on—

"You know we have said that it was best that she should break away entirely from the past. She has gone to try if it is possible to do it. She wants another life altogether."

"I do not know what I must do," said Grace. "You say she has gone away, and I—I came to her from Derrick."

"From Mr. Derrick!" Anice exclaimed; and then both relapsed into silence.

It was Anice who spoke first.

"Mamma was going to send some things to Mr. Derrick this morning," she said. "I will have the basket packed and take it myself. If you will let me, I will go with you as soon as I can have the things prepared."

CHAPTER XLII.

A NEW HOME.

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 waggoner 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 fire-light 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 labour—glanced at her curiously.

She held to the letter as a last resource. When she could not help herself she would ask for assistance but not till then. Still she had always turned her face towards 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 colour 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."

Mrs. Galloway met them on the threshold.

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

commenced with himself. "I could na ha' done no fairer. He deserved a bit o' commendation, an' I let him ha' it. Be fair wi' a mon, say I, parson or no. An' he is na th' wrong sort, after aw."

He was so well pleased with himself, that he even carried his virtue into the Crown, and diffused it abroad over his pipe of sixpenny. He found it not actually unpleasant to display himself as a magnate, who, having made a most natural mistake, had been too independent and "straightforward" to let the matter rest, and consequently had gone to the magnificent length of apologetic explanation.

"I ha' bin havin' a word or so wi' th' little parson," he said. "I ha' ben tellin' him what I thowt o' what he did th' day o' th' blow-up. I changed my moind about th' little chap that day, an' ha' ben tellin' him so."

"Yo' ha'," in an amazed chorus.

"Well, now that their wur a turn, Sammy."

"Ay, it wur. I'm noan afeard to speak my moind one way or t'other, yo' see. When a mon shows us he's med o' th' rest cloth, I am na afeard to tell him I loike th' web."

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"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 your 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, "I happen'd better tell yo' at th' start as I ha' na' na'."

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'm na' 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 fire-side, 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.

"There'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 fur 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 any 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 coonna—but so as I should na be so near to—th' hurt on it."

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

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