

That Lass o' Lowrie's.

A STORY OF THE LANCASHIRE COAL MINES

BY FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ANXIETY.

The next morning the pony-carriage stopped before the door of the curate's lodgings. When Grace went down stairs to the parlour, 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 was last night," she said. "An' he'll be worse still. I ha' nursed hurts like these afore. It'll be more a day afore he'll be better—if th' toime ever comes."

The Rector and Mrs. Barholm, hearing of the accident, and leaving Brocton 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 misadventure soon fell 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."

"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 dashin' heroism from you, Grace."

"I hardly regarded it in that light," said the little gentleman, colouring 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 was tired o' pit-work; and no wonder. She's made up her mind to ha' done wi' it; and she's a frigate—one to nurse—strong i' th' arms, an' mean sleep-headed. Happen she'll tak' up wi' it fur a trade. As to th' bein' such as she meant to save, it was no such thing. Joan Lowrie's non th' find o' wench to be rumm' after gentfolk—yo' know that yoresens. It's non o' our business who th' non war. Happen he's dead; and whether he's dead or alive, yo'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 muttering 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 daytime; 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 comma sleep yet awhile," 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—far away. Yes; he had better go. No—he could not—he would 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."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

RECOGNITION.

The turning-point was reached at last. One evening, at the close of his usual visit, the doctor said to Grace—

"To-morrow, I think, you will see a marked alteration. I should not be surprised to find on my next visit that his mind had become permanently cleared. The intervals of half-consciousness have become lengthened. Unless some entirely unlooked-for change occurs, I feel sure that the worst is over. Give him close attention to-night. Don't let the young woman leave the room."

That night Anice watched with Joan. It was a strange experience through which these two passed together. If Anice had not known the truth before, she would have learned it then. Again and again Derrick went the endless round of his miseries. How must it end? How could it end? What must he do? How black and narrow the passages were! There she was, coming toward him from the other end—and if the props gave way—

"They were giving way"—Good God! the light was out, and he was held fast by the mass which had fallen upon him. What must he do about her whom he loved, and who was separated from him by this horrible wall? He was dying, and she would never know what he wanted to tell her. What was it that he wanted to say—"That he loved her—loved her—loved her? Could she hear him before he died—Joan! Joan!"

Thus he raved for hour after hour; and the two sat and listened, often in dead silence; but at last there arose in Joan Lowrie's face a look of such intense and hopeless pain, that Anice perceived—

"Joan! my poor Joan!" she said. "Joan's head sank down upon her hands. 'I mun go away fro' Riggan,' she whispered. 'I mun go away fro' Riggan,' she whispered. 'I mun go away afore he knows. There's no help fur me.'"

"No help?" repeated Anice, after her. She did not understand.

"There's none," said Joan. "Dunnot yo' see as my place where he is can be no place fur me? I thowt—I thowt the trouble were av on my side, but it is na. Do yo' think I'd stay an' let him do hissen a wrong?"

Anice winning her hands together.

"A wrong?" she cried. "Not a wrong, Joan—I cannot let you call it that."

"It would na be nowt else. Am I fit wife fur a gentleman? Nay, my work's done when the danger's over. If he wakes to know th' let o' day to-morrow morning, it's done then."

"You do not mean," said Anice, "that you will leave us?"

"I comma stay i' Riggan; I mun go away."

Toward morning Derrick became quieter. He muttered less and less, until his voice died away altogether, and he sank into a profound slumber. Grace coming in and finding him sleeping, turned to Joan with a look of intense relief.

"The worst is over," he said; "now we may hope for the best."

"Ay," Joan answered, quietly, "th' worst is over—fur him."

At last darkness gave way to a faint grey light, and then the grey sky showed long slender streaks of wintry red, gradually widening and deepening until all the east seemed flushed.

"It's mornin'," said Joan, turning from the window to the bed. "I mun gi' him th' drops again."

She was standing near the pillow when the first flood of the sunlight poured in at the window. At this moment Derrick awoke from his sleep to a full recognition of all around him. The strength of his delirium had died out; his prostration was so utter, that for the moment he had no power to speak and could only look up at the pale face hopelessly. It seemed as if the golden glow of the morning light transfigured it.

"He's awake," Joan said, moving away and speaking to those on the other side of the room. "Will one on yo'

pour out th' medicine? My hand's non steady."

Grace went to the bedside hurriedly.

"Derrick," he said, bending down, "do you know me?"

"Yes," Derrick answered in a faltering whisper, and as he said it the bed-room door closed.—Both of them heard it. A shadow fell upon the sick man's face. His eyes met his friend's with a question in them, and the next instant the question put itself into words—

"Who—went out?"

Grace bent lower.

"It was Joan Lowrie."

He closed his eyes and waited a little as if to gain fresh strength. There rose a faint flush upon his hollow cheeks, and his mouth trembled.

"How—he said next—"how—long?"

"You mean to ask me," said Grace, "how long she has been here?"

A motion of assent.

"She has been here from the first."

He asked no further questions. His eyes closed once more and he remained silent.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A TESTIMONIAL.

Joan went back to her lodgings at the Thwaite's, and left Mrs. Barholm and Anice to fill her place.

Too prostrate to question her nurses, Derrick could only lie with closed eyes helpless and weary. He could not even keep himself awake long enough to work his way to any very clear memories of what had happened. He had so many half-recollections to tantalize him. He could remember his last definite sensation—a terrible shock, flinging him to the ground, a second of pain and horror and then utter oblivion. Had he awakened one night and seen Joan Lowrie by the dim firelight, and called out to her, and then lost himself? Had he awakened for a second or so again and seen her standing close to his pillow looking down at him with an agony of dread in her face?

In answer to his question, Grace had told him that she had been with him from the first. How had it happened? This he asked himself again and again, until he grew feverish over it.

"Above all things," he heard the doctor say, "don't let him talk and don't talk to him."

But Grace comprehended something of his mental condition.

"I see by your look that you wish to question me," he said to him. Have patience for a few days and then I will answer every question you may ask. Try to rest upon that assurance."

There was one question, however, which would not wait. Grace saw it lying in the eager eyes and answered it.

"Joan Lowrie," he said, "has gone home."

Joan's welcome at the Thwaite's house was tumultuous. The children crowded about her, neighbours dropped in, both men and women, wanting to have a word with her. There were few of them who had not met with some loss by the explosion, and there were those among them who had cause to remember the girl's daring.

"How's th' engineer?" they asked.

"What do th' doctors say on him?"

"He'll get better," she answered. "They say as he's out o' danger."

"We're na it him as had his head on your knee when yo' come up i' th' cage?" said one woman.

Mrs. Thwaite answered for her with some sharpness. They should not gossip about Joan, if she could help it.

"I dunnot suppose as she know th' difference betwix one non an' anther," she said. "It wur na likely as she'd pick and choose. Let th' lass ha' a bit quiet, wenches. Yo' bother her wi' your talk."

"It's an ill wind that blows nobody good," said Thwaite himself. Th' explosion has done one thing—it's made th' masters change their minds. They're th' humor to do what th' engineer axed fur now."

"Ay," said a tired-looking woman, whose poor attempt at mourning told its own story; "but that wunnot bring my master back."

"Nay," said another, "nor my two lads."

There had been a great deal of muttered discontent among the colliers before the accident, and since its occurrence there had been signs of open rebellion. Then, too, results had proved that the seasonable adoption of Derrick's plan would have saved some lives at least, and, in fact, some future expenditure. Most of the owners, perhaps, felt somewhat remorseful; a few, as it is not impossible, experienced nothing more serious than annoyance and embarrassment; but it is certain that there were one or two who were crushed by a sense of personal responsibility for what had occurred.

It was one of these who made the proposition that Derrick's plan be accepted unreservedly, and that the engineer himself should be requested to resume his position and undertake the management of the work. There was some slight denouncing at first, but the catastrophe was so recent that its effect had not had time to wear away, and finally the agreement was made.

But at that time Derrick was lying

senseless in the bedroom over the parlour, and the deputation from the company could only wait upon Grace, and make an effort at expressing their sympathy.

After Joan's return to her lodgings, she, too, was visited. There was some curiosity felt concerning her. A young and handsome woman, who had taken so remarkable a part in the tragedy, was necessarily an object of interest.

Mr. Barholm was so fluently decided in his opinion that something really ought to be done, that a visit to the heroine of the day was the immediate result. There was only one form the appreciation of a higher for a lower social grade could take, and it was Mr. Barholm who had been, naturally, selected as spokesman. He explained to Joan the nature of the visit. His friends of the Company had heard of her remarkable heroism, and had felt that something was due to her—some token of the admiration her conduct had inspired in them. They had agreed that something ought to be done, and they had called this evening to present her with a little testimonial.

The bundle of crisp bank-notes burned the hand of the man who held them, as Joan Lowrie listened to this speech. She stood upright before them, resting one hand upon the back of a chair, but when the bearer of the testimonial in question rose, she made a step forward. There was more of her old self in her gesture than she had shown for months. Her eyes flashed, her face hardened, a sudden red flew to her cheek.

"Put it up," she said, "I wunnot tak' it."

The man who had the money laid it upon the table, as if he were anxious to be rid of it. He was in a glow of anger and shame at the false step they had made.

"I beg your pardon," he said. "I see we have made a mistake."

"Ay," she said, "yo' ha' made a mistake. If yo' choose to tak' that an' gi' it to th' women and childer as is left to wait bread, yo' may do it an' welcome."

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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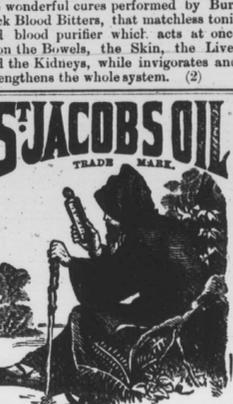
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