

That Lass o' Lowrie's.

A STORY OF THE LANCASHIRE COAL MINES
By FRANCES HODGSON BURNETT.

Derrick started and turned toward him with a sudden movement.
"Grace!" he said.
"I asked if you were sure of that," answered Grace, colouring. "I am not."

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE EXPLOSION IN THE MINE.

The next morning Derrick went down to the mine as usual. There were several things he wished to do in these last two days. He had heard that the managers had entered into negotiations with a new engineer, and he wished the man to find no half-done work. The day was bright and frosty, and the sharp, bracing air seemed to clear his brain. He felt more hopeful, and less inclined to view matters darkly.

He remembered afterward that, as he stepped into the cage, he turned to look at the unpicturesque little town, brightened by the winter's sun, and that, as he went down, he glanced up at the sky and marked how intense appeared the bit of blue, which was framed in by the mouth of the shaft.

Even in the few hours that had elapsed since the meeting, the rumor of what he had said and done had been bruted about. Some collier had heard it and had told it to his comrades, and so it had gone from one to the other. It had been talked over at the evening and morning meal in divers cottages, and many an anxious woman had been into praise of the man who had "had a thowt for th' men."

In the first gallery he entered he found a deputation of men awaiting him,—a group of burly miners with picks and shovels over their shoulders,—and the head of this deputation, a spokesman burlier and generally gruffer than the rest stopped him.

"Mester," he said, "we chaps 'ud loike to ha' a word wi' you."
"All right," was Derrick's reply, "I am ready to listen."

The rest crowded nearer as if anxious to participate as much as possible, and give their spokesman the support of their presence.

"It is na mich as we ha' gotten to say," said the man, "but we're fair to say it. Are na we, mates?"

"Ay, we are, lad," in chorus.
"It's about summat as we'n heard. There wur a chap as towld some on us last neet, as yo'd gotten th' sack fro' th' managers—or lastways as yo'd turned th' tables on 'em an' g'ien them th' sack yo'rself. An' we'n heard as it begun wi' yo'r standin' up fur us chaps—axin fur things as wur wanted i' th' pit to save us fro' rummin' more risk than we need. An' we heard as yo' spoke up bold, an' argued fur us an' stood to what yo' thowt wur th' reet thing, an' we set our minds on tellin' yo' as we'd heard it an' talked it over, an' we'd loike to say a word o' thanks i' common fur th' pluck yo' showed. Is na that it, mates?"

"Ay, that it is, lad," responded the chorus.
"Suddenly one of the group stepped out and threw down his pick.

"An' I'm don't, mates," he said, "if here is na a chap as 'ud loike to shake hands wi' him."

It was a signal for the rest to follow his example. They crowded about their shakings, thrusting grimy paws into his hand, grasping it almost enthusiastically.

"Good luck to yo', lad," said one.
"We'n mean smooth sort o' chaps, but we'n stand by what's fair an' plucky. We shall ha' a good word fur thee when th' lass made thy flittin'."

"I'm glad of that, lads," responded Derrick, heartily, by no means unmoved by the rough-and-ready spirit of the scene. "Only wish I had better luck, that's all."

A few hours later the whole of the little town was shaken to its very foundations, by something like an earthquake accompanied by an ominous, booming sound which brought people flocking out of their houses, with white faces. Some of them had heard it before—all knew what it meant. From the colliers' cottages poured forth women, shrieking and wailing—women who bore children in their arms and had older ones dragging at their skirts, and who made their desperate way to the pit with one accord. From houses and workshops there rushed men, who, coming out in twos and threes joined each other, and forming a breathless crowd, ran through the streets scarcely daring to speak a word—and all ran toward the pit.

There were some at its mouth in five minutes; in ten minutes there were hundreds, and in half an hour the clamour rose to the cry of woe.

"My Mester's down!"
"An' mine!"
"An' mine!"
"Four lads o' mine's down!"
"Three o' mine's!"
"My little ones their th' youngest—nabbed ten year old, poor little chap—an' my boy dead, an' my wife—"

"Ay, wenches, God ha' mercy on us an'—God ha' mercy!" And then more shrieks and wails in which the terror-stricken children joined.

It was a fearful sight. How many lay dead and dying in the noisome darkness below, God only knew! How many lay mangled and crushed, waiting for their death, Heaven only could tell!

In five minutes after the explosion occurred, a slight figure in clerical garb made its way through the crowd with an air of excited determination.

"Th' parson's feart," was the general comment.
"My men," he said, raising his voice so that all could hear, "can any of you tell me who last saw Fergus Derrick?"

There was a little pause, and then came a reply from a collier who stood near.
"I coom up out o' th' pit an' hour ago," he said. "I wur th' last as coom up, an' it wur on'y a chance as brovt me. Derrick wur wi' his men i' th' now part o' th' mine. I seed him as I passed through."

Grace's face became a shade or so paler, but he made no more inquiries.
His friend either lay dead below, or was waiting for his doom at that very moment. He stepped a little farther forward.

"Unfortunately for myself at present," he said, "I have no practical knowledge of the nature of these accidents. Will some of you tell me how long it will be before we can make our first effort to rescue the men who are below?"

Did he mean to volunteer—this young whippersnapper of a parson? And if he did, could he know what he was doing? "I ask you," he said, "because I wish to offer myself as a volunteer at once; I think I am stronger than you imagine, and at least my heart will be in the work. I have a friend below—myself, his voice altering its tone and losing its firmness—a friend who is worthy the sacrifice of ten such lives as mine if such a sacrifice could save him."

One or two of the older and more experienced spoke up. Under an hour it would be impossible to make the attempt—it might even be a longer time, but in an hour they might, at least, make their first effort.

If such was the case, the parson said, the intervening period must be turned to the best account. In that time much could be thought of and done which assist themselves and benefit the sufferers. He called upon the strongest and most experienced, and almost without their recognizing the prominence of his position, led them on in the work. He even rallied the weeping women, and gave them something to do. One was sent for this necessary article and another for that. A couple of boys were despatched to the next village for extra medical assistance, so that there need be no lack of attention when it was required. He took off his broadcloth and worked with the rest of them until all the necessary preparations were made and it was considered possible to descend into the mine.

When all was ready, he went to the mouth of the shaft and took his place quietly.

It was a hazardous task they had before them. Death would stare them in the face all through its performance. There was choking after-damp below, deadly noxious vapours, to breathe which was to die; there was the chance of crushing masses fallen from the shaken galleries—and yet these men left their companions one by one and ranged themselves, without saying a word, at the curate's side.

"My friends," said Grace, barring his head, and raising a feminine hand.
"My friends, we will say a short prayer."

It was only a few words. Then the curate spoke again.
"Ready!" he said.

But just at that moment there stepped out from the anguished crowd a girl, whose face was set and deathly, though there was no fear upon it.

"I ax yo'," she said, "to let me go wi' yo' and do what I can. Lasses, some on yo' speak a word for Joan Lowrie!"

There was a breathless start. The women even stopped their outcry to look at her as she stood apart from them,—a desperate appeal in the very quiet of her gesture as she turned to look about her for some one to speak.

"Lasses," she said again, "Some on yo' speak a word for Joan Lowrie!"

There rose a murmur among them then, and then, and the next instant this murmur was a cry.

"Ay," they answered, "we can ax speak fur yo'. Let her go, lads! She's worth two o' th' best on yo'. Nowt fears her. Ay, she mun go, if she will, mun Joan Lowrie! Go, Joan, lass, and we'n not forget thee!"

But the men demurred. The finer instinct in some of them shrank from giving a woman a place in such a perilous undertaking—the coarser element in others rebelled against it.

"We'n ha' no wenches," these said surlily.

Grace stepped forward. He went to Joan Lowrie and touched her gently on the shoulder.

"We cannot think of it," he said. "It bless you!—but it cannot be. I could not think of allowing it myself, if the rest would."

"Parson," said Joan coolly, but not roughly, "tha'd ha' hard work to help thysen, if so be as th' lads wur willin'."

"But," he protested, "it may be death. I could not bear the thought of it. You are a woman. We cannot let you risk your life."

She turned to the volunteers.
"Lads," she cried passionately, "yo' munnot turn me back. I—sin I mun tell yo'—and she faced them like a queen,—there's a mon down ther as I'd gi' my heart's blood to save."

They did not know whom she meant, but they demurred no longer.

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"Tak' th' place, wench," said the oldest of them. "If th' man, th' mun."

She took her seat in the cage by Grace, and when she took it she half turned her face away. But when those above began to lower them, and they found themselves swinging downward into what might be to them a pit of death, she spoke to him.

"There's a prayer I'd loike yo' to pray," she said. "Pray that if my munde, we may na dee until we ha' done our work."

It was a dreadful work indeed that the rescuers had to do in those black galleries. And Joan was the bravest, quickest, most persistent of all. Paul Grace, following in her wake, found himself obeying her, slightest word or gesture. He worked constantly at her side, for he at least, had guessed the truth. He knew that they were both engaged in the same quest. When at last they had worked their way—lifting, helping, comforting—to the end of the passage where the collier had said he last saw the master, then, for one moment, she paused, and her companion, with a thrill of pity, touched her to attract her attention.

"Let me go first," he said.
"Nay," she answered, "we'n go together."

The gallery was a long and low one, and had been terribly shaken. In some places the props had been torn away, in others they were borne down by the loosened blocks of coal. The dim light of the "Davy" Joan held up showed such a wreck that Grace spoke to her again.

"You must let me go first," he said, with gentle firmness. "If one of these blocks should fall—"

Joan interrupted him—
"If one on 'em should fall I'm th' one as it had better fall on. There is na munny feak as 'ud miss Joan Lowrie. Yo' ha' work o' yere own to do."

She stepped into the gallery before he could protest, and he could only follow her. She went before, holding the Davy high, so that its light might be thrown as far forward as possible. Now and then she was forced to stoop to make her way round a bending prop; sometimes there was a fallen mass to be surmounted, but she was at the front still when they reached the other end without finding the object of their search.

"It—he is na there," she said. "Let us try th' next passage," and she turned into it.

It was she who first came upon what they were looking for; but they did not find it in the next passage, or the next, or even the next. It was farther away from the scene of the explosion than they had dared to hope. As they entered a narrow side gallery, Grace heard her utter a low sound, and the next minute she was down upon her knees.

"There's a mon here," she said. "It's him as we're lookin' fur."

She held the dim little lantern close to the face—a still face with closed eyes and blood upon it. Grace knelt down too, his heart aching with dread.

"Is he—?" he began, but could not finish.

Joan Lowrie laid her hand upon the apparently motionless breast and waited almost a minute, and then she lifted her own face, white as the wounded man's—white and solemn, and wet with a sudden rain of tears.

"He is na dead," she said. We ha' saved him."

She sat down upon the floor of the gallery and lifting his head laid it upon her bosom, holding it close as a mother might hold the head of her child.

"Mester," she said, "gi' me th' brandy flask, and tak' thowt they Davy an' go, fur some o' th' men to help us get him to th' leet o' day. I'm gone weak at last. I canna do no more. I'll go wi' him to th' top."

When the cage ascended to the mouth again with its last load of sufferers, Joan Lowrie came with it, blinded and dazzled by the golden winter sunlight as it fell upon her haggard, beautiful face. She was holding the head of what seemed to be a dead man upon her knee. A great shout of welcome rose up from the bystanders.

She helped them to lay her charge upon a pile of coats and blankets prepared for him, and then she turned to the doctor who had hurried to the spot to see what could be done.

"He is na dead," she said. "Lay yore hand on his heart. It beats yet. Mester, only a little, but it beats."

"No," said the doctor, "he is not dead—yet," with a breath's pause between the two last words. "If some of you will help me to put him on a stretcher, he may be carried home, and I will go with him. There is just a chance for him, poor fellow, and he must have immediate attention. Where does he live?"

"He must go with me," said Grace. "He is my friend."

So they took him up, and Joan Lowrie stood a little apart and watched them carry him away,—watched the bearers until they were out of sight, and then turned again and joined the women in their work among the sufferers.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DERRICK'S NURSES.

In the bedroom above the small parlour a fire was burning at midnight, and by this fire Grace was watching. The lamp was turned low and the room was very quiet; a dropping cinder made quiet a startling sound. When a moan or a movement of the patient broke the stillness—which were only at rare intervals—the curate rose and went to the bedside. But it was only to look at the sufferer lying upon it, bandaged and unconscious. There was very little he could do. He could follow the instructions given by the medical man before he went away, but these had been few and hurried, and he could only watch with grief in his heart. There was but a chance that his friend's life might be saved. Close attention and unremitting care might rescue him, and to the best of his ability the curate meant to give him both. His faith in his own skill was not very great, and there were no professional nurses in Riggan.

"It is the care women give that he needs," he said once, standing near the pillow and speaking to himself. "Men cannot do these things well. A mother or a sister might save him."

He went to the window and drew back the curtain to look out upon the night. As he did so, he saw the figure of a woman nearing the house. As she approached, she began to walk more slowly, and when she reached the gate she hesitated, stopped and looked up. In a moment it became evident that she saw him, and was conscious that he saw her. The dim light in the chamber threw his form into strong relief. She raised her hand and made a gesture. He turned away from the window, left the room quietly and went downstairs. She had not moved, but stood at the gate awaiting him. She spoke to him in a low tone and he distinguished in its sound a degree of physical exhaustion.

"To save me," she said. "I thowt yo' did, though I did na think o' yo' bein' at th' winder when I stepped—to see th' leet."

"I am glad I saw you," said Grace. "You have been among the men who were hurt?"

"Ay," pulling at a bush of evergreen nervously, and scattering the leaves as she spoke. "There's scarce a house o' the common sort i' Riggan as has na trouble in it."

"God help them all!" exclaimed Grace fervently.

"Have you seen Miss Barlow?" he asked next.

"She wur on th' go up i' ten minutes after th' explosion. She wur i' the village when it happened, an' she drove to th' pit. She's been workin' as hard as any woman i' Riggan. She saw us go down th' mine, but she did not see us come up. She wur away then wi' a woman as had a lad to be carried home dead. She would ha' come to him, but she knewed yo' were wi' him, an' thowt wur them as needed her. When th' cages coom up their wur women as screamed an' held to her, an' thowt th' lads on their knees an' hid their faces i' her dress, an' i' her hands, as if they thowt she could keep th' truth fro' me."

Grace trembled in his excitement.

"God bless her! God bless her!" he said, again and again. "Which is she now?" he asked at length.

"There wur a little chap as coom up i' th' last careful—he wur hurt bad, an' he wur such a little chap as it went hard wi' him. When th' doctor touched him he screamed an' begged to be let alone, an' she heerd an' went to him an' knelt down an' quieted him a bit. Th' poor little lad would na let go o' her dress; he held to it fur dear life, an' sobbed and shivered and begged her to go wi' him an' howd his head on her lap while th' doctor did what wur to be done. An' so she went, an' she's wi' him now. He will na live till daylight, an' he keeps cryin' out for th' lady to stay wi' him."

There was another silence, and then Joan spoke—
"Canna yo' guess what I coom to say?"

He thought he could, and perhaps his glance told her so.

"If I wur a lady," she said, her lips, her hands trembling, "I could na ax yo' what I've made up my mind to; but I'm na a lady, an' it does na matter. If yo' need some one to help yo' wi' him, yo' yo' loke me ha' th' place! I dunnot ax nowt else—but to be let do th' hard work."

She ended with a sob. Suddenly she covered her face with her hands weeping wildly.

"Dont do that," he said gently. "Come with me. It is you he needs."

He led the way into the house and up the stairs, Joan following him. When they entered the room they went to the bedside.

The injured man lay motionless.
"Is there loife i' him yet?" asked Joan.
"He looks as if there might na be."

"There is life in him," Grace answered, "and he has been a strong man; so I think we may feel some hope."

(TO BE CONTINUED)

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