

CHAPTER X - On the Knoll Road

The moon was shining brightly when he stepped into the open road--so brightly that he could see every object far before him unless where the trees cast their black shadows, which seemed all the blacker for the light. "What a grave little creature she is!" he was saying to himself. But he stopped suddenly; under one of the trees by the roadside some one was standing motionless; as he approached, the figure stepped boldly out into the moonlight before him. It was a woman.

"Dunnot be afeard," she said, in a low, hurried voice. "It's me, mester--it's Joan Lowrie."

"Joan Lowrie!" he said with surprise. "What has brought you out at this hour, and whom are you waiting for?"

"I'm waiting for yo'rsen," she answered.

"For me?"

"Aye; I ha' summat to say to you."

She looked about her hurriedly.

"Yo'd better come into th' shade o' them trees," she said, "I dunnot want to gi' any one a chance to see me nor yo' either."

It was impossible that he should not hesitate a moment. If she had been forced into entrapping him!

She made a sharp gesture.

"I am na goin' to do no harm," she said. "Yo' may trust me. It's th' other way about."

"I ask pardon," he said, feeling heartily ashamed of himself the next instant, "but you know--"

"Aye," impatiently, as they passed into the shadow, "I know, or I should na be here now."

A moonbeam, finding its way through a rift in the boughs and falling on her face, showed him that she was very pale.

"Yo' wonder as I'm here at aw," she said, not meeting his eyes as she spoke, "but yo' did me a good turn onct, an' I ha' na had so many done me i' my loife as I can forget one on 'em. I'm come here--fur I may as well mak' as few words on't as I con--I come here to tell yo' to tak' heed o' Dan Lowrie."

"What?" said Fergus. "He bears me a grudge, does he?"

"Aye, he bears thee grudge enow," she said. "He bears thee that much grudge that if he could lay his hond on thee, while th' heat's on him, he'd kill thee or dee. He will na be so bitter after a while, happen, but he'd do it now, and that's why I warn thee. Tha has no reet to be goin' out loike this," glancing at his bandaged arm. "How could tha help thysen if he were to set on thee? Tha had better tak' heed, I tell thee."

"I am very much indebted to you," began Fergus.

She stopped him.

"Tha did me a good turn," she said. And then her voice changed. "Dan Lowrie's my feyther, an' I've stuck to him, I dunnot know why--happen cause I never had nowt else to hold to and do for; but feyther or no feyther I know he's a bad un when th' fit's on an' he has a spite agen a mon. So tak' care, I tell thee agen. Theer now, I've done. Will tha walk on first an' let me follow thee?"

Something in her mode of making this suggestion impressed him singularly.

"I do not quite understand--" he said.

She turned and looked at him, her face white and resolute.

"I dunnot want harm done," she answered. "I will na ha' harm done if I con help it, an' if I mun speak th' truth I know their's harm afoot to-neet. If I'm behind thee, their is na a mon i' Riggan as dare lay hond on thee to my face, if I am nowt but a lass. That's why I ax thee to let me keep i' soight."

"You are a brave woman," he said, "and I will do as you tell me, but I feel like a coward."

"Their is no need as you should," she answered in a softened voice, "Yo' dunnot seem loike one to me."

Derrick bent suddenly, and taking her hand, raised it to his lips. At this involuntary act of homage--for it was nothing less--Joan Lowrie looked up at him with startled eyes.

"I am na a lady," she said, and drew her hand away.

They went out into the road together, he first, she following at a short distance, so that nobody seeing the one could avoid seeing the other. It was an awkward and trying position for a man of Derrick's temperament, and under some circumstances he would have rebelled against it; as it was, he could not feel humiliated.

At a certain dark bead in the road not far from Lowrie's cottage, Joan halted suddenly and spoke.

"Feyther," she said, in a clear steady voice, "is na that yo' standin' theer? I thowt yo'd happen to be comin' whoam this way. Wheer has tha been?" And as he passed on, Derrick caught the sound of a muttered oath, and gained a side glimpse of a heavy, slouching figure coming stealthily out of the shadow.