

CHAPTER XXIV - Dan Lowrie's Return

Not a pleasant road to travel at any time--the high road to Riggan, it was certainly at its worst to-night.

Between twelve and one o'clock, the rain which had been pouring down steadily with true English pertinacity for two days, was gradually passing into a drizzle still more unpleasant,--a drizzle that soaked into the already soaked clay, that made the mud more slippery, that penetrated a man's clothing and beat softly but irritatingly against his face, and dripped from his hair and hat down upon his neck, however well he might imagine himself protected by his outside wrappings. But, if he was a common traveller--a rough tramp or laborer, who was not protected from it at all, it could not fail to annoy him still more, and consequently to affect his temper.

At the hour I have named, such a traveller was making his way through the mire and drizzle toward Riggan,--a tramp in mud-splashed corduroy and with the regulation handkerchief bundle tied to the thick stick which he carried over his shoulder.

"Dom th' rain;--dom th' road," he said.

It was not alone the state of the weather that put him out of humor.

"Th' lass," he went on. "Dom her handsome face. Goin' agin a

chap--workin' agin him, an' settin' hersen i' his road. Blast me," grinding his teeth--"Blast me if I dunnot ha' it out wi' her!"

So cursing, and alternating his curses with raging silence, he trudged on his way until four o'clock, when he was in sight of the cottage upon the Knoll Road--the cottage where Joan and Liz lay asleep upon their poor bed, with the child between them.

Joan had not been asleep long. The child had been unusually fretful, and had kept her awake. So she was the more easily awakened from her first light and uneasy slumber by a knock on the door. Hearing it, she started up and listened.

"Who is it?" she asked in a voice too low to disturb the sleepers, but distinct enough to reach Lowrie's hearing.

"Get thee up an' oppen th' door," was the answer. "I want thee."

She knew there was something wrong. She had not responded to his summons

for so many years without learning what each tone meant But she did not hesitate.

When she had hastily thrown on some clothing, she opened the door and stood before him.

"I did not expect to see yo' to-neet," she said, quietly.

"Happen not," he replied. "Coom out here. I ha' summat to say to yo'."

"Yo' wunnot come in?" she asked.

"Nay. What I ha' to say mowt waken th' young un."

She stepped out without another word, and closed the door quietly behind her.

There was the faintest possible light in the sky, the first tint of dawn, and it showed even to his brutal eyes all the beauty of her face and figure as she stood motionless, the dripping rain falling upon her; there was so little suggestion of fear about her that he was roused to fresh anger.

"Dom yo'!" he broke forth. "Do yo' know as I've fun yo' out?"

She did not profess not to understand him, but she did not stir an inch.

"I did na know before," was her reply.

"Yo' thowt as I wur to be stopped, did yo'? Yo' thowt as yo' could keep quiet an' stond i' my way, an' houd me back till I'd forgotten? Yo're a brave wench! Nivver moind how I fun yo' out, an' seed how it wur--I've

done it, that's enow fur yo'; an' now I've coom to ha' a few words wi' yo' and settle matters. I coom here to-neet a purpose, an' this is what I've gotten to say. Yo're stubborn enow, but yo' canna stop me. That's one thing I ha' to tell yo', an' here's another. Yo're hard enow, an' yo're wise enow, but yo're noan so wise as yo' think fur, if yo' fancy as a hundred years ud mak' me forget what I ha' made up my moind to, an' yo're noan so wise as yo' think fur, if yo' put yoursen in my road. An' here's another yet," clinching his fist. "If it wur murder, as I wur goin' to do--not as I say it is--but if it wur murder itsen an' yo' wur i' my way, theer mowt be two blows struck i'stead o' one--theer mowt be two murders done--an' I wunnot say which ud coom first--fur I'll do what I've set my moind to, if I'm dom'd to hell fur it!"

She did not move nor speak. Perhaps because of her immobility he broke out again.

"What!" he cried. "Yo' hangin' on to gentlemen, an' doggin' 'em, an' draggin' yoursen thro' th' dark an' mire to save 'em fro' havin' their prutty faces hurt, an' gotten their dues! Yo' creepin' behind a mon as cares no more fur yo' than he does for th' dirt at his feet, an' as laughs, ten to one, to know as yo're ready to be picked up or throwed down at his pleasure! Yo' watchin' i' th' shade o' trees an' stoppin' a mon by neet as would na stop to speak to yo' by day. Dom yo'! theer were na a mon i' Riggan as dare touch yo' wi' a yard-stick until this chap coom."

"I've listened to yo'," she said. "Will yo' listen to me?"

He replied with another oath, and she continued as if it had been an assent.

"Theer's a few o' them words as yo've spoken as is na true, but theer's others as is. It's true as I ha' set mysen to watch, an' it's true as I mean to do it again. If it's nowt but simple harm yo' mean, yo' shanna do it; if it's murder yo' mean--an' I dunnot trust yo' as it is na--if it's murder yo' mean, theer's yo' an' me for it before it's done; an' if theer's deathly blows struck, the first shall fa' on me. Theer!" and she struck herself upon her breast. "If I wur ivver afraid o' yo' i' my loife--if I ivver feared yo' as choild or woman, dunnot believe me now."

"Yo' mean that?" he said.

"Yo' know whether I mean it or not," she answered.

"Aye!" he said. "I'm dom'd if yo' dunnot, yo' she-devil, an' bein' as that's what's ailin' thee, I'm dom'd if I dunnot mean summat too," and he raised his hand and gave her a blow that felled her to the ground; then he turned away, cursing as he went.

She uttered no cry of appeal or dread, and Liz and the child slept on inside, as quietly as before. It was the light-falling rain and the cool morning air that roused her. She came to herself at last, feeling sick

and dizzy, and conscious of a fierce pain in her bruised temple. She managed to rise to her feet and stand, leaning against the rough gate-post. She had borne such blows before, but she never felt her humiliation so bitterly as she did at this moment. She laid her brow upon her hand, which rested on the gate, and broke into heavy sobs.

"I shall bear th' mark for mony a day," she said. "I mun hide mysen away. I could na bear fur him to see it, even tho' I getten it fur his sake."