

CHAPTER XXV - The Old Danger

It had been some time since Derrick on his nightly walks homeward had been conscious of the presence of the silent figure; but the very night after the occurrence narrated in the last chapter, he was startled at his first turning into the Knoll Road by recognizing Joan.

There was a pang to him in the discovery. Her silent presence seemed only to widen the distance Fate had placed between them. She was ready to shield him from danger, but she held herself apart from him even in doing so. She followed her own path as if she were a creature of a different world,--a world so separated from his own that nothing could ever bridge the gulf between them.

To-night, Derrick was seized with an intense longing to speak to the girl. He had forborne for her sake before, but to-night he was in one of those frames of mind in which a man is selfish, and is apt to let his course be regulated by his impulse. Why should he not speak, after all? If there was danger for him there was danger for her, and it was absurd that he should not show her that he was not afraid. Why should she interpose her single strength between himself and the vengeance of a man of whom he had had the best in their only encounter? As soon as they had reached the more unfrequented part of the road, he wheeled round suddenly, and spoke.

"Joan," he said.

He saw that she paused and hesitated, and he made up his mind more strongly. He took a few impetuous steps toward her, and seeing this, she addressed him hurriedly.

"Dunnot stop," she said. "If--if yo' want to speak to me, I'll go along wi' yo'."

"You think I'm in danger?"

He could not see her face, but her voice told him that her usual steady composure was shaken--it was almost like the voice of another woman.

"Yo' nivver wur i' more danger i' yo're loife."

"The old danger?"

"Th' old danger, as is worse to be feared now than ivver."

"And you!" he broke out. "You interpose yourself between that danger and me!"

His fire seemed to communicate itself to her.

"Th' harm as is meant to be done, is coward's harm," she said, "an' will be done i' coward's fashion--it is na a harm as will be done yo' wi'

fair warnin', i' dayleet, an' face to face. If it wur, I should na fear--but th' way it is, I say it shanna be done--it shanna, if I dee fur it!" Then her manner altered again, and her voice returned to its first tremor. "It is na wi' me as it is wi' other women. Yo' munnot judge o' me as yo' judge o' other lasses. What mowtn't be reet fur other lasses to do, is reet enow fur me. It has na been left to me to be lass-loike, an' feart, an'--an' modest," and she drew her breath hard, as if she was forced to check herself.

"It has been left to you," he burst forth, "it has been left to you to stand higher in my eyes than any other woman God ever made."

He could not have controlled himself. And yet, when he had said this, his heart leaped for fear he might have wounded her or given her a false impression. But strange to say, it proved this time that he had no need for fear.

There was a moment's silence, and then she answered low.

"Thank yo'!"

They had gone some yards together, before he recovered himself sufficiently to remember what he had meant to say to her.

"I wanted to tell you," he said, "that I do not think any--enemy I have, can take me at any very great disadvantage. I am--I have prepared

myself."

She shuddered.

"Yo' carry--summat?"

"Don't misunderstand me," he said quickly. "I shall not use any weapon rashly. It is to be employed more as a means of warning and alarm than anything else. Rigganites do not like firearms, and they are not used to them. I only tell you this, because I cannot bear that you should expose yourself unnecessarily."

There was that in his manner which moved her as his light touch had done that first night of their meeting, when he had bound up her wounded temple with his handkerchief. It was that her womanhood--her hardly used womanhood, of which she had herself thought with such pathetic scorn--was always before him, and was even a stronger power with him than her marvellous beauty.

She remembered the fresh bruise upon her brow, and felt its throb with less of shame, because she bore it for his sake.

"Promise me one thing," he went on. "And do not think me ungracious in asking it of you--promise me that you will not come out again through any fear of danger for me, unless it is a greater one than threatens me now and one I am unprepared to meet."

"I conna," she answered firmly. "I conna promise yo'. Yo' mun let me do as I ha' done fur th' sake o' my own peace."

She made no further explanation, and he could not persuade her to alter her determination. In fact, he was led to see at last, that there was more behind than she had the will or power to reveal to him; something in her reticence silenced him.

"Yo' dunnot know what I do," she said before they parted. "An' happen yo' would na quoite understand it if yo' did. I dunnot do things lightly,--I ha' no reason to,--an' I ha' set my moind on seein' that th' harm as has been brewin' fur long enow, shanna reach wheer it's aimed. I mun ha' my way. Dunnot ask me to gi'e it up. Let me do as I ha' been doin' fur th' sake o' mysen, if fur no one else."

The truth which he could not reach, and would not have reached if he had talked to her till doomsday, was that she was right in saying that she could not give it up. This woman had made no inconsequent boast when she told her father that if deadly blows fell, they must fall first upon herself. She was used to blows, she could bear them, she was fearless before them,--but she could not have borne to sit at home, under any possibility of wrong being done to this man. God knows what heavy sadness had worn her soul, through the months in which she had never for a moment flinched from the knowledge that a whole world lay between herself and him. God knows how she had struggled against the

unconquerable tide of feeling as it crept slowly upon her, refusing to be stemmed and threatening to overwhelm her in its remorseless waves. She was only left endurance--yet even in this there was a gladness which she had in nothing else. She could never meet him as a happier woman might, but she could do for him what other women could not do--she could brave darkness and danger, she could watch over him, if need be; if the worst came to the worst, she could interpose herself between him and violence, or death itself.

But of all this, Fergus Derrick suspected nothing. He only knew that while she had not misinterpreted his appeal, some reason of her own held her firm.