

CHAPTER XXIX - Lying in Wait

Liz crept close to the window and looked down the road. At this time of the year it was not often that the sun set in as fair a sky. In October, Riggan generally shut its doors against damps and mist, and turned toward its fire when it had one. And yet Liz had hardly seen that the sun had shone at all to-day. Still, seeing her face a passer-by would not have fancied that she was chilled. There was a flush upon her cheeks, and her eyes were more than usually bright. She was watching for Joan with a restless eagerness.

"She's late," she said. "I mought ha' knowed she'd be late. I wisht she'd coom--I do. An' yet--an' yet I'm feart. I wisht it wur over;" and she twisted her fingers together nervously.

She had laid the child down upon the bed, and presently it roused her with a cry. She went to it, took it up into her arms, and, carrying it to the fire, sat down.

"Why couldn't tha stay asleep?" she said. "I nivver seed a choild loike thee."

But the next minute, the little creature whimpering, she bent down in impatient repentance and kissed it, whimpering too.

"Dunnot," she said. "I conna bear to hear thee. Hush, thee! tha goes

on as if tha knew. Eh! but I mun be a bad lass. Ay, I'm bad through an' through, an' I conna be no worse nor I am."

She did not kiss the child again, but held it in her listless way even after it fell asleep. She rested an elbow on her knee and her chin upon her hand while her tearful eyes searched the fire, and thus Joan found her when she came in at dusk.

"Tha'rt late again, Joan," she said.

"Ay," Joan answered, "I'm late."

She laid her things aside and came to the firelight. The little one always won her first attention when she came from her day's labor.

"Has she been frettin'?" she asked.

"Ay," said Liz, "she's done nowt else but fret lately. I dunnot know what ails her."

She was in Joan's arms by this time, and Joan stood looking at the puny face.

"She is na well," she said in a low voice. "She has pain as we know nowt on, poor little lass. We conna help her, or bear it fur her. We would if we could, little un,"--as if she forgot Liz's presence.

"Joan," Liz faltered, "what if yo' were to lose her?"

"I hope I shanna. I hope I shanna."

"Yo' could na bear it?"

"Theer is na mich as we conna bear."

"That's true enow," said Liz. "I wish foak could dee o' trouble."

"Theer's more nor yo' has wished th' same," Joan answered.

She thought afterward of the girl's words and remembered how she looked when she uttered them,--her piteous eyes resting on the embers, her weak little mouth quivering, her small hands at work,--but when she heard them, she only recognized in them a new touch of the old petulance to which she had become used.

Joan went about her usual tasks, holding the baby in her arms. She prepared the evening meal with Liz's assistance and they sat down to eat it together. But Liz had little appetite. In-deed neither of them ate much and both were more than usually silent. A shadow of reserve had lately fallen between them.

After the meal was ended they drew their seats to the hearth again, and

Liz went back to her brooding over the fire. Joan, lulling the child, sat and watched her. All Liz's beauty had returned to her. Her soft, rough hair was twisted into a curly knot upon her small head, her pretty, babyish face was at its best of bloom and expression--that absent, subdued look was becoming to her.

"Theer's honest men as mought ha' loved her," said Joan, inwardly.

"Theer's honest men as would ha' made her life happy."

It was just as she was thinking this that Liz turned round to her.

"If she lived to be a woman," with a gesture toward the child; "if she lived to be a woman, do yo' think as sh'd remember me if--if owt should happen to me now?"

"I conna tell," Joan answered, "but I'd try to mak' her."

"Would yo'?" and then she dropped her face upon her hands. "It ud be best if she'd forget me," she said. "It ud be best if she'd forget me."

"Nay, Liz," said Joan. "Tha'rt out o' soarts."

"Ay, I am," said the girl, "an' I need be. Eh, Joan! tha'rt a good wench. I wish I wur loike thee."

"Tha need na, lass."

"But I do. Tha'd nivver go wrong i' th' world. Nowt could mak' thee go wrong. Tha'rt so strong like. An' tha'rt patient, too, Joan, an' noan loike the rest o' women. I dunnot think--if owt wur to happen me now--as tha'd ha' hard thowts o' me. Wouldst tha?" wistfully.

"Nay, lass. I've been fond o' thee, an' sorry fur thee, and if tha wur to dee tha mayst mak' sure I'd noan be hard on thee. But tha art na goin' to dee, I hope."

To her surprise the girl caught her hand, and, pulling it down upon her knee, laid her cheek against it and burst into tears.

"I dunnot know; I mought, or--or--summat. But nivver tha turn agen me, Joan,--nivver tha hate me. I am na loike thee,--I wur na made loike thee. I conna stand up agen things, but I dunnot think as I'm so bad as foaks say!"

When this impassioned mood passed away, she was silent again for a long time. The baby fell asleep upon Joan's breast, but she did not move it,--she liked to feel it resting there; its close presence always seemed to bring her peace. At length, however, Liz spoke once more.

"Wheer wur thy feyther goin' wi' Spring an' Braddy?" she asked.

Joan turned a pale face toward her.

"Wheer did yo' see him wi' Spring an' Braddy?"

"Here," was Liz's reply. "He wur here this afternoon wi' em. They did na coom in, though,--they waited i' th' road, while he went i' th' back room theer fur summat. I think it wur a bottle. It wur that he coom fur, I know, fur I heerd Braddy say to him, 'Hast getten it?' an' thy feyther said, 'Ay,' an' th' other two laughed as if they wur on a spree o' some soart."

Joan rose from her chair, white and shaking.

"Tak' th' choild," she said, hoarsely. "I'm goin' out."

"Out!" cried Liz. "Nay, dunnot go out What ails thee, Joan?"

"I ha' summat to do," said Joan. "Stay tha here with th' choild." And almost before she finished speaking she was gone, and the door had closed behind her.

There would be three of them against one man. She walked faster as she thought of it, and her breath was drawn heavily.

Lowrie bent down in his hiding-place, smiling grimly. He knelt upon the grass behind a hedge at the road-side. He had reached the place a quarter of an hour before, and he had chosen his position as coolly as

if he had been sitting down to take his tramp dinner in the shade. There was a gap in the hedge and he must not be too near to it or too far from it. It would be easier to rush through this gap than to leap the hedge; but he must not risk being seen. The corner where the other men lay concealed was not far above him. It was only a matter of a few yards, but if he stood to wait at one turn and the engineer took the other, the game would escape.

So he had placed his comrades at the second, and he had taken the first.

"T'd loike to ha' th' first yammer at him," he had said, savagely. "Yo' can coom when yo' hear me."

As he waited by the hedge, he put his hand out stealthily toward his "knob-stick" and drew it nearer, saying to himself:

"When I ha' done settlin' wi' him fur mysen, I shall ha' a bit o' an account to settle fur her. If it's his good looks as she's takken wi', she'll be noan so fond on him when she sees him next, I'll warrant."

He had hit upon the greater villainy of stopping short of murder,--if he could contain himself when the time came.

At this instant a sound reached his ears which caused him to start. He bent forward slightly toward the gap to listen. There were footsteps upon the road above him--footsteps that sounded familiar. Clouds had

drifted across the sky and darkened it, but he had heard that tread too often to mistake it now when every nerve was strung to its highest tension. A cold sweat broke out upon him in the impotence of his wrath.

"It's th' lass hersen," he said. "She's heerd summat, an' she's as good as her word!"--with an oath.

He got up and stood a second trembling with rage. He drew his sleeve across his forehead and wiped away the sweat, and then turned round sharply.

"I'll creep up th' road an' meet her afore she reaches th' first place," he panted. "If she sees th' lads, it's aw up wi' us. I'll teach her summat as she'll noan forget."

He was out into the Knoll Road in a minute more.

"I'll teach her to go agen me," he muttered.

"I'll teach her, by -----" But the sentence was never ended. There was a murmur he did not understand, a rush, a heavy rain of blows, a dash of something in his face that scorched like liquid fire, and with a shriek, he fell writhing.