

CHAPTER XXX - The Slip of Paper

A minute after there rushed past Joan, in the darkness, two men,--stumbling and cursing as they went, out of breath, horror-stricken and running at the top of their speed.

"It wur Lowrie hissen, by -----!" she heard one say, as he dashed by.

"Feyther! Feyther, wheer are yo'? Feyther, are yo' nigh me?" she cried, for she heard both the blows and the shriek.

But there came no answer to her ear. The rapid feet beating upon the road, their echo dying in the distance, made the only sound that broke the stillness. There was not even a groan. Yet a few paces from her, lay a battered, bleeding form. There was no starlight now, she could see only the vague outline of the figure, which might be that of either one man or the other. For an instant, the similarity in stature which had deceived his blundering companions, deceived her also; but when she knelt down and touched the shoulder, she knew it was not the master who lay before her.

"It's feyther hissen," she said, and then she drew away her hand, shuddering. "It's wet wi' blood," she said. "It's wet wi' blood!"

He did not hear her when she spoke; he was not conscious that she tried

to raise him; his head hung forward when she lifted him; he lay heavily, and without motion, upon her arms.

"They ha' killed him!" she said. "How is it, as it is na him?"

There was neither light nor help nearer than "The Crown" itself, and when her brain became clearer, she remembered this. Without light and assistance, she could do nothing; she could not even see what hurt he had sustained. Dead or dying, he must lie here until she had time to get help.

She took off her shawl, and folding it, laid his head gently upon it. Then she put her lips to his ear.

"Feyther," she said, "I'm goin' to bring help to thee. If tha con hear me, stir thy hond."

He did not stir it, so she disengaged her arm as gently as possible, and, rising to her feet, went on her way.

There were half a dozen men in the bar-room when she pushed the door inward and stood upon the threshold. They looked up in amazement.

"Those on yo' as want to help a deeing mon," she said, "come wi' me. My feyther's lyin' in the Knoll Road, done to death."

All were astir in a moment. Lanterns and other necessaries were provided, and bearing one of these lanterns herself, Joan led the way.

As she stepped out onto the pavement a man was passing, and, attracted by the confusion, turned to the crowd:

"What is the matter?" he asked.

"There's a mon been killed up on th' Knoll Road," answered one of the colliers. "It's this lass's feyther, Dan Lowrie."

The man strode into the light and showed an agitated face.

"Killed!" he said, "Dan Lowrie!"

It was Fergus Derrick.

He recognized Joan immediately, and went to her.

"For pity's sake," he exclaimed, "don't go with them. If what they say is true, this is no place for you. Let me take you home. You ought not----"

"It wur me," interrupted Joan, in a steady voice, "as found him."

He could not persuade her to remain behind, so he walked on by her side.

He asked her no questions. He knew enough to understand that his enemy had reaped the whirlwind he had himself sown.

It was he who knelt first by the side of the prostrate man, holding the lantern above the almost unrecognizable face. Then he would have raised the lifeless hand, but Joan, who had bent down near him, stopped him with a quick move.

"Dunnot do that," she faltered, and when he looked up in surprise, he comprehended her meaning, even before she added, in a passionate undertone, the miserable words:

"Theer's blood on it, as might ha' bin yo're own."

"Theer's a bottle here," some one cried out suddenly. "A bottle as I just set my foot on. Chaps, theer's been vitriol throwed."

"Ay," cried another, "so theer has; chaps, look yo' here. Th' villains has vitriolled him."

They laid him upon the shutter they had brought, and carried him homeward. Joan and Derrick were nearest to him as they walked.

They were not far from the cottage, and it was not long before the light glimmered through the window upon them. Seeing it, Joan turned to Derrick suddenly.

"I mun hurry on before," she said. "I mun go and say a word to Liz. Comin' aw at onct th' soight ud fear her."

Reaching the house, she pushed the door open and went in. Everything was so quiet that she fancied the girl must have gone to bed.

"Liz," she said aloud. "Liz!"

Her voice fell with an echoing sound upon the silent room. She looked at the bed and saw the child lying there asleep. Liz was not with it. She passed quickly into the room adjoining and glanced around. It was empty. Moved by some impulse she went back to the bed, and in bending over the child, saw a slip of paper pinned upon its breast, and upon this paper Joan read, in the sprawling, uncertain hand she knew so well:

"Dunnot be hard on me, Joan, dunnot--Good-bye!"

When Derrick entered the door, he found Joan standing alone in the centre of the room, holding the scrap of paper in her hand.