

CHAPTER XIV - VISITORS AT THE MANSE.

On bringing home his bride, the minister showed her to us, and we thought she would do when she realized that she was not the minister. She was a grand lady from Edinburgh, though very frank, and we simple folk amused her a good deal, especially when we were sitting cowed in the manse parlour drinking a dish of tea with her, as happened to Leebie, her father, and me, three days before Jamie came home.

Leebie had refused to be drawn into conversation, like one who knew her place, yet all her actions were genteel and her monosyllabic replies in the Englishy tongue, as of one who was, after all, a little above the common. When the minister's wife asked her whether she took sugar and cream, she said politely, "If you please" (though she did not take sugar), a reply that contrasted with Hendry's equally well-intended answer to the same question. "I'm no partikler," was what Hendry said.

Hendry had left home glumly, declaring that the white collar Jess had put on him would throttle him; but her feikieness ended in his surrender, and he was looking unusually perjink. Had not his daughter been present he would have been the most at ease of the company, but her manners were too fine not to make an impression upon one who knew her on her every-day behaviour, and she had also ways of bringing Hendry to himself by a touch beneath the table. It was in church that Leebie brought to perfection her manner of looking after her father. When he had confidence in the preacher's soundness, he would sometimes have slept in his pew if Leebie had not had a watchful foot. She wakened him in an instant, while still looking modestly at the pulpit; however reverently he might try to fall over, Leebie's foot went out. She was such an artist that I never caught her in the act. All I knew for certain was that, now and then, Hendry suddenly sat up.

The ordeal was over when Leebie went upstairs to put on her things. After tea Hendry had become bolder in talk, his subject being ministerial. He had an extraordinary knowledge, got no one knew where, of the matrimonial affairs of all the ministers in these parts, and his stories about them ended frequently with a chuckle. He always took it for granted that a minister's marriage was womanhood's great triumph, and that the particular woman who got him must be very clever. Some of his

tales were even more curious than he thought them, such as the one Leeby tried to interrupt by saying we must be going.

"There's Mr. Pennycuick, noo," said Hendry, shaking his head in wonder at what he had to tell; "him 'at's minister at Tilliedrum. Weel, when he was a probationer he was mighty poor, an' one day he was walkin' into Thrums frae Glen Quharity, an' he tak's a rest at a little housey on the road. The fowk didna ken him ava, but they saw he was a minister, an' the lassie was sorry to see him wi' sic an auld hat. What think ye she did?"

"Come away, father," said Leeby, re-entering the parlour; but Hendry was now in full pursuit of his story.

"I'll tell ye what she did," he continued. "She juist took his hat awa, an' put her father's new ane in its place, an' Mr. Pennycuick never kent the differ till he landed in Thrums. It was terrible kind o' her. Ay, but the old man would be in a mighty rage when he found she had swappit the hats."

"Come away," said Leeby, still politely, though she was burning to tell her mother how Hendry had disgraced them.

"The minister," said Hendry, turning his back on Leeby, "didna forget the lassie. Na; as sune as he got a kirk, he married her. Ay, she got her reward. He married her. It was rale noble of 'im."

I do not know what Leeby said to Hendry when she got him beyond the manse gate, for I stayed behind to talk to the minister. As it turned out, the minister's wife did most of the talking, smiling good-humouredly at country gawkiness the while.

"Yes," she said, "I am sure I shall like Thrums, though those teas to the congregation are a little trying. Do you know, Thrums is the only place I was ever in where it struck me that the men are cleverer than the women."

She told us why.

"Well, to-night affords a case in point. Mr. McQumpha was quite brilliant, was he not, in comparison with his daughter? Really she seemed so put out at being at the manse that she could not raise her eyes. I question if she would know me again, and I am sure she sat in

the room as one blindfolded. I left her in the bedroom a minute, and I assure you, when I returned she was still standing on the same spot in the centre of the floor."

I pointed out that Leeby had been awestruck.

"I suppose so," she said; "but it is a pity she cannot make use of her eyes, if not of her tongue. Ah, the Thrums women are good, I believe, but their wits are sadly in need of sharpening. I daresay it comes of living in so small a place."

I overtook Leeby on the brae, aware, as I saw her alone, that it had been her father whom I passed talking to Tammas Haggart in the Square. Hendry stopped to have what he called a tove with any likely person he encountered, and, indeed, though he and I often took a walk on Saturdays, I generally lost him before we were clear of the town.

In a few moments Leeby and I were at home to give Jess the news.

"Whaur's yer father?" asked Jess, as if Hendry's way of dropping behind was still unknown to her.

"Ou, I left him speakin' to Gavin Birse," said Leeby. "I daursay he's awa to some hoose."

"It's no very silvendy (safe) his comin' ower the brae by himsel," said Jess, adding in a bitter tone of conviction, "but he'll gang in to no hoose as lang as he's so weel dressed. Na, he would think it boastfu'."

I sat down to a book by the kitchen fire; but, as Leeby became communicative, I read less and less. While she spoke she was baking bannocks with all the might of her, and Jess, leaning forward in her chair, was arranging them in a semicircle round the fire.

"Na," was the first remark of Leeby's that came between me and my book, "it is no new furniture."

"But there was three cart-loads o't, Leeby, sent on frae Edinbory. Tibbie Birse helpit to lift it in, and she said the parlour furniture beat a'."

"Ou, it's substantial, but it is no new. I sepad it had been bocht cheap second-hand, for the chair I had was terrible scratched like, an', what's mair, the airm-chair was a heap shinnier than the rest."

"Ay, ay, I wager it had been new stuffed. Tibbie said the carpet cowed for grandeur?"

"Oh, I dinna deny it's a guid carpet; but if it's been turned once it's been turned half a dozen times, so it's far frae new. Ay, an' forby, it was rale threadbare aneath the table, so ye may be sure they've been cuttin't an' puttin' the worn pairt whaur it would be least seen."

"They say 'at there's twa grand gas brackets i' the parlour, an' a wonderfu' gasoliery i' the dinin'-room?"

"We wasna i' the dinin'-room, so I ken naething aboot the gasoliery; but I'll tell ye what the gas brackets is. I recognized them immeditly. Ye mind the auld gasoliery i' the dinin'-room had twa lichts? Ay, then, the parlour brackets is made oot o' the auld gasoliery."

"Weel, Leeby, as sure as ye're standin' there, that passed through my head as sune as Tibbie mentioned them!"

"There's nae doot about it. Ay, I was in ane o' the bedrooms, too!"

"It would be grand?"

"I wouldna say 'at it was partikler grand, but there was a great mask (quantity) o' things in't, an' near everything was covered wi' cretonne. But the chairs dinna match. There was a very bonny-painted cloth along the chimley--what they call a mantelpiece border, I warrant."

"Sal, I've often wondered what they was."

"Well, I assure ye they winna be ill to mak, for the border was juist nailed upon a board laid on the chimley. There's naething to hender's makin' ane for the room."

"Ay, we could sew something on the border instead o' paintin't. The room lookit weel, ye say?"

"Yes, but it was economically furnished. There was nae carpet below the wax-cloth; na, there was nane below the bed either."

"Was't a grand bed?"

"It had a fell lot o' brass aboot it, but there was juist one pair o' blankets. I thocht it was gey shabby, hae'n the ewer a different pattern frae the

basin; ay, an' there was juist a poker in the fireplace, there was nae tangs."

"Yea, yea; they'll hae but one set o' bedroom fireirons. The tangs'll be in anither room. Tod, that's no sae mighty grand for Edinbory. What like was she hersel?"

"Ou, very ladylike and saft spoken. She's a canty body an' frank. She wears her hair low on the left side to hod (hide) a scar, an' there's twa warts on her richt hand."

"There hadna been a fire i' the parlour?"

"No, but it was ready to licht. There was sticks and paper in't. The paper was oot o' a dressmaker's journal."

"Ye say so? She'll mak her ain frocks, I sepad."

When Hendry entered to take off his collar and coat before sitting down to his evening meal of hot water, porter, and bread mixed in a bowl, Jess sent me off to the attic. As I climbed the stairs I remembered that the minister's wife thought Leeby in need of sharpening.