

CHAPTER XXI - JESS LEFT ALONE

There may be a few who care to know how the lives of Jess and Hendry ended. Leeby died in the back-end of the year I have been speaking of, and as I was snowed up in the school-house at the time, I heard the news from Gavin Birse too late to attend her funeral. She got her death on the commonty one day of sudden rain, when she had run out to bring in her washing, for the terrible cold she woke with next morning carried her off very quickly. Leeby did not blame Jamie for not coming to her, nor did I, for I knew that even in the presence of death the poor must drag their chains. He never got Hendry's letter with the news, and we know now that he was already in the hands of her who played the devil with his life. Before the spring came he had been lost to Jess.

"Them 'at has got sae mony blessin's mair than the generality," Hendry said to me one day, when Craigiebuckle had given me a lift into Thrums, "has nae shame if they would pray aye for mair. The Lord has gi'en this hoose sae muckle, 'at to pray for muir looks like no bein' thankfu' for what we've got. Ay, but I canna help prayin' to Him 'at in His great mercy he'll take Jess afore me. No 'at Leeby's gone, an' Jamie never lets us hear frae him, I canna gulp doon the thocht o' Jess bein' left alane."

This was a prayer that Hendry may be pardoned for having so often in his heart, though God did not think fit to grant it. In Thrums, when a weaver died, his womenfolk had to take his seat at the loom, and those who, by reason of infirmities, could not do so, went to a place the name of which, I thank God, I am not compelled to write in this chapter. I could not, even at this day, have told any episodes in the life of Jess had it ended in the poorhouse.

Hendry would probably have recovered from the fever had not this terrible dread darkened his intellect when he was still prostrate. He was lying in the kitchen when I saw him last in life, and his parting words must be sadder to the reader than they were to me.

"Ay, richt ye are," he said, in a voice that had become a child's; "I hae muckle, muckle, to be thankfu' for, an' no the least is 'at baith me an' Jess has aye belonged to a bural society. We hae nae cause to be anxious about a' thing bein' dune re-respectable aince we're gone. It was

Jess 'at insisted on oor joinin': a' the wisest things I ever did I was put up to by her."

I parted from Hendry, cheered by the doctor's report, but the old weaver died a few days afterwards. His end was mournful, yet I can recall it now as the not unworthy close of a good man's life. One night poor worn Jess had been helped ben into the room, Tibbie Birse having undertaken to sit up with Hendry. Jess slept for the first time for many days, and as the night was dying Tibbie fell asleep too. Hendry had been better than usual, lying quietly, Tibbie said, and the fever was gone. About three o'clock Tibbie woke and rose to mend the fire. Then she saw that Hendry was not in his bed.

Tibbie went ben the house in her stocking-soles, but Jess heard her.

"What is't, Tibbie?" she asked, anxiously.

"Ou, it's no naething," Tibbie said, "he's lyin' rale quiet."

Then she went up to the attic. Hendry was not in the house.

She opened the door gently and stole out. It was not snowing, but there had been a heavy fall two days before, and the night was windy. A tearing gale had blown the upper part of the brae clear, and from T'nowhead's fields the snow was rising like smoke. Tibbie ran to the farm and woke up T'nowhead.

For an hour they looked in vain for Hendry. At last some one asked who was working in Elshioner's shop all night. This was the long earthen-floored room in which Hendry's loom stood with three others.

"It'll be Sanders Whamond likely," T'nowhead said, and the other men nodded.

But it happened that T'nowhead's Bell, who had flung on a wrapper, and hastened across to sit with Jess, heard of the light in Elshioner's shop.

"It's Hendry," she cried, and then every one moved toward the workshop.

The light at the diminutive, yarn-covered window was pale and dim, but Bell, who was at the house first, could make the most of a cruizey's glimmer.

"It's him," she said, and then, with swelling throat, she ran back to Jess.

The door of the workshop was wide open, held against the wall by the wind. T'nowhead and the others went in. The cruizey stood on the little window. Hendry's back was to the door, and he was leaning forward on the silent loom. He had been dead for some time, but his fellow-workers saw that he must have weaved for nearly an hour.

So it came about that for the last few months of her pilgrimage Jess was left alone. Yet I may not say that she was alone. Jamie, who should have been with her, was undergoing his own ordeal far away; where, we did not now even know. But though the poorhouse stands in Thrums, where all may see it, the neighbours did not think only of themselves.

Than Thomas Haggart there can scarcely have been a poorer man, but Tammas was the first to come forward with offer of help. To the day of Jess's death he did not once fail to carry her water to her in the morning, and the luxuriously living men of Thrums in those present days of pumps at every corner, can hardly realize what that meant. Often there were lines of people at the well by three o'clock in the morning, and each had to wait his turn. Tammas filled his own pitcher and pan, and then had to take his place at the end of the line with Jess's pitcher and pan, to wait his turn again. His own house was in the Tenements, far from the brae in winter time, but he always said to Jess it was "naething ava."

Every Saturday old Robbie Angus sent a bag of sticks and shavings from the saw-mill by his little son Rob, who was afterwards to become a man for speaking about at nights. Of all the friends that Jess and Hendry had, T'nowhead was the ablest to help, and the sweetest memory I have of the farmer and his wife is the delicate way they offered it. You who read will see Jess wince at the offer of charity. But the poor have fine feelings beneath the grime, as you will discover if you care to look for them, and when Jess said she would bake if any one would buy, you would wonder to hear how many kindly folk came to her door for scones.

She had the house to herself at nights, but Tibbie Birse was with her early in the morning, and other neighbours dropped in. Not for long did she have to wait the summons to the better home.

"Na," she said to the minister, who has told me that he was a better man from knowing her, "my thochts is no nane set on the vanities o' the world noo. I kenra hoo I could ever hae ha'en sic an ambeetion to hae thae stuff-bottomed chairs."

I have tried to keep away from Jamie, whom the neighbours sometimes upbraided in her presence. It is of him you who read would like to hear, and I cannot pretend that Jess did not sit at her window looking for him.

"Even when she was bakin'," Tibbie told me, "she aye had an eye on the brae. If Jamie had come at any time when it was licht she would hae seen 'im as sune as he turned the corner."

"If he ever comes back, the sacket (rascal)," T'nowhead said to Jess, "we'll show 'im the door gey quick."

Jess just looked, and all the women knew how she would take Jamie to her arms.

We did not know of the London woman then, and Jess never knew of her. Jamie's mother never for an hour allowed that he had become anything but the loving laddie of his youth.

"I ken 'im ower weel," she always said, "my ain Jamie."

Toward the end she was sure he was dead. I do not know when she first made up her mind to this, nor whether it was not merely a phrase for those who wanted to discuss him with her. I know that she still sat at the window looking at the elbow of the brae.

The minister was with her when she died. She was in her chair, and he asked her, as was his custom, if there was any particular chapter which she would like him to read. Since her husband's death she had always asked for the fourteenth of John, "Hendry's chapter," as it is still called among a very few old people in Thrums. This time she asked him to read the sixteenth chapter of Genesis.

"When I came to the thirteenth verse," the minister told me, "'And she called the name of the Lord that spake unto her. Thou God seest me,' she covered her face with her two hands, and said, 'Joey's text, Joey's text. Oh, but I grudged ye sair, Joey.'"

"I shut the book," the minister said, "when I came to the end of the chapter, and then I saw that she was dead. It is my belief that her heart broke one-and-twenty years ago."