

CHAPTER VI. - THE OLD DOMINIE.

From the new cemetery, which is the highest point in Thrums, you just fail to catch sight of the red school-house that nestles between two bare trees, some five miles up the glen of Quharity. This was proved by Davit Lunan, tinsmith, whom I have heard tell the story. It was in the time when the cemetery gates were locked to keep the bodies of suicides out, but men who cared to risk the consequences could get the coffin over the high dyke and bury it themselves. Peter Lundy's coffin broke, as one might say, into the church-yard in this way, Peter having hanged himself in the Whunny wood when he saw that work he must. The general feeling among the intimates of the deceased was expressed by Davit when he said:

"It may do the crittur nae guid i' the tail o' the day, but he paid for's bit o' ground, an' he's in's richt to occupy it."

The custom was to push the coffin on to the wall up a plank, and then let it drop less carefully into the cemetery. Some of the mourners were dragging the plank over the wall, with Davit Lunan on the top directing them, when they seem to have let go and sent the tinsmith suddenly into the air. A week afterward it struck Davit, when in the act of soldering a hole in Leeby Wheens' flagon (here he branched off to explain that he had made the flagon years before, and that Leeby was sister to Tammas Wheens, and married one Baker Robbie, who died of chicken-pox in his forty-fourth year), that when "up there" he had a view of Quharity school-house. Davit was as truthful as a man who tells the same story more than once can be expected to be, and it is far from a suspicious circumstance that he did not remember seeing the school-house all at once. In Thrums things only struck them gradually. The new cemetery, for instance, was only so called because it had been new once.

In this red stone school, full of the modern improvements that he detested, the old dominie whom I succeeded taught, and sometimes slept, during the last five years of his cantankerous life. It was in a little thatched school, consisting of but one room, that he did his best work, some five hundred yards away from the edifice that was reared in its stead. Now dismally fallen into disrepute, often indeed a domicile for

cattle, the ragged academy of Glen Quharity, where he held despotic sway for nearly half a century, is falling to pieces slowly in a howe that conceals it from the high-road. Even in its best scholastic days, when it sent barefooted lads to college who helped to hasten the Disruption, it was but a pile of ungainly stones, such as Scott's Black Dwarf flung together in a night, with holes in its broken roof of thatch where the rain trickled through, and never with less than two of its knotted little window-panes stopped with brown paper. The twelve or twenty pupils of both sexes who constituted the attendance sat at the two loose desks, which never fell unless you leaned on them, with an eye on the corner of the earthen floor where the worms came out, and on cold days they liked the wind to turn the peat smoke into the room. One boy, who was supposed to wash it out, got his education free for keeping the school-house dirty, and the others paid their way with peats, which they brought in their hands, just as wealthier school-children carry books, and with pence which the dominie collected regularly every Monday morning. The attendance on Monday mornings was often small.

Once a year the dominie added to his income by holding cockfights in the old school. This was at Yule, and the same practice held in the parish school of Thrums. It must have been a strange sight. Every male scholar was expected to bring a cock to the school, and to pay a shilling to the dominie for the privilege of seeing it killed there. The dominie was the master of the sports, assisted by the neighboring farmers, some of whom might be elders of the church. Three rounds were fought. By the end of the first round all the cocks had fought, and the victors were then pitted against each other. The cocks that survived the second round were eligible for the third, and the dominie, besides his shilling, got every cock killed. Sometimes, if all stories be true, the spectators were fighting with each other before the third round concluded.

The glen was but sparsely dotted with houses even in those days; a number of them inhabited by farmer-weavers, who combined two trades and just managed to live. One would have a plough, another a horse, and so in Glen Quharity they helped each other. Without a loom in addition many of them would have starved, and on Saturdays the big farmer and his wife, driving home in a gig, would pass the little farmer carrying or wheeling his wob to Thrums. When there was no longer a market for the produce of the hand-loom these farms had to be given up, and thus it is that the old school is not the only house in our weary glen around which

gooseberry and currant bushes, once tended by careful hands, now grow wild.

In heavy spates the children were conveyed to the old school, as they are still to the new one, in carts, and between it and the dominie's whitewashed, dwelling-house swirled in winter a torrent of water that often carried lumps of the land along with it. This burn he had at times to ford on stilts.

Before the Education Act passed the dominie was not much troubled by the school inspector, who appeared in great splendor every year at Thrums. Fifteen years ago, however, Glen Quharity resolved itself into a School Board, and marched down the glen, with the minister at its head, to condemn the school. When the dominie, who had heard of their design, saw the board approaching, he sent one of his scholars, who enjoyed making a mess of himself, wading across the burn to bring over the stilts which were lying on the other side. The board were thus unable to send across a spokesman, and after they had harangued the dominie, who was in the best of tempers, from the wrong side of the stream, the siege was raised by their returning home, this time with the minister in the rear. So far as is known, this was the only occasion on which the dominie ever lifted his hat to the minister. He was the Established Church minister at the top of the glen, but the dominie was an Auld Licht, and trudged into Thrums to church nearly every Sunday with his daughter.

The farm of Little Tilly lay so close to the dominie's house that from one window he could see through a telescope whether the farmer was going to church, owing to Little Tilly's habit of never shaving except with that intention, and of always doing it at a looking-glass which he hung on a nail in his door. The farmer was Established Church, and when the dominie saw him in his shirt-sleeves with a razor in his hand, he called for his black clothes. If he did not see him it is undeniable that the dominie sent his daughter to Thrums, but remained at home himself. Possibly, therefore, the dominie sometimes went to church, because he did not want to give Little Tilly and the Established minister the satisfaction of knowing that he was not devout today, and it is even conceivable that had Little Tilly had a telescope and an intellect as well as his neighbor, he would have spied on the dominie in return. He sent the teacher a load of potatoes every year, and the recipient rated him

soundly if they did not turn out as well as the ones he had got the autumn before. Little Tilly was rather in awe of the dominie, and had an idea that he was a Freethinker, because he played the fiddle and wore a black cap.

The dominie was a wizened-looking little man, with sharp eyes that pierced you when they thought they were unobserved, and if any visitor drew near who might be a member of the board, he disappeared into his house much as a startled weasel makes for its hole. The most striking thing about him was his walk, which to the casual observer seemed a limp. The glen in our part is marshy, and to progress along it you have to jump from one little island of grass or heather to another. Perhaps it was this that made the dominie take the main road and even the streets of Thrums in leaps, as if there were bowlders or puddles in the way. It is, however, currently believed among those who knew him best that he jerked himself along in that way when he applied for the vacancy in Glen Quharity school, and that he was therefore chosen from among the candidates by the committee of farmers, who saw that he was specially constructed for the district.

In the spring the inspector was sent to report on the school, and, of course, he said, with a wave of his hand, that this would never do. So a new school was built, and the ramshackle little academy that had done good service in its day was closed for the last time. For years it had been without a lock; ever since a blatter of wind and rain drove the door against the fire-place. After that it was the dominie's custom, on seeing the room cleared, to send in a smart boy--a dux was always chosen--who wedged a clod of earth or peat between doorpost and door. Thus the school was locked up for the night. The boy came out by the window, where he entered to open the door next morning. In time grass hid the little path from view that led to the old school, and a dozen years ago every particle of wood about the building, including the door and the framework of the windows, had been burned by travelling tinkers.

The board would have liked to leave the dominie in his whitewashed dwelling-house to enjoy his old age comfortably, and until he learned that he had intended to retire. Then he changed his tactics and removed his beard. Instead of railing at the new school, he began to approve of it, and it soon came to the ears of the horrified Established minister, who had a man (Established) in his eye for the appointment, that the dominie

was looking ten years younger. As he spurned a pension he had to get the place, and then began a warfare of bickerings between the board and him that lasted until within a few weeks of his death. In his scholastic barn the dominie had thumped the Latin grammar into his scholars till they became university bursars to escape him. In the new school, with maps (which he hid in the hen-house) and every other modern appliance for making teaching easy, he was the scandal of the glen. He snapped at the clerk of the board's throat, and barred his door in the minister's face. It was one of his favorite relaxations to peregrinate the district, telling the farmers who were not on the board themselves, but were given to gossiping with those who were, that though he could slumber pleasantly in the school so long as the hum of the standards was kept up, he immediately woke if it ceased.

Having settled himself in his new quarters, the dominie seems to have read over the code and come at once to the conclusion that it would be idle to think of straightforwardly fulfilling its requirements. The inspector he regarded as a natural enemy, who was to be circumvented by much guile. One year that admirable Oxford don arrived at the school, to find that all the children, except two girls--one of whom had her face tied up with red flannel--were away for the harvest. On another occasion the dominie met the inspector's trap some distance from the school, and explained that he would guide him by a short cut, leaving the driver to take the dog-cart to a farm where it could be put up. The unsuspecting inspector agreed, and they set off, the obsequious dominie carrying his bag. He led his victim into another glen, the hills round which had hidden their heads in mist, and then slyly remarked that he was afraid they had lost their way. The minister, who liked to attend the examination, reproved the dominie for providing no luncheon, but turned pale when his enemy suggested that he should examine the boys in Latin.

For some reason that I could never discover, the dominie had all his life refused to teach his scholars geography. The inspector and many others asked him why there was no geography class, and his invariable answer was to point to his pupils collectively, and reply in an impressive whisper:

"They winna hae her."

This story, too, seems to reflect against the dominie's views on cleanliness. One examination day the minister attended to open the inspection with prayer. Just as he was finishing, a scholar entered who had a reputation for dirt.

"Michty!" cried a little pupil, as his opening eyes fell on the apparition at the door, "there's Jocky Tamson wi' his face washed!"

When the dominie was a younger man he had first clashed with the minister during Mr. Rattray's attempts to do away with some old customs that were already dying by inches. One was the selection of a queen of beauty from among the young women at the annual Thrums fair. The judges, who were selected from the better-known farmers as a rule, sat at the door of a tent that reeked of whiskey, and regarded the competitors filing by much as they selected prize sheep, with a stolid stare. There was much giggling and blushing on these occasions among the maidens, and shouts from their relatives and friends to "Haud yer head up, Jean," and "Lat them see yer een, Jess." The dominie enjoyed this, and was one time chosen, a judge, when he insisted on the prize's being bestowed on his own daughter, Marget. The other judges demurred, but the dominie remained firm and won the day.

"She wasna the best-faured amon them," he admitted afterward, "but a man maun mak the maist o' his ain."

The dominie, too, would not shake his head with Mr. Rattray over the apple and loaf bread raffles in the smithy, nor even at the Daft Days, the black week of glum debauch that ushered in the year, a period when the whole countryside rumbled to the farmers' "kebec" laden cart.

For the great part of his career the dominie had not made forty pounds a year, but he "died worth" about three hundred pounds. The moral of his life came in just as he was leaving it, for he rose from his death-bed to hide a whiskey-bottle from his wife.