

## **CHAPTER X. - A VERY OLD FAMILY.**

They were a very old family with whom Snecky Hobart, the bellman, lodged. Their favorite dissipation, when their looms had come to rest, was a dander through the kirk-yard. They dressed for it: the three young ones in their rusty blacks; the patriarch in his old blue coat, velvet knee-breeches, and broad blue bonnet; and often of an evening I have met them moving from grave to grave. By this time the old man was nearly ninety, and the young ones averaged sixty. They read out the inscriptions on the tombstones in a solemn drone, and their father added his reminiscences. He never failed them. Since the beginning of the century he had not missed a funeral, and his children felt that he was a great example. Sire and sons returned from the cemetery invigorated for their daily labors. If one of them happened to start a dozen yards behind the others, he never thought of making up the distance. If his foot struck against a stone, he came to a dead stop; when he discovered that he had stopped, he set off again.

A high wall shut off this old family's house and garden, from the clatter of Thrums, a wall that gave Snecky some trouble before he went to live within it. I speak from personal knowledge. One spring morning, before the school-house was built, I was assisting the patriarch to divest the gaunt garden pump of its winter suit of straw. I was taking a drink, I remember, my palm over the mouth of the wooden spout and my mouth at the gimlet-hole above, when a leg appeared above the corner of the wall against which the hen-house was built. Two hands followed, clutching desperately at the uneven stones. Then the leg worked as if it were turning a grindstone, and next moment Snecky was sitting breathlessly on the dyke. From this to the hen-house, whose roof was of "divets," the descent was comparatively easy, and a slanting board allowed the daring bellman to slide thence to the ground. He had come on business, and having talked it over slowly with the old man he turned to depart. Though he was a genteel man, I heard him sigh heavily as, with the remark, "Ay, weel, I'll be movin' again," he began to rescale the wall. The patriarch, twisted round the pump, made no reply, so I ventured to suggest to the bellman that he might find the gate easier. "Is there a gate?" said Snecky, in surprise at the resources of civilization. I pointed it out to him, and he went his way chuckling. The old man told

me that he had sometimes wondered at Snecky's mode of approach, but it had not struck him to say anything. Afterward, when the bellman took up his abode there, they discussed the matter heavily.

Hobart inherited both his bell and his nickname from his father, who was not a native of Thrums. He came from some distant part where the people speak of snecking the door, meaning shut it. In Thrums the word used is steek, and sneck seemed to the inhabitants so droll and ridiculous that Hobart got the name of Snecky. His son left Thrums at the age of ten for the distant farm of Tirl, and did not return until the old bellman's death, twenty years afterward; but the first remark he overheard on entering the kirk-wynd was a conjecture flung across the street by a gray-haired crone, that he would be "little Snecky come to bury auld Snecky."

The father had a reputation in his day for "crying" crimes he was suspected of having committed himself, but the Snecky I knew had too high a sense of his own importance for that. On great occasions, such as the loss of little Davy Dundas, or when a tattie roup had to be cried, he was even offensively inflated: but ordinary announcements, such as the approach of a flying stationer, the roup of a deceased weaver's loom, or the arrival in Thrums of a cart-load of fine "kebec" cheeses, he treated as the merest trifles. I see still the bent legs of the snuffy old man straightening to the tinkle of his bell, and the smirk with which he let the curious populace gather round him. In one hand he ostentatiously displayed the paper on which what he had to cry was written, but, like the minister, he scorned to "read." With the bell carefully tucked under his oxter he gave forth his news in a rasping voice that broke now and again into a squeal. Though Scotch in his unofficial conversation, he was believed to deliver himself on public occasions in the finest English. When trotting from place to place with his news he carried his bell by the tongue as cautiously as if it were a flagon of milk.

Snecky never allowed himself to degenerate into a mere machine. His proclamations were provided by those who employed him, but his soul was his own. Having cried a potato roup he would sometimes add a word of warning, such as, "I wudna advise ye, lads, to hae ony-thing to do wi' thae tatties; they're diseased." Once, just before the cattle market, he was sent round by a local laird to announce that any drover found taking the short cut to the hill through the grounds of Muckle Plowy would be

prosecuted to the utmost limits of the law. The people were aghast. "Hoots, lads," Snecky said; "dinna fash yoursels. It's juist a haver o' the grieve's." One of Hobart's ways of striking terror into evil-doers was to announce, when crying a crime, that he himself knew perfectly well who the culprit was. "I see him brawly," he would say, "standing afore me, an' if he disna instantly mak retribution, I am determined this very day to mak a public example of him."

Before the time of the Burke and Hare murders Snecky's father was sent round Thrums to proclaim the startling news that a grave in the kirk-yard had been tampered with. The "resurrectionist" scare was at its height then, and the patriarch, who was one of the men in Thrums paid to watch new graves in the night-time, has often told the story. The town was in a ferment as the news spread, and there were fierce suspicious men among Hobart's hearers who already had the rifler of graves in their eye.

He was a man who worked for the farmers when they required an extra hand, and loafed about the square when they could do without him. No one had a good word for him, and lately he had been flush of money. That was sufficient. There was a rush of angry men through the "pend" that led to his habitation, and he was dragged, panting and terrified, to the kirk-yard before he understood what it all meant. To the grave they hurried him, and almost without a word handed him a spade. The whole town gathered round the spot--a sullen crowd, the women only breaking the silence with their sobs, and the children clinging to their gowns. The suspected resurrectionist understood what was wanted of him, and, flinging off his jacket, began to reopen the grave. Presently the spade struck upon wood, and by and by part of the coffin came in view. That was nothing, for the resurrectionists had a way of breaking the coffin at one end and drawing out the body with tongs. The digger knew this. He broke the boards with the spade and revealed an arm. The people convinced, he dropped the arm savagely, leaped out of the grave and went his way, leaving them to shovel back the earth themselves.

There was humor in the old family as well as in their lodger. I found this out slowly. They used to gather round their peat fire in the evening, after the poultry had gone to sleep on the kitchen rafters, and take off their neighbors. None of them ever laughed; but their neighbors did afford them subject for gossip, and the old man was very sarcastic over other

people's old-fashioned ways. When one of the family wanted to go out he did it gradually. He would be sitting "into the fire" browning his corduroy trousers, and he would get up slowly. Then he gazed solemnly before him for a time, and after that, if you watched him narrowly, you would see that he was really moving to the door. Another member of the family took the vacant seat with the same precautions. Will'um, the eldest, has a gun, which customarily stands behind the old eight-day clock; and he takes it with him to the garden to shoot the blackbirds. Long before Will'um is ready to let fly, the blackbirds have gone away; and so the gun is never, never fired; but there is a determined look on Will'um's face when he returns from the garden.

In the stormy days of his youth the old man had been a "Black Nib." The Black Nibs were the persons who agitated against the French war; and the public feeling against them ran strong and deep. In Thrums the local Black Nibs were burned in effigy, and whenever they put their heads out of doors they risked being stoned. Even where the authorities were unprejudiced they were helpless to interfere; and as a rule they were as bitter against the Black Nibs as the populace themselves. Once the patriarch was running through the street with a score of the enemy at his heels, and the bailie, opening his window, shouted to them, "Stane the Black Nib oot o' the toon!"

When the patriarch was a young man he was a follower of pleasure. This is the one thing about him that his family have never been able to understand. A solemn stroll through the kirk-yard was not sufficient relaxation in those riotous times, after a hard day at the loom; and he rarely lost a chance of going to see a man hanged. There was a good deal of hanging in those days; and yet the authorities had an ugly way of reprieving condemned men on whom the sight-seers had been counting. An air of gloom would gather on my old friend's countenance when he told how he and his contemporaries in Thrums trudged every Saturday for six weeks to the county town, many miles distant, to witness the execution of some criminal in whom they had local interest, and who, after disappointing them again and again, was said to have been bought off by a friend. His crime had been stolen entrance into a house in Thrums by the chimney, with intent to rob; and though this old-fashioned family did not see it, not the least noticeable incident in the scrimmage that followed was the prudence of the canny housewife. When she saw the legs coming down the lum, she rushed to the kail-pot which

was on the fire and put on the lid. She confessed that this was not done to prevent the visitor's scalding himself, but to save the broth.

The old man was repeated in his three sons. They told his stories precisely as he did himself, taking as long in the telling and making the points in exactly the same way. By and by they will come to think that they themselves were of those past times. Already the young ones look like contemporaries of their father.