

CHAPTER XI - LITTLE RATHIE'S "BURAL."

Devout-under-difficulties would have been the name of Lang Tammas had he been of Covenanting times. So I thought one wintry afternoon, years before I went to the school-house, when he dropped in to ask the pleasure of my company to the farmer of Little Rathie's "bural." As a good Auld Licht, Tammas reserved his swallow-tail coat and "lum hat" (chimney-pot) for the kirk and funerals; but the coat would have flapped villanously, to Tammas' eternal ignominy, had he for one rash moment relaxed his hold of the bottom button, and it was only by walking sideways, as horses sometimes try to do, that the hat could be kept at the angle of decorum. Let it not be thought that Tammas had asked me to Little Rathie's funeral on his own responsibility. Burials were among the few events to break the monotony of an Auld Licht winter, and invitations were as much sought after as cards to my lady's dances in the south. This had been a fair average season for Tammas, though of his four burials one had been a bairn's--a mere bagatelle; but had it not been for the death of Little Rathie I would probably not have been out that year at all.

The small farm of Little Rathie lies two miles from Thrums, and Tammas and I trudged manfully through the snow, adding to our numbers as we went. The dress of none differed materially from the precentor's, and the general effect was of septuagenarians in each other's best clothes, though living in low-roofed houses had bent most of them before their time. By a rearrangement of garments, such as making Tammas change coat, hat, and trousers with Cragiebuckle, Silva McQueen, and Sam'l Wilkie respectively, a dexterous tailor might perhaps have supplied each with a "fit." The talk was chiefly of Little Rathie, and sometimes threatened to become animated, when another mourner would fall in and restore the more fitting gloom.

"Ay, ay," the new-comer would say, by way of responding to the sober salutation, "Ay, Johnny." Then there was silence, but for the "gluck" with which we lifted our feet from the slush.

"So Little Rathie's been ta'en awa'," Johnny would venture to say by and by.

"He's gone, Johnny; ay, man, he is so."

"Death must come to all," some one would waken up to murmur.

"Ay," Lang Tammas would reply, putting on the coping-stone, "in the morning we are strong and in the evening we are cut down."

"We are so, Tammas; ou ay, we are so; we're here the wan day an' gone the neist."

"Little Rathie wasna a crittur I took till; no, I canna say he was," said Bowie Haggart, so called because his legs described a parabola, "but be maks a vary creditable corp [corpse]. I will say that for him. It's wonderfu' hoo death improves a body. Ye cudna hae said as Little Rathie was a weel-faured man when he was i' the flesh."

Bowie was the wright, and attended burials in his official capacity. He had the gift of words to an uncommon degree, and I do not forget his crushing blow at the reputation of the poet Burns, as delivered under the auspices of the Thrums Literary Society. "I am of opeenion," said Bowie, "that the works of Burns is of an immoral tendency. I have not read them myself, but such is my opeenion."

"He was a queer stock, Little Rathie, mighty queer," said Tammas Haggart, Bowie's brother, who was a queer stock himself, but was not aware of it; "but, ou, I'm thinkin' the wife had something to do wi't. She was ill to manage, an' Little Rathie hadna the way o' the women. He hadna the knack o' managin' them's yo nicht say--no, Little Rathie hadna the knack."

"They're kittle cattle, the women," said the farmer of Craigiebuckle--son of the Craigiebuckle mentioned elsewhere--a little gloomily. "I've often thocht maiterimony is no onlike the lucky bags th' auld wifies has at the mucky. There's prizes an' blanks baith inside, but, losh, ye're far frae sure what ye'll draw oot when ye put in yer han'."

"Ou, weel," said Tammas complacently, "there's truth in what ye say, but the women can be managed if ye have the knack."

"Some o' them," said Cragiebuckle woefully.

"Ye had yer wark wi' the wife yersel, Tammas, so ye had," observed Lang Tammas, unbending to suit his company.

"Ye're speakin' about the bit wife's bural," said Tammas Haggart, with a chuckle; "ay, ay, that brocht her to reason."

Without much pressure Haggart retold a story known to the majority of his hearers. He had not the "knack" of managing women apparently when he married, for he and his gypsy wife "agreed ill thegither" at first. Once Chirsty left him and took up her abode in a house just across the wynd. Instead of routing her out, Tammas, without taking any one into his confidence, determined to treat Chirsty as dead, and celebrate her decease in a "lyke wake"--a last wake. These wakes were very general in Thrums in the old days, though they had ceased to be common by the date of Little Rathie's death. For three days before the burial the friends and neighbors of the mourners were invited into the house to partake of food and drink by the side of the corpse. The dead lay on chairs covered with a white sheet. Dirges were sung and the deceased was extolled, but when night came the lights were extinguished and the corpse was left alone. On the morning of the funeral tables were spread with a white cloth outside the house, and food and drink were placed upon them. No neighbor could pass the tables without paying his respects to the dead; and even when the house was in a busy, narrow thoroughfare, this part of the ceremony was never omitted. Tammas did not give Chirsty a wake inside the house; but one Friday morning--it was market-day, and the square was consequently full--it went through the town that the tables were spread before his door. Young and old collected, wandering round the house, and Tammas stood at the tables in his blacks inviting every one to eat and drink. He was pressed to tell what it meant; but nothing could be got from him except that his wife was dead. At times he pressed his hands to his heart, and then he would make wry faces, trying hard to cry. Chirsty watched from a window across the street, until she perhaps began to fear that she really was dead. Unable to stand it any longer, she rushed out into her husband's arms, and shortly afterward she could have been seen dismantling the tables.

"She's gone this fower year," Tammas said, when he had finished his story, "but up to the end I had no more trouble wi' Chirsty. No, I had the knack o' her."

"I've heard tell, though," said the sceptical Craigiebuckle, "as Chirsty only cam back to ye because she cudna bear to see the fowk makkin' sae free wi' the whiskey."

"I mind hoo she bottled it up at ance and drove the laddies awa'," said Bowie, "an' I hae seen her after that, Tammas, giein' ye up yer fut an' you no sayin' a word."

"Ou, ay," said the wife-tamer, in the tone of a man who could afford to be generous in trifles, "women maun talk, an' a man hasna aye time to conterdick them, but frae that day I had the knack o' Chirsty."

"Donal Elshioner's was a vary seemilar case," broke in Snecky Hobart shrilly. "Maist o' ye'll mind 'at Donal was mighty plagueit wi' a drucken wife. Ay, weel, wan day Bowie's man was carryin' a coffin past Donal's door, and Donal an' the wife was there. Says Donal, 'Put doon yer coffin, my man, an' tell's wha it's for.' The laddie rests the coffin on its end, an' says he, 'It's for Davie Fairbrother's guid-wife.' 'Ay, then,' says Donal, 'tak it awa', tak it awa' to Davie, an' tell 'im as ye kin a man wi' a wife 'at wid be glad to neifer [exchange] wi' him.' Man, that terrified Donal's wife; it did so."

As we delved up the twisting road between two fields that leads to the farm of Little Rathie, the talk became less general, and another mourner who joined us there was told that the farmer was gone.

"We must all fade as a leaf," said Lang Tammas.

"So we maun, so we maun," admitted the new-comer. "They say," he added, solemnly, "as Little Rathie has left a full teapot."

The reference was to the safe in which the old people in the district stored their gains.

"He was thrifty," said Tammas Haggart, "an' shrewd, too, was Little Rathie. I mind Mr. Dishart admonishin' him for no attendin' a special weather service i' the kirk, when Finny an' Lintool, the twa adjoinin' farmers, baith attendit. 'Ou,' says Little Rathie, 'I thocht to mysel, thinks I, if they get rain for prayin' for't on Finny an' Lintool, we're bound to get the benefit o't on Little Rathie.'"

"Tod," said Snecky, "there's some sense in that; an' what says the minister?"

"I d'na kin what he said," admitted Haggart; "but he took Little Rathie up to the manse, an' if ever I saw a man lookin' sma', it was Little Rathie when he cam oot."

The deceased had left behind him a daughter (herself now known as Little Rathie), quite capable of attending to the ramshackle "but and ben;" and I remember how she nipped off Tammas' consolations to go out and feed the hens. To the number of about twenty we assembled round the end of the house to escape the bitter wind, and here I lost the precentor, who, as an Auld Licht elder, joined the chief mourners inside. The post of distinction at a funeral is near the coffin; but it is not given to every one to be a relative of the deceased, and there is always much competition and genteelly concealed disappointment over the few open vacancies. The window of the room was decently veiled, but the mourners outside knew what was happening within, and that it was not all prayer, neither mourning. A few of the more reverent uncovered their heads at intervals; but it would be idle to deny that there was a feeling that Little Rathie's daughter was favoring Tammas and others somewhat invidiously. Indeed, Robbie Gibruth did not scruple to remark that she had made "an inauspeecious beginning." Tammas Haggart, who was melancholy when not sarcastic, though he brightened up wonderfully at funerals, reminded Robbie that disappointment is the lot of man on his earthly pilgrimage; but Haggart knew who were to be invited back after the burial to the farm, and was inclined, to make much of his position. The secret would doubtless have been wormed from him had not public attention been directed into another channel. A prayer was certainly being offered up inside; but the voice was not the voice of the minister.

Lang Tammas told me afterward that it had seemed at one time "vary queestionable" whether Little Rathie would be buried that day at all. The incomprehensible absence of Mr. Dishart (afterward satisfactorily explained) had raised the unexpected question of the legality of a burial in a case where the minister had not prayed over the "corp." There had even been an indulgence in hot words, and the Reverend Alexander Kewans, a "stickit minister," but not of the Auld Licht persuasion, had withdrawn in dudgeon on hearing Tammas asked to conduct the ceremony instead of himself. But, great as Tammas was on religious questions, a pillar of the Auld Licht kirk, the Shorter Catechism at his finger-ends, a sad want of words at the very time when he needed them most incapacitated him for prayer in public, and it was providential that

Bowie proved himself a man of parts. But Tammias tells me that the wright grossly abused his position, by praying at such length that Craigiebuckle fell asleep, and the mistress had to rise and hang the pot on the fire higher up the joist, lest its contents should burn before the return from the funeral. Loury grew the sky, and more and more anxious the face of Little Rathie's daughter, and still Bowie prayed on. Had it not been for the impatience of the precentor and the grumbling of the mourners outside, there is no saying when the remains would have been lifted through the "bole," or little window.

Hearses had hardly come in at this time, and the coffin was carried by the mourners on long stakes. The straggling procession of pedestrians behind wound its slow way in the waning light to the kirk-yard, showing startlingly black against the dazzling snow; and it was not until the earth rattled on the coffin-lid that Little Rathie's nearest male relative seemed to remember his last mournful duty to the dead. Sidling up to the favored mourners, he remarked casually and in the most emotionless tone he could assume; "They're expec'in' ye to stap doon the length o' Little Rathie noo. Aye, aye, he's gone. Na, na, nae refoosal, Da-avit; ye was aye a guid friend till him, an' it's onything a body can do for him noo."

Though the uninvited slunk away sorrowfully, the entertainment provided at Auld Licht houses of mourning was characteristic of a stern and sober sect. They got to eat and to drink to the extent, as a rule, of a "lippy" of short bread and a "brew" of toddy; but open Bibles lay on the table, and the eyes of each were on his neighbors to catch them transgressing, and offer up a prayer for them on the spot. Ay me! there is no Bowie nowadays to fill an absent minister's shoes.