

CHAPTER XII. - A LITERARY CLUB.

The ministers in the town did not hold with literature. When the most notorious of the clubs met in the town-house under the presidentship of Gravia Ogilvy, who was no better than a poacher, and was troubled in his mind because writers called Pope a poet, there was frequently a wrangle over the question, "Is literature necessarily immoral?" It was a fighting club, and on Friday nights the few respectable, God-fearing members dandered to the town-house, as if merely curious to have another look at the building. If Lang Tammas, who was dead against letters, was in sight they wandered off, but when there were no spies abroad they slunk up the stair. The attendance was greatest on dark nights, though Gavin himself and some other characters would have marched straight to the meeting in broad daylight. Tammas Haggart, who did not think much of Milton's devil, had married a gypsy woman for an experiment, and the Coat of Many Colors did not know where his wife was. As a rule, however, the members were wild bachelors. When they married they had to settle down.

Gavin's essay on Will'um Pitt, the Father of the Taxes, led to the club's being bundled out of the town-house, where people said it should never have been allowed to meet. There was a terrible towse when Tammas Haggart then disclosed the secret of Mr. Byars' supposed approval of the club. Mr. Byars was the Auld Licht minister whom Mr. Dishart succeeded, and it was well known that he had advised the authorities to grant the use of the little town-house to the club on Friday evenings. As he solemnly warned his congregation against attending the meetings, the position he had taken up created talk, and Lang Tammas called at the manse with Sanders Whamond to remonstrate. The minister, however, harangued them on their sinfulness in daring to question the like of him, and they had to retire vanquished though dissatisfied. Then came the disclosures of Tammas Haggart, who was never properly secured by the Auld Lights until Mr. Dishart took him in hand. It was Tammas who wrote anonymous letters to Mr. Byars about the scarlet woman, and, strange to say, this led to the club's being allowed to meet in the town-house. The minister, after many days, discovered who his correspondent was, and succeeded in inveigling the stone-breaker to the manse. There, with the door snibbed, he opened out on Tammas, who, after his usual

manner when hard pressed, pretended to be deaf. This sudden fit of deafness so exasperated the minister that he flung a book at Tammas. The scene that followed was one that few Auld Licht manses can have witnessed. According to Tammas, the book had hardly reached the floor when the minister turned white. Tammas picked up the missile. It was a Bible. The two men looked at each other. Beneath the window Mr. Byars' children were prattling. His wife was moving about in the next room, little thinking what had happened. The minister held out his hand for the Bible, but Tammas shook his head, and then Mr. Byars shrank into a chair. Finally, it was arranged that if Tammas kept the affair to himself the minister would say a good word to the bailie about the literary club. After that the stone-breaker used to go from house to house, twisting his mouth to the side and remarking that he could tell such a tale of Mr. Byars as would lead to a split in the kirk. When the town-house was locked on the club Tammas spoke out, but though the scandal ran from door to door, as I have seen a pig in a fluster do, the minister did not lose his place. Tammas preserved the Bible, and showed it complacently to visitors as the present he got from Mr. Byars. The minister knew this, and it turned his temper sour. Tammas' proud moments, after that, were when he passed the minister.

Driven from the town-house, literature found a table with forms round it in a tavern hard by, where the club, lopped of its most respectable members, kept the blinds down and talked openly of Shakespeare. It was a low-roofed room, with pieces of lime hanging from the ceiling and peeling walls. The floor had a slope that tended to fling the debater forward, and its boards, lying loose on an uneven foundation, rose and looked at you as you crossed the room. In winter, when the meetings were held regularly every fortnight, a fire of peat, sod, and dross lit up the curious company who sat round the table shaking their heads over Shelley's mysticism, or requiring to be called to order because they would not wait their turn to deny an essayist's assertion, that Berkeley's style was superior to David Hume's. Davit Hume, they said, and Watty Scott. Burns was simply referred to as Rob or Robbie.

There was little drinking at these meetings, for the members knew what they were talking about, and your mind had to gallop to keep up with the flow of reasoning. Thrums is rather a remarkable town. There are scores and scores of houses in it that have sent their sons to college (by what a struggle!), some to make their way to the front in their professions, and

others, perhaps, despite their broadcloth, never to be a patch on their parents. In that literary club there were men of a reading so wide and catholic that it might put some graduates of the universities to shame, and of an intellect so keen that had it not had a crook in it their fame would have crossed the county. Most of them had but a threadbare existence, for you weave slowly with a Wordsworth open before you, and some were strange Bohemians (which does not do in Thrums), yet others wandered into the world and compelled it to recognize them. There is a London barrister whose father belonged to the club. Not many years ago a man died on the staff of the Times, who, when he was a weaver near Thrums, was one of the club's prominent members. He taught himself shorthand by the light of a cruizey, and got a post on a Perth paper, afterward on the Scotsman and the Witness, and finally on the Times. Several other men of his type had a history worth reading, but it is not for me to write. Yet I may say that there is still at least one of the original members of the club left behind in Thrums to whom some of the literary dandies might lift their hats.

Gavin Ogilvy I only knew as a weaver and a poacher: a lank, long-armed man, much bent from crouching in ditches whence he watched his snares. To the young he was a romantic figure, because they saw him frequently in the fields with his call-birds tempting siskins, yellow yites, and Unties to twigs which he had previously smeared with lime. He made the lime from the tough roots of holly; sometimes from linseed, oil, which is boiled until thick, when it is taken out of the pot and drawn and stretched with the hands like elastic. Gavin was also a famous hare-snarer at a time when the ploughman looked upon this form of poaching as his perquisite. The snare was of wire, so constructed that the hare entangled itself the more when trying to escape, and it was placed across the little roads through the fields to which hares confine themselves, with a heavy stone attached to it by a string. Once Gavin caught a toad (fox) instead of a hare, and did not discover his mistake until it had him by the teeth. He was not able to weave for two months. The grouse-netting was more lucrative and more exciting, and women engaged in it with their husbands. It is told of Gavin that he was on one occasion chased by a game-keeper over moor and hill for twenty miles, and that by and by when the one sank down exhausted so did the other. They would sit fifty yards apart, glaring at each other. The poacher eventually escaped. This, curious as it may seem, is the man whose eloquence at the club has not

been forgotten in fifty years. "Thus did he stand," I have been told recently, "exclaiming in language sublime that the soul shall bloom in immortal youth through the ruin and wrack of time."

Another member read to the club an account of his journey to Lochnagar, which was afterward published in Chambers's Journal . He was celebrated for his descriptions of scenery, and was not the only member of the club whose essays got into print. More memorable perhaps was an itinerant match-seller known to Thrums and the surrounding towns as the literary spunk-seller. He was a wizened, shivering old man, often barefooted, wearing at the best a thin, ragged coat that had been black but was green-brown with age, and he made his spunks as well as sold them. He brought Bacon and Adam Smith into Thrums, and he loved to recite long screeds from Spenser, with a running commentary on the versification and the luxuriance of the diction. Of Jamie's death I do not care to write. He went without many a dinner in order to buy a book.

The Coat of Many Colors and Silva Robbie were two street preachers who gave the Thrums ministers some work. They occasionally appeared at the club. The Coat of Many Colors was so called because he wore a garment consisting of patches of cloth of various colors sewed together. It hung down to his heels. He may have been cracked rather than inspired, but he was a power in the square where he preached, the women declaring that he was gifted by God. An awe filled even the men when he admonished them for using strong language, for at such a time he would remind them of the woe which fell upon Tibbie Mason. Tibbie had been notorious in her day for evil-speaking, especially for her free use of the word handless, which she flung a hundred times in a week at her man, and even at her old mother. Her punishment was to have a son born without hands. The Coat of Many Colors also told of the liar who exclaimed, "If this is not gospel true may I stand here forever," and who is standing on that spot still, only nobody knows where it is. George Wishart was the Coat's hero, and often he has told in the square how Wishart saved Dundee. It was the time when the plague lay over Scotland, and in Dundee they saw it approaching from the West in the form of a great black cloud. They fell on their knees and prayed, crying to the cloud to pass them by, and while they prayed it came nearer. Then they looked around for the most holy man among them, to intervene with God on their behalf. All eyes turned to George Wishart, and he stood up,

stretching his arms to the cloud, and prayed, and it rolled back. Thus Dundee was saved from the plague, but when Wishart ended his prayer he was alone, for the people had all returned to their homes. Less of a genuine man than the Coat of Many Colors was Silva Robbie, who had horrid fits of laughing in the middle of his prayers, and even fell in a paroxysm of laughter from the chair on which he stood. In the club he said, things not to be borne, though logical up to a certain point.

Tammas Haggart was the most sarcastic member of the club, being celebrated for his sarcasm far and wide. It was a remarkable thing about him, often spoken of, that if you went to Tammas with a stranger and asked him to say a sarcastic thing that the man might take away as a specimen, he could not do it. "Na, na," Tammas would say, after a few trials, referring to sarcasm, "she's no a crittur to force. Ye maun lat her tak her ain time. Sometimes she's dry like the pump, an' syne, again, oot she comes in a gush." The most sarcastic thing the stone-breaker ever said was frequently marvelled over in Thrums, both before and behind his face, but unfortunately no one could ever remember what it was. The subject, however, was Cha Tamson's potato pit. There is little doubt that it was a fit of sarcasm that induced Tammas to marry a gypsy lassie. Mr. Byars would not join them, so Tammas had himself married by Jimmy Pawse, the gay little gypsy king, and after that the minister remarried them. The marriage over the tongs is a thing to scandalize any well-brought-up person, for before he joined the couple's hands Jimmy jumped about in a startling way, uttering wild gibberish, and after the ceremony was over there was rough work, with incantations and blowing on pipes. Tammas always held that this marriage turned out better than he had expected, though he had his trials like other married men. Among them was Chirsty's way of climbing on to the dresser to get at the higher part of the plate-rack. One evening I called in to have a smoke with the stone-breaker, and while we were talking Chirsty climbed the dresser. The next moment she was on the floor on her back, wailing, but Tammas smoked on imperturbably. "Do you not see what has happened, man?" I cried. "Ou," said Tammas, "she's aye fa'in aff the dresser."

Of the school-masters who were at times members of the club, Mr. Dickie was the ripest scholar, but my predecessor at the schoolhouse had a way of sneering at him that was as good as sarcasm. When they were on their legs at the same time, asking each other passionately to be calm, and rolling out lines from Homer that made the inn-keeper look fearfully to

the fastenings of the door, their heads very nearly came together, although the table was between them. The old dominie had an advantage in being the shorter man, for he could hammer on the table as he spoke, while gaunt Mr. Dickie had to stoop to it. Mr. McRittie's arguments were a series of nails that he knocked into the table, and he did it in a workmanlike manner. Mr. Dickie, though he kept firm on his feet, swayed his body until by and by his head was rotating in a large circle. The mathematical figure he made was a cone revolving on its apex. Gavin's reinstalment in the chair year after year was made by the disappointed dominie the subject of some tart verses which he called an epode, but Gavin crushed him when they were read before the club. "Satire," he said, "is a legitimate weapon, used with mighty effect by Swift, Sammy Butler, and others, and I dount object to being made the subject of creeticism. It has often been called a t'nife [knife], but them as is not used to t'nives cuts their hands, and ye'll a' observe that Mr. McRittie's fingers is bleedin'." All eyes were turned upon the dominie's hand, and though he pocketed it smartly several members had seen the blood. The dominie was a rare visitor at the club after that, though he outlived poor Mr. Dickie by many years. Mr. Dickie was a teacher in Tilliedrum, but he was ruined by drink. He wandered from town to town, reciting Greek and Latin poetry to any one who would give him a dram, and sometimes he wept and moaned aloud in the street, crying, "Poor Mr. Dickie! poor Mr. Dickie!"

The leading poet in a club of poets was Dite Walls, who kept a school when there were scholars and weaved when there were none. He had a song that was published in a halfpenny leaflet about the famous lawsuit instituted by the fanner of Teuchbusses against the Laird of Drumlee. The laird was alleged to have taken from the land of Teuchbusses sufficient broom to make a besom thereof, and I am not certain that the case is settled to this day. It was Dite, or another member of the club, who wrote "The Wife o' Deeside," of all the songs of the period the one that had the greatest vogue in the county at a time when Lord Jeffrey was cursed at every fireside in Thrums. The wife of Deeside was tried for the murder of her servant, who had infatuated the young laird, and had it not been that Jeffrey defended her she would, in the words of the song, have "hung like a troot." It is not easy now to conceive the rage against Jeffrey when the woman was acquitted. The song was sung and recited

in the streets, at the smiddy, in bothies, and by firesides, to the shaking of fists and the grinding of teeth. It began:

"Ye'll a' hae hear tell o' the wife o' Deeside, Ye'll a' hae hear tell o' the wife o' Deeside, She poisoned her maid for to keep up her pride, Ye'll a' hae hear tell o' the wife o' Deeside."

Before the excitement had abated, Jeffrey was in Tilliedrum for electioneering purposes, and he was mobbed in the streets. Angry crowds pressed close to howl "Wife o' Deeside!" at him. A contingent from Thrums was there, and it was long afterward told of Sam'l Todd, by himself, that he hit Jeffrey on the back of the head with a clod of earth.

Johnny McQuhatty, a brother of the T'nowhead farmer, was the one taciturn member of the club, and you had only to look at him to know that he had a secret. He was a great genius at the hand-loom, and invented a loom for the weaving of linen such as has not been seen before or since. In the day-time he kept guard over his "shop," into which no one was allowed to enter, and the fame of his loom was so great that he had to watch over it with a gun. At night he weaved, and when the result at last pleased him he made the linen into shirts, all of which he stitched together with his own hands, even to the button-holes. He sent one shirt to the Queen, and another to the Duchess of Athole, mentioning a very large price for them, which he got. Then he destroyed his wonderful loom, and how it was made no one will ever know. Johnny only took to literature after he had made his name, and he seldom spoke at the club except when ghosts and the like were the subject of debate, as they tended to be when the farmer of Mucklo Haws could get in a word. Mucklo Haws was fascinated by Johnny's sneers at superstition, and sometimes on dark nights the inventor had to make his courage good by seeing the farmer past the doulie yates (ghost gates), which Muckle Haws had to go perilously near on his way home. Johnny was a small man, but it was the burly farmer who shook at sight of the gates standing out white in the night. White gates have an evil name still, and Muckle Haws was full of horrors as he drew near them, clinging to Johnny's arm. It was on such a night, he would remember, that he saw the White Lady go through the gates greeting sorely, with a dead bairn in her arms, while water kelpie laughed and splashed in the pools and the witches danced in a ring round Broken Buss. That very night twelve months ago the packman was murdered at Broken Buss, and Easie

Pettie hanged herself on the stump of a tree. Last night there were ugly sounds from the quarry of Croup, where the bairn lies buried, and it's not mous (canny) to be out at such a time. The farmer had seen spectre maidens walking round the ruined castle of Darg, and the castle all lit up with flaring torches, and dead knights and ladies sitting in the halls at the wine-cup, and the devil himself flapping his wings on the ramparts.

When the debates were political, two members with the gift of song fired the blood with their own poems about taxation and the depopulation of the Highlands, and by selling these songs from door to door they made their livelihood.

Books and pamphlets were brought into the town by the flying stationers, as they were called, who visited the square periodically carrying their wares on their backs, except at the Muckly, when they had their stall and even sold books by auction. The flying stationer best known to Thrums was Sandersy Riaca, who was stricken from head to foot with the palsy, and could only speak with a quaver in consequence. Sandersy brought to the members of the club all the great books he could get second-hand, but his stock in trade was Thrummy Cap and Akenstaff, the Fishwives of Buckhaven, the Devil upon Two Sticks, Gilderoy, Sir James the Rose, the Brownie of Badenoch, the Ghaist of Firenden, and the like. It was from Sandersy that Tammas Haggart bought his copy of Shakespeare, whom Mr. Dishart could never abide.

Tammas kept what he had done from his wife, but Chirsty saw a deterioration setting in and told the minister of her suspicions. Mr. Dishart was newly placed at the time and very vigorous, and the way he shook the truth out of Tammas was grand. The minister pulled Tammas the one way and Gavin pulled him the other, but Mr. Dishart was not the man to be beaten, and he landed Tammas in the Auld Licht kirk before the year was out. Chirsty buried Shakespeare in the yard.