

## CHAPTER X - THE FAVORITE OF THE LADIES

That night the excited boy was wakened by a tap-tap, as of someone knocking for admittance, and stealing to his mother's side, he cried, "Aaron Latta has come; hearken to him chapping at the door!"

It was only the man through the wall, but Mrs. Sandys took Tommy into bed with her, and while Elspeth slept, told him the story of her life. She coughed feebly now, but the panting of the dying is a sound that no walls can cage, and the man continued to remonstrate at intervals. Tommy never recalled his mother's story without seeming, through the darkness in which it was told, to hear Elspeth's peaceful breathing and the angry tap-tap on the wall.

"I'm sweer to tell it to you," she began, "but tell I maun, for though it's just a warning to you and Elspeth no' to be like them that brought you into the world, it's all I have to leave you. Ay, and there's another reason: you may soon be among folk wha ken but half the story and put a waur face on it than I deserve."

She had spoken calmly, but her next words were passionate.

"They thought I was fond o'him," she cried; "oh, they were blind, blind! Frae the first I could never thole the sight o' him.

"Maybe that's no' true," she had to add. "I aye kent he was a black, but yet I couldna put him out o' my head; he took sudden grips o' me like an evil thought. I aye ran frae him, and yet I sair doubt that I went looking for him too."

"Was it Aaron Latta?" Tommy asked.

"No, it was your father. The first I ever saw of him was at Cullew, four lang miles frae Thrums. There was a ball after the market, and Esther Auld and me went to it. We went in a cart, and I was wearing a pink print, wi' a white bonnet, and blue ribbons that tied aneath the chin. I had a shawl abune, no' to file them. There wasna a more innocent lassie in Thrums, man, no, nor a happier one; for Aaron Latta--Aaron came half the way wi' us, and he was hauding my hand aneath the shawl. He hadna speired me at that time, but I just kent.

"It was an auld custom to choose a queen of beauty at the ball, but that night the men couldna 'gree wha should be judge, and in the tail-end they went out thegither to look for one, determined to mak' judge o' the first man they met, though they should have to tear him off a horse and bring him in by force. You wouldna believe to look at me now, man, that I could have had any thait o' being made queen, but I was fell bonny, and I was as keen as the rest. How simple we were, all pretending to one another that we didna want to be chosen! Esther Auld said she would hod ahint the tent till a queen was picked, and at the very time she said it, she was in a palsy, through no being able to decide whether she looked better in her shell necklace or wanting it. She put it on in the end, and syne when we heard the tramp o' the men, her mind misgave her, and she cried: 'For the love o' mercy, keep them out till I get it off again!' So we were a' laughing when they came in.

"Laddie, it was your father and Elspeth's that they brought wi' them, and he was a stranger to us, though we kent something about him afore the night was out. He was finely put on, wi' a gold chain, and a free w'y of looking at women, and if you mind o' him ava, you ken that he was fair and buirdly, wi' a full face, and aye a laugh ahint it. I tell ye, man, that when our een met, and I saw that triumphing laugh ahint his face, I took a fear of him, as if I had guessed the end.

"For years and years after that night I dreamed it ower again, and aye I heard mysel' crying to God to keep that man awa' frae me. But I doubt I put up no sic prayer at the time; his masterful look fleid me, and yet it drew me against my will, and I was trembling wi' pride as well as fear when he made me queen. We danced thegither and fought thegither a' through the ball, and my will was no match for his, and the worst o't was I had a kind o' secret pleasure in being mastered.

"Man, he kissed me. Lads had kissed me afore that night, but never since first I went wi' Aaron Latta to the Cuttle Well. Aaron hadna done it, but I was never to let none do it again except him. So when your father did it I struck him, but ahint the redness that came ower his face, I saw his triumphing laugh, and he whispered that he liked me for the blow. He said, 'I prefer the sweer anes, and the more you struggle, my beauty, the better pleased I'll be.' Almost his hinmost words to me was, 'I've been hearing of your Aaron, and that pleases me too!' I fired up at that and telled him what I thought of him, but he said, 'If you canna abide me,

what made you dance wi' me so often?' and, oh, laddie, that's a question that has sung in my head since syne.

"I've telled you that we found out wha he was, and 'deed he made no secret of it. Up to the time he was twal year auld he had been a kent face in that part, for his mither was a Cullew woman called Mag Sandys, ay, and a single woman. She was a hard ane too, for when he was twelve year auld he flung out o' the house saying he would ne'er come back, and she said he shouldna run awa' wi' thae new boots on, so she took the boots off him and let him go.

"He was a grown man when more was heard o' him, and syne stories came saying he was at Redlintie, playing queer games wi' his father. His father was gauger there, that's exciseman, a Mr. Cray, wha got his wife out o' Thrums, and even when he was courting her (so they say) had the heart to be ower chief wi' this other woman. Weel, Magerful Tam, as he was called through being so masterful, cast up at Redlintie frae none kent where, gey desperate for siller, but wi' a black coat on his back, and he said that all he wanted was to be owned as the gauger's son. Mr. Cray said there was no proof that he was his son, and syne the queer sport began. Your father had noticed he was like Mr. Cray, except in the beard, and so he had his beard clippit the same, and he got hand o' some weel-kent claethes o' the gauger's that had been presented to a poor body, and he learned up a' the gauger's tricks of speech and walking, especially a droll w'y he had o' taking snuff and syne flinging back his head. They were as like as buckies after that, and soon there was a town about it, for one day ladies would find that they had been bowing to the son thinking he was the father, and the next they wouldna speak to the father, mistaking him for the son; and a report spread to the head office o' the excise that the gauger of Redlintie spent his evenings at a public house, singing 'The De'il's awa' wi' the Exciseman.' Tam drank nows and nans, and it ga'e Mr. Cray a turn to see him come rolling yont the street, just as if it was himsel' in a looking-glass. He was a sedate-living man now, but chiefly because his wife kept him in good control, and this sight brought back auld times so vive to him, that he a kind of mistook which ane he was, and took to dropping, forgetful-like, into public-houses again. It was high time Tam should be got out of the place, and they did manage to bribe him into leaving, though no easily, for it had been fine sport to him, and to make a sensation was what he valued above all things. We heard that he went back to Redlintie a curran years after, but

both the gauger and his wife were dead, and I ken that he didna trouble the twa daughters. They were Miss Ailie and Miss Kitty, and as they werena left as well off as was expected they came to Thrums, which had been their mother's town, and started a school for the gentry there. I dinna doubt but what it's the school that Esther Auld's laddie is at.

"So after being long lost sight o' he turned up at Cullew, wi' what looked to simple folk a fortune in his pouches, and half a dozen untrue stories about how he made it. He had come to make a show o' himsel' afore his mither, and I dare say to give her some gold, for he was aye ready to give when he had, I'll say that for him; but she had flitted to some unken place, and so he bade on some weeks at the Cullew public. He caredna whether the folk praised or blamed him so long as they wondered at him, and queer stories about his doings was aye on the road to Thrums. One was that he gave wild suppers to whae'er would come; another that he went to the kirk just for the glory of flinging a sovereign into the plate wi' a clatter; another that when he lay sleeping on twa chairs, gold and silver dribbled out o' his trouser pouches to the floor.

"There was an ugly story too, about a lassie, that led to his leaving the place and coming to Thrums, after he had near killed the Cullew smith, in a fight. The first I heard o' his being in Thrums was when Aaron Latta walked into my granny's house and said there was a strange man at the Tappit Hen public standing drink to any that would tak', and boasting that he had but to waggle his finger to make me give Aaron up. I went wi' Aaron and looked in at the window, but I kent wha it was afore I looked. If Aaron had just gone in and struck him! All decent women, laddie, has a horror of being fought about. I'm no sure but what that's just the difference atween guid ones and ill ones, but this man had a power ower me; and if Aaron had just struck him! Instead o' meddling he turned white, and I couldna help contrasting them, and thinking how masterful your father looked. Fine I kent he was a brute, and yet I couldna help admiring him for looking so magerful.

"He bade on at the Tappit Hen, flinging his siller about in the way that made him a king at Cullew, but no molesting Miss Ailie and Miss Kitty, which all but me thought was what he had come to Thrums to do. Aaron and me was cried for the first time the Sabbath after he came, and the next Sabbath for the second time, but afore that he was aye getting in my road and speaking to me, but I ran frae him and hod frae him when I could, and he said the reason I did that was because I kent his will was

stronger than mine. He was aye saying things that made me think he saw down to the bottom o' my soul; what I didna understand was that in mastering other women he had been learning to master me. Ay, but though I thought ower muckle about him, never did I speak him fair. I loo'ed Aaron wi' all my heart, and your father kent it; and that, I doubt, was what made him so keen, for, oh, but he was vain!

"And now we've come to the night I'm so sweer to speak about. She was a good happy lassie that went into the Den that moonlight night wi' Aaron's arm round her, but it was another woman that came out. We thought we had the Den to oursel's, and as we sat on the Shoaging Stane at the Cuttle Well, Aaron wrote wi' a stick on the ground 'Jean Latta,' and prigged wi' me to look at it, but I spread my hands ower my face, and he didna ken that I was keeking at it through my fingers all the time. We was so ta'en up with oursel's that we saw nobody coming, and all at once there was your father by the side o' us! 'You've written the wrong name, Aaron,' he said, jeering and pointing with his foot at the letters; 'it should be Jean Sandys.'

"Aaron said not a word, but I had a presentiment of ill, and I cried, 'Dinna let him change the name, Aaron!' Your father had been to change it himsel', but at that he had a new thait, and he said, 'No, I'll no' do it; your brave Aaron shall do it for me.'

"Laddie, it doesna do for a man to be a coward afore a woman that's fond o' him. A woman will thole a man's being anything except like hersel'. When I was sure Aaron was a coward I stood still as death, waiting to ken wha's I was to be.

"Aaron did it. He was loath, but your father crushed him to the ground, and said do it he should, and warned him too that if he did it he would lose me, bantering him and cowing him and advising him no' to shame me, all in a breath. He kent so weel, you see, what was in my mind, and aye there was that triumphing laugh ahint his face. If Aaron had fought and been beaten, even if he had just lain there and let the man strike away, if he had done anything except what he was bidden, he would have won, for it would have broken your father's power ower me. But to write the word! It was like dishonoring me to save his ain skin, and your father took good care he should ken it. You've heard me crying to Aaron in my sleep, but it wasna for him I cried, it was for his fire-side. All the love I had for him, and it was muckle, was skailed forever that night at the

Cuttle Well. Without a look ahint me away I went wi' my master, and I had no more will to resist him--and oh, man, man, when I came to mysel' next morning I wished I had never been born!

"The men folk saw that Aaron had shamed them, and they werena quite so set agin me as the women, wha had guessed the truth, though they couldna be sure o't. Sair I pitied mysel', and sair I grat, but only when none was looking. The mair they miscalled me the higher I held my head, and I hung on your father's arm as if I adored him, and I boasted about his office and his clerk in London till they believed what I didna believe a word o' myself.

"But though I put sic a brave face on't, I was near demented in case he shouldna marry me, and he kent that and jokit me about it. Dinna think I was fond o' him; I hated him now. And dinna think his masterfulness had any more power ower me; his power was broken forever when I woke up that weary morning. But that was ower late, and to wait on by mysel' in Thrums for what might happen, and me a single woman--I daredna! So I flattered at him, and flattered at him, till I got the fool side o' him, and he married me.

"My granny let the marriage take place in her house, and he sent in so muckle meat and drink that some folk was willing to come. One came that wasna wanted. In the middle o' the marriage Aaron Latta, wha had refused to speak to anybody since that night, walked in wearing his blacks, wi' crape on them, as if it was a funeral, and all he said was that he had come to see Jean Myles coffined. He went away quietly as soon as we was married, but the crowd outside had fathomed his meaning, and abune the minister's words I could hear them crying, 'Ay, it's mair like a burial than a marriage!'

"My heart was near breaking wi' woe, but, oh, I was awid they shouldna ken it, and the bravest thing I ever did was to sit through the supper that night, making muckle o' your father, looking fond-like at him, laughing at his coarse jokes, and secretly hating him down to my very marrow a' the time. The crowd got word o' the ongoin's, and they took a cruel revenge. A carriage had been ordered for nine o'clock to take us to Tilliedrum, where we should get the train to London, and when we heard it, as we thought, drive up to the door, out we went, me on your father's arm laughing, but wi' my teeth set. But Aaron's words had put an idea into their heads, though he didna intend it, and they had got out the

hearse. It was the hearse they had brought to the door instead of a carriage.

"We got awa' in a carriage in the tail-end, and the stanes hitting it was all the good luck flung after me. It had just one horse, and I mind how I cried to Esther Auld, wha had been the first to throw, that when I came back it would be in a carriage and pair.

"Ay, I had pride! In the carriage your father telled me as a joke that he had got away without paying the supper, and that about all the money he had now, forby what was to pay our tickets to London, was the half-sovereign on his watch-chain. But I was determined to have Thrums think I had married grand, and as I had three pound six on me, the savings o' all my days, I gave two pound of it to Malcolm Crabb, the driver, unbeknown to your father, but pretending it was frae him, and telled him to pay for the supper and the carriage with it. He said it was far ower muckle, but I just laughed, and said wealthy gentlemen like Mr. Sandys couldna be bothered to take back change, so Malcolm could keep what was ower. Malcolm was the man Esther Auld had just married, and I counted on this maddening her and on Malcolm's spreading the story through the town. Laddie, I've kent since syne what it is to be without bite or sup, but I've never grudged that siller."

The poor woman had halted many times in her tale, and she was glad to make an end. "You've forgotten what a life he led me in London," she said, "and it could do you no good to hear it, though it might be a lesson to thae lassies at the dancing-school wha think so much o' masterful men. It was by betting at horseraces that your father made a living, and whiles he was large o' siller, but that didna last, and I question whether he would have stuck to me if I hadna got work. Well, he's gone, and the Thrums folk'll soon ken the truth about Jean Myles now."

She paused, and then cried, with extraordinary vehemence: "Oh, man, how I wish I could keep it frae them for ever and ever!"

But presently she was calm again and she said: "What I've been telling you, you can understand little o' the now, but some of it will come back to you when you're a grown man, and if you're magerful and have some lassie in your grip, maybe for the memory of her that bore you, you'll let the poor thing awa'."

And she asked him to add this to his nightly prayer: "O God, keep me from being a magerful man!" and to teach this other prayer to Elspeth, "O God, whatever is to be my fate, may I never be one of them that bow the knee to magerful men, and if I was born like that and canna help it, oh, take me up to heaven afore I'm fil't."

The wardrobe was invisible in the darkness, but they could still hear Elspeth's breathing as she slept, and the exhausted woman listened long to it, as if she would fain carry away with her to the other world the memory of that sweet sound.

"If you gang to Thrums," she said at last, "you may hear my story frae some that winna spare me in the telling; but should Elspeth be wi' you at sic times, dinna answer back; just slip quietly away wi' her. She's so young that she'll soon forget all about her life in London and all about me, and that'll be best for her. I would like her lassiehood to be bright and free frae cares, as if there had never been sic a woman as me. But laddie, oh, my laddie, dinna you forget me; you and me had him to thole thegither, dinna you forget me! Watch ower your little sister by day and hap her by night, and when the time comes that a man wants her--if he be magerful, tell her my story at once. But gin she loves one that is her ain true love, dinna rub off the bloom, laddie, with a word about me. Let her and him gang to the Cuttle Well, as Aaron and me went, kenning no guile and thinking none, and with their arms round one another's waists. But when her wedding-day comes round--"

Her words broke in a sob and she cried: "I see them, I see them standing up thegither afore the minister! Oh! you lad, you lad that's to be married on my Elspeth, turn your face and let me see that you're no' a magerful man!"

But the lad did not turn his face, and when she spoke next it was to Tommy.

"In the bottom o' my kist there's a little silver teapot. It's no' real silver, but it's fell bonny. I bought it for Elspeth twa or three months back when I saw I couldna last the winter. I bought it to her for a marriage present. She's no' to see it till her wedding-day comes round. Syne you're to give it to her, man, and say it's with her mother's love. Tell her all about me, for it canna harm her then. Tell her of the fool lies I sent to Thrums, but dinna forget what a bonny place I thought it all the time, nor how I stood on many a driech night at the corner of that street, looking so waeful at



the lighted windows, and hungering for the wring of a Thrums hand or the sound of the Thrums word, and all the time the shrewd blasts cutting through my thin trails of claithe. Tell her, man, how you and me spent this night, and how I fought to keep my hoast down so as no' to waken her. Mind that whatever I have been, I was aye fond o' my bairns, and slaved for them till I dropped. She'll have long forgotten what I was like, and it's just as well, but yet--Look at me, Tommy, look long, long, so as you'll be able to call up my face as it was on the far-back night when I telled you my mournful story. Na, you canna see in the dark, but haud my hand, haud it tight, so that, when you tell Elspeth, you'll mind how hot it was, and the skin loose on it; and put your hand on my cheeks, man, and feel how wet they are wi' sorrowful tears, and lay it on my breast, so that you can tell her how I was shrunk awa'. And if she greets for her mother a whiley, let her greet."

The sobbing boy hugged his mother. "Do you think I'm an auld woman?" she said to him.

"You're gey auld, are you no'?" he answered.

"Ay," she said, "I'm gey auld; I'm nine and twenty. I was seventeen on the day when Aaron Latta went half-road in the cart wi' me to Cullew, hauding my hand aneath my shawl. He hadna spiered me, but I just kent."

Tommy remained in his mother's bed for the rest of the night, and so many things were buzzing in his brain that not for an hour did he think it time to repeat his new prayer. At last he said reverently: "O God, keep me from being a magerful man!" Then he opened his eyes to let God see that his prayer was ended, and added to himself: "But I think I would fell like it."