

CHAPTER XI - AARON LATTA

The Airlie post had dropped the letters for outlying farms at the Monypenny smithy and trudged on. The smith having wiped his hand on his hair, made a row of them, without looking at the addresses, on his window-sill, where, happening to be seven in number, they were almost a model of Monypenny, which is within hail of Thrums, but round the corner from it, and so has ways of its own. With the next clang on the anvil the middle letter fell flat, and now the likeness to Monypenny was absolute.

Again all the sound in the land was the melancholy sweet kink, kink, kink of the smith's hammer.

Across the road sat Dite Deuchars, the mole-catcher, a solitary figure, taking his pleasure on the dyke. Behind him was the flour-miller's field, and beyond it the Den, of which only some tree-tops were visible. He looked wearily east the road, but no one emerged from Thrums; he looked wearily west the road, which doubled out of sight at Aaron Latta's cottage, little more than a stone's throw distant. On the inside of Aaron's window an endless procession seemed to be passing, but it was only the warping mill going round. It was an empty day, but Dite, the accursed, was used to them; nothing ever happened where he was, but many things as soon as he had gone.

He yawned and looked at the houses opposite. They were all of one story; the smith's had a rusty plough stowed away on its roof; under a window stood a pew and bookboard, bought at the rroup of an old church, and thus transformed into a garden-seat. There were many of them in Thrums that year. All the doors, except that of the smithy, were shut, until one of them blew ajar, when Dite knew at once, from the smell which crossed the road, that Blinder was in the bunk pulling the teeth of his potatoes. May Ann Irons, the blind man's niece, came out at this door to beat the cistern with a bass, and she gave Dite a wag of her head. He was to be married to her if she could get nothing better.

By and by the Painted Lady came along the road. She was a little woman, brightly dressed, so fragile that a collie might have knocked her over with his tail, and she had a beautiful white-and-pink face, the white ending of a sudden in the middle of her neck, where it met skin of a duller color.

As she tripped along with mincing gait, she was speaking confidentially to herself, but when she saw Dite grinning, she seemed, first, afraid, and then sorry for herself, and then she tried to carry it off with a giggle, cocking her head impudently at him. Even then she looked childish, and a faded guilelessness, with many pretty airs and graces, still lingered about her, like innocent birds loath to be gone from the spot where their nest has been. When she had passed monotony again reigned, and Dite crossed to the smithy window, though none of the letters could be for him. He could read the addresses on six of them, but the seventh lay on its back, and every time he rose on his tip-toes to squint down at it, the spout pushed his bonnet over his eyes.

"Smith," he cried in at the door, "to gang hame afore I ken wha that letter's to is more than I can do."

The smith good-naturedly brought the letter to him, and then glancing at the address was dumfounded. "God behears," he exclaimed, with a sudden look at the distant cemetery, "it's to Double Dykes!"

Dite also shot a look at the cemetery. "He'll never get it," he said, with mighty conviction.

The two men gazed at the cemetery for some time, and at last Dite muttered, "Ay, ay, Double Dykes, you was aye fond o' your joke!"

"What has that to do wi' 't?" rapped out the smith, uncomfortably.

Dite shuddered. "Man," he said, "does that letter no bring Double Dykes back terrible vive again! If we was to see him climbing the cemetery dyke the now, and coming stepping down the fields in his moleskin waistcoat wi' the pearl buttons--"

Auchterlonie stopped him with a nervous gesture.

"But it couldna be the pearl buttons," Dite added thoughtfully, "for Betty Finlayson has been wearing them to the kirk this four year. Ay, ay, Double Dykes, that puts you farther awa' again."

The smith took the letter to a neighbor's house to ask the advice of old Irons, the blind tailor, who when he lost his sight had given himself the name of Blinder for bairns to play with.

"Make your mind easy, smith," was Blinder's counsel. "The letter is meant for the Painted Lady. What's Double Dykes? It's but the name of a farm, and we gave it to Sanders because he was the farmer. He's dead, and them that's in the house now become Double Dykes in his place."

But the Painted Lady only had the house, objected Dite; Nether Drumgley was farming the land, and so he was the real Double Dykes. True, she might have pretended to her friends that she had the land also.

She had no friends, the smith said, and since she came to Double Dykes from no one could find out where, though they knew her furniture was bought in Tilliedrum, she had never got a letter. Often, though, as she passed his window she had keeked sideways at the letters, as bairns might look at parlys. If he made a tinkle with his hammer at such times off she went at once, for she was as easily flichtered as a field of crows, that take wing if you tap your pipe on the loof of your hand. It was true she had spoken to him once; when he suddenly saw her standing at his smiddy door, the surprise near made him fall over his brot. She looked so neat and ladylike that he gave his hair a respectful pull before he remembered the kind of woman she was.

And what was it she said to him? Dite asked eagerly.

She had pointed to the letters on the window-sill, and said she, "Oh, the dear loves!" It was a queer say, but she had a bonny English word. The English word was no doubt prideful, but it melted in the mouth like a lick of sirup. She offered him sixpence for a letter, any letter he liked, but of course he refused it. Then she prigged with him just to let her hold one in her hands, for said she, bairnlike, "I used to get one every day." It so happened that one of the letters was to Mysy Bobbie; and Mysy was of so little importance that he thought there would be no harm in letting the Painted Lady hold her letter, so he gave it to her, and you should have seen her dawting it with her hand and holding it to her breast like a lassie with a pigeon. "Isn't it sweet?" she said, and before he could stop her she kissed it. She forgot it was no letter of hers, and made to open it, and then she fell a-trembling and saying she durst not read it, for you never knew whether the first words might not break your heart. The envelope was red where her lips had touched it, and yet she had an innocent look beneath the paint. When he took the letter from her, though, she called him a low, vulgar fellow for presuming to address a lady. She worked herself into a fury, and said far worse than that; a

perfect guller of clarty language came pouring out of her. He had heard women curse many a time without turning a hair, but he felt wae when she did it, for she just spoke it like a bairn that had been in ill company.

The smith's wife, Suphy, who had joined the company, thought that men were easily taken in, especially smiths. She offered, however, to convey the letter to Double Dykes. She was anxious to see the inside of the Painted Lady's house, and this would be a good opportunity. She admitted that she had crawled to the east window of it before now, but that dour bairn of the Painted Lady's had seen her head and whipped down the blind.

Unfortunate Suphy! she could not try the window this time, as it was broad daylight, and the Painted Lady took the letter from her at the door. She returned crestfallen, and for an hour nothing happened. The mole-catcher went off to the square, saying, despondently, that nothing would happen until he was round the corner. No sooner had he rounded the corner than something did happen.

A girl who had left Double Dykes with a letter was walking quickly toward Monypenny. She wore a white pinafore over a magenta frock, and no one could tell her whether she was seven or eight, for she was only the Painted Lady's child. Some boys, her natural enemies, were behind; they had just emerged from the Den, and she heard them before they saw her, and at once her little heart jumped and ran off with her. But the halloo that told her she was discovered checked her running. Her teeth went into her underlip; now her head was erect. After her came the rabble with a rush, flinging stones that had no mark and epithets that hit. Grizel disdained to look over her shoulder. Little hunted child, where was succor to come from if she could not fight for herself?

Though under the torture she would not cry out. "What's a father?" was their favorite jeer, because she had once innocently asked this question of a false friend. One tried to snatch the letter from her, but she flashed him a look that sent him to the other side of the dyke, where, he said, did she think he was afraid of her? Another strutted by her side, mimicking her in such diverting manner that presently the others had to pick him out of the ditch. Thus Grizel moved onward defiantly until she reached Monypenny, where she tossed the letter in at the smithy door and immediately returned home. It was the letter that had been sent to her

mother, now sent back, because it was meant for the dead farmer after all.

The smith read Jean Myles's last letter, with a face of growing gravity. "Dear Double Dykes," it said, "I send you these few scrapes to say I am dying, and you and Aaron Latta was seldom sindry, so I charge you to go to him and say to him 'Aaron Latta, it's all lies Jean Myles wrote to Thrums about her grandeur, and her man died mony year back, and it was the only kindness he ever did her, and if she doesna die quick, her and her starving bairns will be flung out into the streets.' If that doesna move him, say, 'Aaron Latta, do you mind yon day at Inverquharity and the cushie doos?' likewise, 'Aaron Latta, do you mind yon day at the Kaims of Airlie?' likewise, 'Aaron Latta, do you mind that Jean Myles was ower heavy for you to lift? Oh, Aaron, you could lift me so pitiful easy now.' And syne says you solemnly three times, 'Aaron Latta, Jean Myles is lying dying all alone in a foreign land; Aaron Latta, Jean Myles is lying dying all alone in a foreign land; Aaron Latta, Jean Myles is lying dying all alone in a foreign land.' And if he's sweer to come, just say, 'Oh, Aaron, man, you nicht; oh, Aaron, oh, Aaron, are you coming?'"

The smith had often denounced this woman, but he never said a word against her again. He stood long reflecting, and then took the letter to Blinder and read it to him.

"She doesna say, 'Oh, Aaron Latta, do you mind the Cuttle Well?'" was the blind man's first comment.

"She was thinking about it," said Auchterlonie.

"Ay, and he's thinking about it," said Blinder, "night and day, night and day. What a town there'll be about that letter, smith!"

"There will. But I'm to take it to Aaron afore the news spreads. He'll never gang to London though."

"I think he will, smith."

"I ken him well."

"Maybe I ken him better."

"You canna see the ugly mark it left on his brow."

"I can see the uglier marks it has left in his breast."

"Well, I'll take the letter; I can do no more."

When the smith opened the door of Aaron's house he let out a draught of hot air that was glad to be gone from the warper's restless home. The usual hallan, or passage, divided the but from the ben, and in the ben a great revolving thing, the warping-mill, half filled the room. Between it and a pile of webs that obscured the light a little silent man was sitting on a box turning a handle. His shoulders were almost as high as his ears, as if he had been caught forever in a storm, and though he was barely five and thirty, he had the tattered, dishonored beard of black and white that comes to none till the glory of life has gone.

Suddenly the smith appeared round the webs. "Aaron," he said, awkwardly, "do you mind Jean Myles?"

The warper did not for a moment take his eyes off a contrivance with pirns in it that was climbing up and down the whirring mill.

"She's dead," he answered.

"She's dying," said the smith.

A thread broke, and Aaron had to rise to mend it.

"Stop the mill and listen," Auchterlonie begged him, but the warper returned to his seat and the mill again revolved.

"This is her dying words to you," continued the smith. "Did you speak?"

"I didna, but I wish you would take your arm off the haik."

"She's loath to die without seeing you. Do you hear, man? You shall listen to me, I tell you."

"I am listening, smith," the warper replied, without rancour. "It's but right that you should come here to take your pleasure on a shamed man." His calmness gave him a kind of dignity.

"Did I ever say you was a shamed man, Aaron?"

"Am I not?" the warper asked quietly; and Auchterlonie hung his head.

Aaron continued, still turning the handle, "You're truthful, and you canna deny it. Nor will you deny that I shamed you and every other

mother's son that night. You try to hod it out o' pity, smith, but even as you look at me now, does the man in you no rise up against me?"

"If so," the smith answered reluctantly, "if so, it's against my will."

"It is so," said Aaron, in the same measured voice, "and it's right that it should be so. A man may thieve or debauch or murder, and yet no be so very different frae his fellow-men, but there's one thing he shall not do without their wanting to spit him out o' their mouths, and that is, violate the feelings of sex."

The strange words in which the warper described his fall had always an uncomfortable effect on those who heard him use them, and Auchterlonie could only answer in distress, "Maybe that's what it is."

"That's what it is. I have had twal lang years sitting on this box to think it out. I blame none but mysel'."

"Then you'll have pity on Jean in her sair need," said the smith. He read slowly the first part of the letter, but Aaron made no comment, and the mill had not stopped for a moment.

"She says," the smith proceeded, doggedly--"she says to say to you, 'Aaron Latta, do you mind yon day at Inverquharity and the cushie doos?'"

Only the monotonous whirr of the mill replied.

"She says, 'Aaron Latta, do you mind that Jean Myles was ower heavy for you to lift? Oh, Aaron, you could lift me so pitiful easy now.'"

Another thread broke and the warper rose with sudden fury.

"Now that you've eased your conscience, smith," he said, fiercely, "make your feet your friend."

"I'll do so," Auchterlonie answered, laying the letter on the webs, "but I leave this ahint me."

"Wap it in the fire."

"If that's to be done, you do it yoursel'. Aaron, she treated you ill, but--"

"There's the door, smith."

The smith walked away, and had only gone a few steps when he heard the whirr of the mill again. He went back to the door.

"She's dying, man!" he cried.

"Let her die!" answered Aaron.

In an hour the sensational news was through half of Thrums, of which Monypenny may be regarded as a broken piece, left behind, like the dot of quicksilver in the tube, to show how high the town once rose. Some could only rejoice at first in the down-come of Jean Myles, but most blamed the smith (and himself among them) for not taking note of her address, so that Thrums Street could be informed of it and sent to her relief. For Blinder alone believed that Aaron would be softened.

"It was twa threads the smith saw him break," the blind man said, "and Aaron's good at his work. He'll go to London, I tell you."

"You forget, Blinders, that he was warping afore I was a dozen steps frae the door."

"Ay, and that just proves he hadna burned the letter, for he hadna time. If he didna do it at the first impulse, he'll no do it now."

Every little while the boys were sent along the road to look in at Aaron's end window and report.

At seven in the evening Aaron had not left his box, and the blind man's reputation for seeing farther than those with eyes was fallen low.

"It's a good sign," he insisted, nevertheless. "It shows his mind's troubled, for he usually louses at six."

By eight the news was that Aaron had left his mill and was sitting staring at his kitchen fire.

"He's thinking o' Inverquharity and the cushie doos," said Blinder.

"More likely," said Dite Deuchars, "he's thinking o' the Cuttle Well."

Corp Shiach clattered along the road about nine to say that Aaron Latta was putting on his blacks as if for a journey.

At once the blind man's reputation rose on stilts. It fell flat, however, before the ten-o'clock bell rang, when three of the Auchterlonie children,

each pulling the others back that he might arrive first, announced that Aaron had put on his corduroys again, and was back at the mill.

"That settles it," was everyone's good-night to Blinder, but he only answered thoughtfully, "There's a fierce fight going on, my billies."

Next morning when his niece was shaving the blind man, the razor had to travel over a triumphant smirk which would not explain itself to womankind, Blinder being a man who could bide his time. The time came when the smith looked in to say, "Should I gang yont to Aaron's and see if he'll give me the puir woman's address?"

"No, I wouldna advise that," answered Blinder, cleverly concealing his elation, "for Aaron Latta's awa' to London."

"What! How can you ken?"

"I heard him go by in the night."

"It's no possible!"

"I kent his foot."

"You're sure it was Aaron?"

Blinder did not consider the question worth answering, his sharpness at recognizing friends by their tread being proved. Sometimes he may have carried his pretensions too far. Many granted that he could tell when a doctor went by, when a lawyer, when a thatcher, when a herd, and this is conceivable, for all callings have their walk. But he was regarded as uncanny when he claimed not only to know ministers in this way, but to be able to distinguish between the steps of the different denominations.

He had made no mistake about the warper, however. Aaron was gone, and ten days elapsed before he was again seen in Thrums.