CHAPTER XXVII - THE LONGER CATECHISM

In the meantime Mr. McLean was walking slowly to the Quharity Arms, fanning his face with his hat, and in the West town end he came upon some boys who had gathered with offensive cries round a girl in a lustre jacket. A wave of his stick put them to flight, but the girl only thanked him with a look, and entered a little house the window of which showed a brighter light than its neighbors. Dr. McQueen came out of this house a moment afterwards, and as the two men now knew each other slightly, they walked home together, McLean relating humorously how he had spent the evening. "And though Commander Sandys means to incarcerate me in the Tower of London," he said, "he did me a good service the other day, and I feel an interest in him."

"What did the inventive sacket do?" the doctor asked inquisitively; but McLean, who had referred to the incident of the pass-book, affected not to hear. "Miss Ailie has told me his history," he said, "and that he goes to the University next year."

"Or to the herding," put in McQueen, dryly.

"Yes, I heard that was the alternative, but he should easily carry a bursary; he is a remarkable boy."

"Ay, but I'm no sure that it's the remarkable boys who carry the bursaries. However, if you have taken a fancy to him you should hear what Mr. Cathro has to say on the subject; for my own part I have been more taken up with one of his band lately than with himself--a lassie, too."

"She who went into that house just before you came out?"

"The same, and she is the most puzzling bit of womankind I ever fell in with."

"She looked an ordinary girl enough," said Mr. McLean.

The doctor chuckled. "Man," he said, "in my time I have met all kinds of women except ordinary ones. What would you think if I told you that this ordinary girl had been spending three or four hours daily in that house entirely because there was a man dying in it?"

"Some one she had an affection for?"

"My certie, no! I'm afraid it is long since anybody had an affection for shilpit, hirpling, old Ballingall, and as for this lassie Grizel, she had never spoken to him until I sent her on an errand to his house a week ago. He was a single man (like you and me), without womenfolk, a school-master of his own making, and in the smallest way, and his one attraction to her was that he was on his death-bed. Most lassies of her age skirl to get away from the presence of death, but she prigged, sir, fairly prigged, to get into it!"

"Ah, I prefer less uncommon girls," McLean said. "They should not have let her have her wish; it can only do her harm."

"That is another curious thing," replied the doctor. "It does not seem to have done her harm; rather it has turned her from being a dour, silent crittur into a talkative one, and that, I take it, is a sign of grace."

He sighed, and added: "Not that I can get her to talk of herself and her mother. (There is a mystery about them, you understand.) No, the obstinate brat will tell me nothing on that subject; instead of answering my questions she asks questions of me--an endless rush of questions, and all about Ballingall. How did I know he was dying? When you put your fingers on their wrist, what is it you count? which is the place where the lungs are? when you tap their chest what do you listen for? are they not dying as long as they can rise now and then, and dress and go out? when they are really dying do they always know it themselves? If they don't know it, is that a sign that they are not so ill as you think them? When they don't know they are dying, is it best to keep it from them in case they should scream with terror? and so on in a spate of questions, till I called her the Longer Catechism."

"And only morbid curiosity prompted her?"

"Nothing else," said the confident doctor; "if there had been anything else I should have found it out, you may be sure. However, unhealthily minded though she be, the women who took their turn at Ballingall's bedside were glad of her help."

"The more shame to them," McLean remarked warmly; but the doctor would let no one, save himself, miscall the women of Thrums.

"Ca' canny," he retorted. "The women of this place are as overdriven as the men, from the day they have the strength to turn a pirn-wheel to the day they crawl over their bed-board for the last time, but never yet have I said, 'I need one of you to sit up all night wi' an unweel body,' but what there were half a dozen willing to do it. They are a grand race, sir, and will remain so till they find it out themselves."

"But of what use could a girl of twelve or fourteen be to them?"

"Use!" McQueen cried. "Man, she has been simply a treasure, and but for one thing I would believe it was less a morbid mind than a sort of divine instinct for nursing that took her to Ballingall's bedside. The women do their best in a rough and ready way; but, sir, it cowed to see that lassie easying a pillow for Ballingall's head, or changing a sheet without letting in the air, or getting a poultice on his back without disturbing the one on his chest. I had just to let her see how to do these things once, and after that Ballingall complained if any other soul touched him."

"Ah," said McLean, "then perhaps I was uncharitable, and the nurse's instinct is the true explanation."

"No, you're wrong again, though I might have been taken in as well as you but for the one thing I spoke of. Three days ago Ballingall had a ghost of a chance of pulling through, I thought, and I told the lassie that if he did, the credit would be mainly hers. You'll scarcely believe it, but, upon my word, she looked disappointed rather than pleased, and she said to me, quite reproachfully, 'You told me he was sure to die!' What do you make of that?"

"It sounds unnatural."

"It does, and so does what followed. Do you know what straiking is?"

"Arraying the corpse for the coffin, laying it out, in short, is it not?"

"Ay, ay. Well, it appears that Grizel had prigged with the women to let her be present at Ballingall's straiking, and they had refused."

"I should think so," exclaimed McQueen, with a shudder.

"But that's not all. She came to me in her difficulty, and said that if I didna promise her this privilege she would nurse Ballingall no more."

"Ugh! That shows at least that pity for him had not influenced her."

"No, she cared not a doit for him. I question if she's the kind that could care for anyone. It's plain by her thrawn look when you speak to her about her mother that she has no affection even for her. However, there she was, prepared to leave Ballingall to his fate if I did not grant her request, and I had to yield to her."

"You promised?"

"I did, sore against the grain, but I accept the responsibility. You are pained, but you don't know what a good nurse means to a doctor."

"Well?"

"Well, he died after all, and the straiking is going on now. You saw her go in."

"I think you could have been excused for breaking your word and turning her out."

"To tell the truth," said the doctor, "I had the same idea when I saw her enter, and I tried to shoo her to the door, but she cried, 'You promised, you can't break a promise!' and the morbid brat that she is looked so horrified at the very notion of anybody's breaking a promise that I slunk away as if she had right on her side."

"No wonder the little monster is unpopular," was McLean's comment. "The children hereabout seem to take to her as little as I do, for I had to drive away some who were molesting her. I am sorry I interfered now."

"I can tell you why they t'nead her," replied the doctor, and he repeated the little that was known in Thrums of the Painted Lady, "And you see the womenfolk are mad because they can find out so little about her, where she got her money, for instance, and who are the 'gentlemen' that are said to visit her at Double Dykes. They have tried many ways of drawing Grizel, from heckle biscuits and parlies to a slap in the face, but neither by coaxing nor squeezing will you get an egg out of a sweer hen, and so they found. 'The dour little limmer,' they say, 'stalking about wi' all her blinds down,' and they are slow to interfere when their laddies call her names. It's a pity for herself that she's not more communicative, for if she would just satisfy the women's curiosity she would find them full of kindness. A terrible thing, Mr. McLean, is curiosity. The Bible says that the love of money is the root of all evil, but we must ask Mr. Dishart if love of money is not a misprint for curiosity. And you won't find men

boring their way into other folk's concerns; it is a woman's failing, essentially a woman's." This was the doctor's pet topic, and he pursued it until they had to part. He had opened his door and was about to enter when he saw Gavinia passing on her way home from the Den.

"Come here, my lass," he called to her, and then said inquisitively, "I'm told Mr. McLean is at his tea with Miss Ailie every day?"

"And it's true," replied Gavinia, in huge delight, "and what's more, she has given him some presents."

"You say so, lassie! What were they now?"

"I dinna ken," Gavinia had to admit, dejectedly. "She took them out o' the ottoman, and it has aye been kept looked."

McQueen looked very knowingly at her. "Will he, think you?" he asked mysteriously.

The maid seemed to understand, for she replied, promptly, "I hope he will."

"But he hasna spiered her as yet, you think?"

"No," she said, "no, but he calls her Ailie, and wi' the gentry it's but one loup frae that to spiering."

"Maybe," answered the doctor, "but it's a loup they often bogle at. I'se uphaud he's close on fifty, Gavinia?"

"There's no denying he is by his best," she said regretfully, and then added, with spirit, "but Miss Ailie's no heavy, and in thae grite arms o' his he could daidle her as if she were an infant."

This bewildered McQueen, and he asked, "What are you blethering about, Gavinia?" to which she replied, regally, "Wha carries me, wears me!" The doctor concluded that it must be Den language.

"And I hope he's good enough for her," continued Miss Ailie's warm-hearted maid, "for she deserves a good ane."

"She does," McQueen agreed heartily; "ay, and I believe he is, for he breathes through his nose instead of through his mouth; and let me tell you, Gavinia, that's the one thing to be sure of in a man before you take him for better or worse."

The astounded maid replied, "I'll ken better things than that about my lad afore I take him," but the doctor assured her that it was the box which held them all, "though you maun tell no one, lassie, for it's my one discovery in five and thirty years of practice."

Seeing that, despite his bantering tone, he was speaking seriously, she pressed him for his meaning, but he only replied sadly, "You're like the rest, Gavinia, I see it breaking out on you in spots."

"An illness!" she cried, in alarm.

"Ay, lassie, an illness called curiosity. I had just been telling Mr. McLean that curiosity is essentially a woman's ailment, and up you come ahint to prove it." He shook a finger at her reprovingly, and was probably still reflecting on woman's ways when Grizel walked home at midnight breathing through her nose, and Tommy fell asleep with his mouth open. For Tommy could never have stood the doctor's test of a man. In the painting of him, aged twenty-four, which was exhibited in the Royal Academy, his lips meet firmly, but no one knew save himself how he gasped after each sitting.