

CHAPTER XI. - TELLS IN A WHISPER OF MAN'S FALL DURING THE CURLING SEASON.

No snow could be seen in Thrums by the beginning of the year, though clods of it lay in Waster Lunny's fields, where his hens wandered all day as if looking for something they had dropped. A black frost had set in, and one walking on the glen road could imagine that through the cracks in it he saw a loch glistening. From my door I could hear the roar of curling stones at Rashie-bog, which is almost four miles nearer Thrums. On the day I am recalling, I see that I only made one entry in my diary, "At last bought Waster Lunny's bantams." Well do I remember the transaction, and no wonder, for I had all but bought the bantams every day for a six months.

About noon the doctor's dog-cart was observed by all the Tenements standing at the Auld Licht manse. The various surmises were wrong. Margaret had not been suddenly taken ill; Jean had not swallowed a darning-needle; the minister had not walked out at his study window in a moment of sublime thought. Gavin stepped into the dog-cart, which at once drove off in the direction of Rashie-bog, but equally in error were those who said that the doctor was making a curler of him.

There was, however, ground for gossip; for Thrums folk seldom called in a doctor until it was too late to cure them, and McQueen was not the man to pay social visits. Of his skill we knew fearsome stories, as that, by looking at Archie Allardyce, who had come to broken bones on a ladder, he discovered which rung Archie fell from. When he entered a stuffy room he would poke his staff through the window to let in fresh air, and then fling down a shilling to pay for the breakage. He was deaf in the right ear, and therefore usually took the left side of prosy people, thus, as he explained, making a blessing of an affliction. "A pity I don't hear better?" I have heard him say. "Not at all. If my misfortune, as you call it, were to be removed, you can't conceive how I should miss my deaf ear." He was a fine fellow, though brusque, and I never saw him without his pipe until two days before we buried him, which was five-and-twenty years ago come Martinmas.

"We're all quite weel," Jean said apprehensively as she answered his knock on the manse door, and she tried to be pleasant, too, for well she knew that, if a doctor willed it, she could have fever in five minutes.

"Ay, Jean, I'll soon alter that," he replied ferociously. "Is the master in?"

"He's at his sermon," Jean said with importance.

To interrupt the minister at such a moment seemed sacrilege to her, for her up-bringing had been good. Her mother had once fainted in the church, but though the family's distress was great, they neither bore her out, nor signed to the kirk-officer to bring water. They propped her up in the pew in a respectful attitude, joining in the singing meanwhile, and she recovered in time to look up 2nd Chronicles, 21st and 7th.

"Tell him I want to speak to him at the door," said the doctor fiercely, "or I'll bleed you this minute."

McQueen would not enter, because his horse might have seized the opportunity to return stablewards. At the houses where it was accustomed to stop, it drew up of its own accord, knowing where the Doctor's "cases" were as well as himself, but it resented new patients.

"You like misery, I think, Mr. Dishart," McQueen said when Gavin came to him, "at least I am always finding you in the thick of it, and that is why I am here now. I have a rare job for you if you will jump into the machine. You know Nanny Webster, who lives on the edge of Windyghoul? No, you don't, for she belongs to the other kirk. Well, at all events, you knew her brother, Sanders, the mole-catcher?"

"I remember him. You mean the man who boasted so much about seeing a ball at Lord Rintoul's place?"

"The same, and, as you may know, his boasting about maltreating policemen whom he never saw led to his being sentenced to nine months in gaol lately."

"That is the man," said Gavin. "I never liked him."

"No, but his sister did," McQueen answered, drily, "and with reason, for he was her breadwinner, and now she is starving."

"Anything I can give her--"

"Would be too little, sir."

"But the neighbours--"

"She has few near her, and though the Thrums poor help each other bravely, they are at present nigh as needy as herself. Nanny is coming to the poorhouse, Mr. Dishart."

"God help her!" exclaimed Gavin.

"Nonsense," said the doctor, trying to make himself a hard man. "She will be properly looked after there, and--and in time she will like it."

"Don't let my mother hear you speaking of taking an old woman to that place," Gavin said, looking anxiously up the stair. I cannot pretend that Margaret never listened.

"You all speak as if the poorhouse was a gaol," the doctor said testily. "But so far as Nanny is concerned, everything is arranged. I promised to drive her to the poorhouse to-day, and she is waiting for me now. Don't look at me as if I was a brute. She is to take some of her things with her to the poorhouse, and the rest is to be left until Sanders's return, when she may rejoin him. At least we said that to her to comfort her."

"You want me to go with you?"

"Yes, though I warn you it may be a distressing scene; indeed, the truth is that I am loth to face Nanny alone to-day. Mr. Duthie should have accompanied me, for the Websters are Established Kirk; ay, and so he would if Rashie-bog had not been bearing. A terrible snare this curling, Mr. Dishart"--here the doctor sighed--"I have known Mr. Duthie wait until midnight struck on Sabbath and then be off to Rashie-bog with a torch."

"I will go with you," Gavin said, putting on his coat.

"Jump in then. You won't smoke? I never see a respectable man not smoking, sir, but I feel indignant with him for such sheer waste of time."

Gavin smiled at this, and Snecky Hobart, who happened to be keeking over the manse dyke, bore the news to the Tenements.

"I'll no sleep the nicht," Snecky said, "for wondering what made the minister lauch. Ay, it would be no trifle."

A minister, it is certain, who wore a smile on his face would never have been called to the Auld Licht kirk, for life is a wrestle with the devil, and only the frivolous think to throw him without taking off their coats. Yet, though Gavin's zeal was what the congregation revered, many loved him privately for his boyishness. He could unbend at marriages, of which he had six on the last day of the year, and at every one of them he joked (the same joke) like a layman. Some did not approve of his playing at the teetotum for ten minutes with Kitty Dundas's invalid son, but the way Kitty boasted about it would have disgusted anybody. At the present day there

are probably a score of Gavins in Thrums, all called after the little minister, and there is one Gavinia, whom he hesitated to christen. He made humorous remarks (the same remark) about all these children, and his smile as he patted their heads was for thinking over when one's work was done for the day.

The doctor's horse clattered up the Backwynd noisily, as if a minister behind made no difference to it. Instead of climbing the Roods, however, the nearest way to Nanny's, it went westward, which Gavin, in a reverie, did not notice. The truth must be told. The Egyptian was again in his head.

"Have I fallen deaf in the left ear, too?" said the doctor. "I see your lips moving, but I don't catch a syllable."

Gavin started, coloured, and flung the gypsy out of the trap.

"Why are we not going up the Roods?" he asked.

"Well," said the doctor slowly, "at the top of the Roods there is a stance for circuses, and this old beast of mine won't pass it. You know, unless you are behind in the clashes and clavers of Thrums, that I bought her from the manager of a travelling show. She was the horse ('Lightning' they called her) that galloped round the ring at a mile an hour, and so at the top of the Roods she is still unmanageable. She once dragged me to the scene of her former triumphs, and went revolving round it, dragging the machine after her."

"If you had not explained that," said Gavin, "I might have thought that you wanted to pass by Rashie-bog."

The doctor, indeed, was already standing up to catch a first glimpse of the curlers.

"Well," he admitted, "I might have managed to pass the circus ring, though what I have told you is true. However, I have not come this way merely to see how the match is going. I want to shame Mr. Duthie for neglecting his duty. It will help me to do mine, for the Lord knows I am finding it hard, with the music of these stones in my ears."

"I never saw it played before," Gavin said, standing up in his turn. "What a din they make! McQueen, I believe they are fighting!"

"No, no," said the excited doctor, "they are just a bit daft. That's the proper spirit for the game. Look, that's the baron- bailie near standing on his head, and there's Mr. Duthie off his head a' thegither. Yon's twa weavers and a

mason cursing the laird, and the man wi' the besom is the Master of Crumnathie."

"A democracy, at all events," said Gavin.

"By no means," said the doctor, "it's an aristocracy of intellect. Gee up, Lightning, or the frost will be gone before we are there."

"It is my opinion, doctor," said Gavin, "that you will have bones to set before that game is finished. I can see nothing but legs now."

"Don't say a word against curling, sir, to me," said McQueen, whom the sight of a game in which he must not play had turned crusty. "Dangerous! It's the best medicine I know of. Look at that man coming across the field. It is Jo Strachan. Well, sir, curling saved Jo's life after I had given him up. You don't believe me? Hie, Jo, Jo Strachan, come here and tell the minister how curling put you on your legs again."

Strachan came forward, a tough, little, wizened man, with red flannel round his ears to keep out the cold.

"It's gospel what the doctor says, Mr. Dishart," he declared. "Me and my brither Sandy was baith ill, and in the same bed, and the doctor had hopes o' Sandy, but nane o' me. Ay, weel, when I heard that, I thocht I micht as weel die on the ice as in my bed, so I up and on wi' my claethes. Sandy was mad at me, for he was no curler, and he says, 'Jo Strachan, if you gang to Rashie-bog you'll assuredly be brocht hame a corp.' I didna heed him, though, and off I gaed."

"And I see you did not die," said Gavin.

"Not me," answered the fish cadger, with a grin. "Na, but the joke o't is, it was Sandy that died."

"Not the joke, Jo," corrected the doctor, "the moral."

"Ay, the moral; I'm aye forgetting the word."

McQueen, enjoying Gavin's discomfiture, turned Lightning down the Rashie-bog road, which would be impassable as soon as the thaw came. In summer Rashie-bog is several fields in which a cart does not sink unless it stands still, but in winter it is a loch with here and there a spring where dead men are said to lie, There are no rushes at its east end, and here the dog-cart drew up near the curlers, a crowd of men dancing, screaming,

shaking their fists and sweeping, while half a hundred onlookers got in their way, gesticulating and advising.

"Hold me tight," the doctor whispered to Gavin, "or I'll be leaving you to drive Nanny to the poorhouse by yourself."

He had no sooner said this than he tried to jump out of the trap.

"You donnert fule, John Robbie," he shouted to a player, "soop her up, man, soop her up; no, no, dinna, dinna; leave her alane. Bailie, leave her alane, you blazing idiot. Mr. Dishart, let me go; what do you mean, sir, by hanging on to my coat tails? Dang it all, Duthie's winning. He has it, he has it!"

"You're to play, doctor?" some cried, running to the dog-cart. "We hae missed yousair."

"Jeames, I--I--. No, I daurna."

"Then we get our licks. I never saw the minister in sic form. We can do nothing against him."

"Then," cried McQueen, "I'll play. Come what will, I'll play. Let go my tails, Mr. Dishart, or I'll cut them off. Duty? Fiddlesticks!"

"Shame on you, sir," said Gavin; "yes, and on you others who would entice him from his duty."

"Shame!" the doctor cried. "Look at Mr. Duthie. Is he ashamed? And yet that man has been reproving me for a twelvemonths because I've refused to become one of his elders. Duthie," he shouted, "think shame of yourself for curling this day."

Mr. Duthie had carefully turned his back to the trap, for Gavin's presence in it annoyed him. We seldom care to be reminded of our duty by seeing another do it. Now, however, he advanced to the dog-cart, taking the far side of Gavin.

"Put on your coat, Mr. Duthie," said the doctor, "and come with me to Nanny Webster's. You promised."

Mr. Duthie looked quizzically at Gavin, and then at the sky.

"The thaw may come at any moment," he said.

"I think the frost is to hold," said Gavin.

"It may hold over to-morrow," Mr. Duthie admitted; "but to-morrow's the Sabbath, and so a lost day."

"A what?" exclaimed Gavin, horrified.

"I only mean," Mr. Duthie answered, colouring, "that we can't curl on the Lord's day. As for what it may be like on Monday, no one can say. No, doctor, I won't risk it. We're in the middle of a game, man."

Gavin looked very grave.

"I see what you are thinking, Mr. Dishart," the old minister said doggedly; "but then, you don't curl. You are very wise. I have forbidden my sons to curl."

"Then you openly snap your fingers at your duty, Mr. Duthie?" said the doctor, loftily. ("You can let go my tails now, Mr. Dishart, for the madness has passed.")

"None of your virtuous airs, McQueen," said Mr. Duthie, hotly. "What was the name of the doctor that warned women never to have bairns while it was hauding?"

"And what," retorted McQueen, "was the name of the minister that told his session he would neither preach nor pray while the black frost lasted?"

"Hoots, doctor," said Duthie, "don't lose your temper because I'm in such form."

"Don't lose yours, Duthie, because I aye beat you."

"You beat me, McQueen! Go home, sir, and don't talk havers. Who beat you at--"

"Who made you sing small at--"

"Who won--"

"Who--"

"Who--"

"I'll play you on Monday for whatever you like!" shrieked the doctor.

"If it holds," cried the minister, "I'll be here the whole day. Name the stakes yourself. Astone?"

"No," the doctor said, "but I'll tell you what we'll play for. You've been dinging me doited about that eldership, and we'll play for't. If you win I accept office."

"Done," said the minister, recklessly.

The dog-cart was now turned toward Windyghoul, its driver once more good-humoured, but Gavin silent.

"You would have been the better of my deaf ear just now, Mr. Dishart," McQueen said after the loch had been left behind. "Aye, and I'm thinking my pipe would soothe you. But don't take it so much to heart, man. I'll lick him easily. He's a decent man, the minister, but vain of his play, ridiculously vain. However, I think the sight of you, in the place that should have been his, has broken his nerve for this day, and our side may win yet."

"I believe," Gavin said, with sudden enlightenment, "that you brought me here for that purpose."

"Maybe," chuckled the doctor; "maybe." Then he changed the subject suddenly. "Mr. Dishart," he asked, "were you ever in love?"

"Never!" answered Gavin violently.

"Well, well," said the doctor, "don't terrify the horse. I have been in love myself. It's bad, but it's nothing to curling."