

CHAPTER XII. - TRAGEDY OF A MUD HOUSE.

THE dog-cart bumped between the trees of Caddam, flinging Gavin and the doctor at each other as a wheel rose on some beech-root or sank for a moment in a pool. I suppose the wood was a pretty sight that day, the pines only white where they had met the snow, as if the numbed painter had left his work unfinished, the brittle twigs snapping overhead, the water as black as tar. But it matters little what the wood was like. Within a squirrel's leap of it an old woman was standing at the door of a mud house listening for the approach of the trap that was to take her to the poorhouse. Can you think of the beauty of the day now?

Nanny was not crying. She had redd up her house for the last time and put on her black merino. Her mouth was wide open while she listened. If you had, addressed her you would have thought her polite and stupid. Look at her. A flabby-faced woman she is now, with a swollen body, and no one has heeded her much these thirty years. I can tell you something; it is almost droll. Nanny Webster was once a gay flirt, and in Airlie Square there is a weaver with an unsteady head who thought all the earth of her. His loom has taken a foot from his stature, and gone are Nanny's raven locks on which he used to place his adoring hand. Down in Airlie Square he is weaving for his life, and here is Nanny, ripe for the poorhouse, and between them is the hill where they were lovers. That is all the story save that when Nanny heard the dog-cart she screamed.

No neighbour was with her. If you think this hard, it is because you do not understand. Perhaps Nanny had never been very lovable except to one man, and him, it is said, she lost through her own vanity; but there was much in her to like. The neighbours, of whom there were two not a hundred yards away, would have been with her now but they feared to hurt her feelings. No heart opens to sympathy without letting in delicacy, and these poor people knew that Nanny would not like them to see her being taken away. For a week they had been aware of what was coming, and they had been most kind to her, but that hideous word, the poorhouse, they had not uttered. Poorhouse is not to be spoken in Thrums, though it is nothing to tell a man that you see death in his face. Did Nanny think they knew where she was going? was a question they whispered to each other, and her suffering eyes cut scars on their hearts. So now that the hour had come they called their children into their houses and pulled down their blinds.

"If you would like to see her by yourself," the doctor said eagerly to Gavin, as the horse drew up at Nanny's gate, "I'll wait with the horse. Not," he added, hastily, "that I feel sorry for her. We are doing her a kindness."

They dismounted together, however, and Nanny, who had run from the trap into the house, watched them from her window.

McQueen saw her and said glumly, "I should have come alone, for if you pray she is sure to break down. Mr. Dishart, could you not pray cheerfully?"

"You don't look very cheerful yourself," Gavin said sadly.

"Nonsense," answered the doctor. "I have no patience with this false sentiment. Stand still, Lightning, and be thankful you are not your master today."

The door stood open, and Nanny was crouching against the opposite wall of the room, such a poor, dull kitchen, that you would have thought the furniture had still to be brought into it. The blanket and the piece of old carpet that was Nanny's coverlet were already packed in her box. The plate rack was empty. Only the round table and the two chairs, and the stools and some pans were being left behind.

"Well, Nanny," the doctor said, trying to bluster, "I have come, and you see Mr. Dishart is with me."

Nanny rose bravely. She knew the doctor was good to her, and she wanted to thank him. I have not seen a great deal of the world myself, but often the sweet politeness of the aged poor has struck me as beautiful. Nanny dropped a curtesy, an ungainly one maybe, but it was an old woman giving the best she had.

"Thank you kindly, sirs," she said; and then two pairs of eyes dropped before hers.

"Please to take a chair," she added timidly. It is strange to know that at that awful moment, for let none tell me it was less than awful, the old woman was the one who could speak.

Both men sat down, for they would have hurt Nanny by remaining standing. Some ministers would have known the right thing to say to her, but Gavin dared not let himself speak. I have again to remind you that he was only one-and-twenty.

"I'm drouthy, Nanny," the doctor said, to give her something to do, "and I would be obliged for a drink of water."

Nanny hastened to the pan that stood behind her door, but stopped before she reached it.

"It's toom," she said. "I--I didna think I needed to fill it this morning." She caught the doctor's eye, and could only half restrain a sob. "I couldna help that," she said, apologetically. "I'm richt angry at myself for being so ungrateful like."

The doctor thought it best that they should depart at once. He rose.

"Oh, no, doctor," cried Nanny in alarm.

"But you are ready?"

"Ay," she said, "I have been ready this twa hours, but you micht wait a minute. Hendry Munn and Andrew Allardyce is coming yont the road, and they would see me."

"Wait, doctor," Gavin said.

"Thank you kindly, sir," answered Nanny.

"But Nanny," the doctor said, "you must remember what I told you about the poo--, about the place you are going to. It is a fine house, and you will be very happy in it."

"Ay, I'll be happy in't," Nanny faltered, "but, doctor, if I could just hae bidden on here though I wasna happy!"

"Think of the food you will get: broth nearly every day."

"It--it'll be terrible enjoyable," Nanny said.

"And there will be pleasant company for you always," continued the doctor, "and a nice room to sit in. Why, after you have been there a week, you won't be the same woman."

"That's it!" cried Nanny with sudden passion. "Na, na; I'll be a woman on the poor's rates. Oh, mither, mither, you little thocht when you bore me that I would come to this!"

"Nanny," the doctor said, rising again, "I am ashamed of you."

"I humbly speir your forgiveness, sir," she said, "and you micht bide just a wee yet. I've been ready to gang these twa hours, but now that the machine is at the gate, I dinna ken how it is, but I'm terrible sweer to come awa'. Oh, Mr. Dishart, it's richt true what the doctor says about the--the place, but I canna just take it in. I'm--I'm gey auld."

"You will often get out to see your friends," was all Gavin could say.

"Na, na, na," she cried, "dinna say that; I'll gang, but you mauna bid me ever come out, except in a hearse. Dinna let onybody in Thrums look on my face again."

"We must go," said the doctor firmly. "Put on your mutch, Nanny."

"I dinna need to put on a mutch," she answered, with a faint flush of pride. "I have a bonnet."

She took the bonnet from her bed, and put it on slowly.

"Are you sure there's naebody looking?" she asked.

The doctor glanced at the minister, and Gavin rose.

"Let us pray," he said, and the three went down on their knees.

It was not the custom of Auld Licht ministers to leave any house without offering up a prayer in it, and to us it always seemed that when Gavin prayed, he was at the knees of God. The little minister pouring himself out in prayer in a humble room, with awed people around him who knew much more of the world than he, his voice at times thick and again a squeal, and his hands clasped not gracefully, may have been only a comic figure, but we were old-fashioned, and he seemed to make us better men. If I only knew the way, I would draw him as he was, and not fear to make him too mean a man for you to read about. He had not been long in Thrums before he knew that we talked much of his prayers, and that doubtless puffed him up a little. Sometimes, I daresay, he rose from his knees feeling that he had prayed well to-day, which is a dreadful charge to bring against anyone. But it was not always so, nor was it so now.

I am not speaking harshly of this man, whom I have loved beyond all others, when I say that Nanny came between him and his prayer. Had he been of God's own image, unstained, he would have forgotten all else in his Maker's presence, but Nanny was speaking too, and her words choked his. At first she only whispered, but soon what was eating her heart burst out painfully, and she did not know that the minister had stopped.

They were such moans as these that brought him back to earth:--

"I'll hae to gang... I'm a base woman no' to be mair thankf' to them that is so good to me... I dinna like to prig wi' them to take a roundabout road, and I'm sair fleid a' the Roods will see me... If it could just be said to poor Sanders when he comes back that I died hurriedly, syne he would be able to haud up his head ... Oh, mither! ... I wish terrible they had come and ta'en me at nicht... It's a dog-cart, and I was praying it micht be a cart, so that they could cover me wi' straw."

"This is more than I can stand," the doctor cried.

Nanny rose frightened.

"I've tried you, sair," she said, "but, oh, I'm grateful, and I'm ready now."

They all advanced toward the door without another word, and Nanny even tried to smile. But in the middle of the floor something came over her, and she stood there. Gavin took her hand, and it was cold. She looked from one to the other, her mouth opening and shutting.

"I canna help it," she said.

"It's cruel hard," muttered the doctor. "I knew this woman when she was a lassie."

The little minister stretched out his hands.

"Have pity on her, O God!" he prayed, with the presumptuousness of youth.

Nanny heard the words.

"Oh, God," she cried, "you micht!"

God needs no minister to tell Him what to do, but it was His will that the poorhouse should not have this woman. He made use of a strange instrument, no other than the Egyptian, who now opened the mud-house door.