

CHAPTER XXV. - BEGINNING OF THE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

I can tell still how the whole of the glen was engaged about the hour of noon on the fourth of August month; a day to be among the last forgotten by any of us, though it began as quietly as a roaring March. At the Spittal, between which and Thrums this is a halfway house, were gathered two hundred men in kilts, and many gentry from the neighboring glens, to celebrate the earl's marriage, which was to take place on the morrow, and thither, too, had gone many of my pupils to gather gossip, at which girls of six are trustier hands than boys of twelve. Those of us, however, who were neither children nor of gentle blood, remained at home, the farmers more taken up with the want of rain, now become a calamity, than with an old man's wedding, and their women-folk wringing their hands for rain also, yet finding time to marvel at the marriage's taking place at the Spittal instead of in England, of which the ignorant spoke vaguely as an estate of the bride's.

For my own part I could talk of the disastrous drought with Waster Lunny as I walked over his parched fields, but I had not such cause as he to brood upon it by day and night; and the ins and outs of the earl's marriage were for discussing at a tea-table, where there were women to help one to conclusions, rather than for the reflections of a solitary dominie, who had seen neither bride nor bridegroom. So it must be confessed that when I might have been regarding the sky moodily, or at the Spittal, where a free table that day invited all, I was sitting in the school-house, heeling my left boot, on which I have always been a little hard.

I made small speed, not through lack of craft, but because one can no more drive in tackets properly than take cities unless he gives his whole mind to it; and half of mine was at the Auld Licht manse. Since our meeting six months earlier on the hill I had not seen Gavin, but I had heard much of him, and of a kind to trouble me.

"I saw nothing queer about Mr. Dishart," was Waster Lunny's frequent story, "till I hearkened to Elspeth speaking about it to the lasses (for I'm the last Elspeth would tell anything to, though I'm her man), and syne I minded I had been noticing it for months. Elspeth says," he would go on, for he could no more forbear quoting his wife than complaining of her, "that the minister'll listen to you nowadays wi' his een glaring at you as if he had a perfectly passionate interest in what you were telling him (though it may be only about a hen wi' the croup), and then, after all, he hasna heard a sylib.

Ay, I listened to Elspeth saying that, when she thocht I was at the byre, and yet, would you believe it, when I says to her after lousing times, 'I've been noticing of late that the minister loses what a body tells him,' all she answers is 'Havers.' Tod, but women's provoking."

"I allow," Birse said, "that on the first Sabbath o' June month, and again on the third Sabbath, he poured out the Word grandly, but I've ta'en note this curran Sabbaths that if he's no mighty magnificent he's mighty poor. There's something damming up his mind, and when he gets by it he's a roaring water, but when he doesna he's a despizable trickle. The folk thinks it's a woman that's getting in his way, but dinna tell me that about sic a scholar; I tell you he would gang ower a toon o' women like a loaded cart ower new-laid stanes."

Wearyworld hobbled after me up the Roods one day, pelting me with remarks, though I was doing my best to get away from him. "Even Rob Dow sees there's something come ower the minister," he bawled, "for Rob's fou ilka Sabbath now. Ay, but this I will say for Mr. Dishart, that he aye gies me a civil word," I thought I had left the policeman behind with this, but next minute he roared, "And whatever is the matter wi' him it has made him kindlier to me than ever." He must have taken the short cut through Lunan's close, for at the top of the Roods his voice again made up on me. "Dagone you, for a cruel pack to put your fingers to your lugs ilka time I open mymouth."

As for Waster Lunny's daughter Easie, who got her schooling free for redding up the school-house and breaking my furniture, she would never have been off the gossip about the minister, for she was her mother in miniature, with a tongue that ran like a pump after the pans are full, not for use but for the mere pleasure of spilling.

On that awful fourth of August I not only had all this confused talk in my head but reason for jumping my mind between it and the Egyptian (as if to catch them together unawares), and I was like one who, with the mechanism of a watch jumbled in his hand, could set it going if he had the art.

Of the gypsy I knew nothing save what I had seen that night, yet what more was there to learn? I was aware that she loved Gavin and that he loved her. A moment had shown it to me. Now with the Auld Lichts, I have the smith's acquaintance with his irons, and so I could not believe that they would suffer their minister to marry a vagrant. Had it not been for this knowledge, which made me fearful for Margaret, I would have done nothing to keep

these two young people apart. Some to whom I have said this maintain that the Egyptian turned my head at our first meeting. Such an argument is not perhaps worth controverting. I admit that even now I straighten under the fire of a bright eye, as a pensioner may salute when he sees a young officer. In the shooting season, should I chance to be leaning over my dyke while English sportsmen pass (as is usually the case if I have seen them approaching), I remember nought of them save that they call me "she," and end their greetings with "whatever" (which Waster Lunny takes to be a southron mode of speech), but their ladies dwell pleasantly in my memory, from their engaging faces to the pretty crumpled thing dangling on their arms, that is a hat or a basket, I am seldom sure which. The Egyptian's beauty, therefore, was a gladsome sight to me, and none the less so that I had come upon it as unexpectedly as some men step into a bog. Had she been alone when I met her I cannot deny that I would have been content to look on her face, without caring what was inside it; but she was with her lover, and that lover was Gavin, and so her face was to me as little for admiring as this glen in a thunderstorm, when I know that some fellow-creature is lost on the hills.

If, however, it was no quick liking for the gypsy that almost tempted me to leave these two lovers to each other, what was it? It was the warning of my own life. Adam Dishart had torn my arm from Margaret's, and I had not recovered the wrench in eighteen years. Rather than act his part between these two I felt tempted to tell them, "Deplorable as the result may be, if you who are a minister marry this vagabond, it will be still more deplorable if you do not."

But there was Margaret to consider, and at thought of her I cursed the Egyptian aloud. What could I do to keep Gavin and the woman apart? I could tell him the secret of his mother's life. Would that be sufficient? It would if he loved Margaret, as I did not doubt. Pity for her would make him undergo any torture rather than she should suffer again. But to divulge our old connection would entail her discovery of me. and I questioned if even the saving of Gavin could destroy the bitterness of that.

I might appeal to the Egyptian. I might tell her even what I shuddered to tell him. She cared for him, I was sure, well enough to have the courage to give him up. But where was I to find her?

Were she and Gavin meeting still? Perhaps the change which had come over the little minister meant that they had parted. Yet what I had heard him

say to her on the hill warned me not to trust in any such solution of the trouble.

Boys play at casting a humming-top into the midst of others on the ground, and if well aimed it scatters them prettily. I seemed to be playing such a game with my thoughts, for each new one sent the others here and there, and so what could I do in the end but fling my tops aside, and return to the heeling of my boot?

I was thus engaged when the sudden waking of the glen into life took me to my window. There is seldom silence up here, for if the wind be not sweeping the heather, the Quharity, that I may not have heard for days, seems to have crept nearer to the school-house in the night, and if both wind and water be out of earshot, there is the crack of a gun, or Waster Lunny's shepherd is on a stone near at hand whistling, or a lamb is scrambling through a fence, and kicking foolishly with its hind legs. These sounds I am unaware of until they stop, when I look up. Such a stillness was broken now by music.

From my window I saw a string of people walking rapidly down the glen, and Waster Lunny crossing his potato-field to meet them. Remembering that, though I was in my stocking soles, the ground was dry, I hastened to join the farmer, for I like to miss nothing. I saw a curious sight. In front of the little procession coming down the glen road, and so much more impressive than his satellites that they may be put of mind as merely ploughman and the like following a show, was a Highlander that I knew to be Lauchlan Campbell, one of the pipers engaged to lend music to the earl's marriage. He had the name of a thrawn man when sober, but pretty at the pipes at both times, and he came marching down the glen blowing gloriously, as if he had the clan of Campbell at his heels. I know no man who is so capable on occasion of looking like twenty as a Highland piper, and never have I seen a face in such a blaze of passion as was Lauchlan Campbell's that day. His following were keeping out of his reach, jumping back every time he turned round to shake his fist in the direction of the Spittal. While this magnificent man was yet some yards from us, I saw Waster Lunny, who had been in the middle of the road to ask questions, fall back in fear, and not being a fighting man myself, I jumped the dyke. Lauchlan gave me a look that sent me farther into the field, and strutted past, shrieking defiance through his pipes, until I lost him and his followers in a bend of the road.

"That's a terrifying spectacle," I heard Waster Lunny say when the music had become but a distant squeal. "You're bonny at louping dykes, dominie, when there is a wild bull in front o' you. Na, I canna tell what has happened, but at the least Lauchlan maun hae dirked the earl. Thae loons cried out to me as they gaed by that he has been blawing awa' at that tune till he canna halt. What a wind's in the crittur! I'm thinking there's a hell in ilka Highlandman."

"Take care then, Waster Lunny, that you dinna licht it," said an angry voice that made us jump, though it was only Duncan, the farmer's shepherd, who spoke.

"I had forgotten you was a Highlandman yoursel', Duncan," Waster Lunny said nervously; but Elspeth, who had come to us unnoticed, ordered the shepherd to return to the hillside, which he did haughtily.

"How did you no lay haud on that blast o' wind, Lauchlan Campbell," asked Elspeth of her husband, "and speir at him what had happened at the Spittal? A quarrel afore a marriage brings ill luck."

"I'm thinking," said the farmer, "that Rintoul's making his ain ill luck by marrying on a young leddy."

"A man's never ower auld to marry," said Elspeth.

"No, nor a woman," rejoined Waster Lunny, "when she gets the chance. But, Elspeth, I believe I can guess what has fired that fearsome piper. Depend upon it, somebody has been speaking disrespectful about the crittur's ancestors."

"His ancestors!" exclaimed Elspeth, scornfully. "I'm thinking mine could hae bocht them at a crown the dozen."

"Hoots," said the farmer, "you're o' a weaving stock, and dinna understand about ancestors. Take a stick to a Highland laddie, and it's no him you hurt, but his ancestors. Likewise it's his ancestors that stanes you for it. When Duncan stalked awa the now, what think you he saw? He saw a farmer's wife dauring to order about his ancestors; and if that's the way wi' a shepherd, what will it be wi' a piper that has the kilts on him a' day to mind him o' his ancestors ilka time he looks down?"

Elspeth retired to discuss the probable disturbance at the Spittal with her family, giving Waster Lunny the opportunity of saying to me impressively--

"Man, man, has it never crossed you that it's a queer thing the like o' you and me having no ancestors? Ay, we had them in a manner o' speaking, no doubt, but they're as completely lost sicht o' as a flagon lid that's fallen ahint the dresser. Hech, sirs, but they would need a gey rubbing to get the rust off them now, I've been thinking that if I was to get my laddies to say their grandfather's name a curran times ilka day, like the Catechism, and they were to do the same wi' their bairns, and it was continued in future generations, we might raise a fell field o' ancestors in time. Ay, but Elspeth wouldna hear o't. Nothing angers her mair than to hear me speak o' planting trees for the benefit o' them that's to be farmers here after me; and as for ancestors, she would howk them up as quick as I could plant them. Losh, dominie, is that a boot in your hand?"

To my mortification I saw that I had run out of the school-house with the boot on my hand as if it were a glove, and back I went straightway, blaming myself for a man wanting in dignity. It was but a minor trouble this, however, even at the time; and to recall it later in the day was to look back on happiness, for though I did not know it yet, Lauchlan's playing raised the curtain on the great act of Gavin's life, and the twenty-four hours had begun, to which all I have told as yet is no more than the prologue.