

CHAPTER XXVI. - SCENE AT THE SPITTAL.

Within an hour after I had left him, Waster Lunny walked into the school-house and handed me his snuff-mull, which I declined politely. It was with this ceremony that we usually opened our conversations.

"I've seen the post," he said, and he tells me there has been a queer ploy at the Spittal. It's a wonder the marriage hasna been turned into a burial, and all because o' that Highland stirk, Lauchlan Campbell.

Waster Lunny was a man who had to retrace his steps in telling a story if he tried short cuts, and so my custom was to wait patiently while he delved through the ploughed fields that always lay between him and his destination.

"As you ken, Rintoul's so little o' a Scotchman that he's no muckle better than an Englisher. That maun be the reason he hadna mair sense than to tramp on a Highlandman's ancestors, as he tried to tramp on Lauchlan's this day."

"If Lord Rintoul insulted the piper," I suggested, giving the farmer a helping hand cautiously, "it would be through inadvertence. Rintoul only bought the Spittal a year ago, and until then, I daresay, he had seldom been on our side of the Border."

This was a foolish, interruption, for it set Walter Lunny off in a new direction.

"That's what Elspeth says. Says she, 'When the earl has grand estates in England, what for does he come to a barren place like the Spittal to be married! It's gey like,' she says, 'as if he wanted the marriage to be got by quietly; a thing,' says she, 'that no woman can stand. Furthermore,' Elspeth says, 'how has the marriage been postponed twice?' We ken what the servants at the Spittal says to that, namely, that the young lady is no keen to take him, but Elspeth winna listen to sic arguments. She says either the earl had grown timid (as mony a man does) when the wedding-day drew near, or else his sister that keeps his house is mad at the thocht o' losing her place; but as for the young leddy's being sweer, says Elspeth, 'an earl's an earl however auld he is, and a lassie's a lassie however young she is, and weel she kens you're never sure o' a man's no changing his mind about you till you're tied to him by law, after which it doesna so muckle matter

whether he changes his mind about you or no.' Ay, there's a quirk in it some gait, dominie; but it's a deep water Elspeth canna bottom."

"It is," I agreed; "but you were to tell me what Birse told you of the disturbance at the Spittal."

"Ay, weel." he answered, "the post puts the wite o't on her little leddyship, as they call her, though she winna be a leddyship till the morn. All I can say is that if the earl was saft enough to do sic a thing out of fondness for her, it's time he was married on her, so that he may come to his senses again. That's what I say; but Elspeth conters me, of course, and says she, 'If the young leddy was so careless o' insulting other folks' ancestors, it proves she has nane o' her ain; for them that has china plates themsel's is the maist careful no to break the china plates of others.'"

"But what was the insult? Was Lauchlan dismissed?" "Na, faags! It was waur than that. Dominie, you're dull in the uptake compared to Elspeth. I hadna telled her half the story afore she jaloused the rest. However, to begin again; there's great feasting and rejoicings gaen on at the Spittal the now, and also a banquet, which the post says is twa dinners in one. Weel, there's a curran Ogilvys among the guests, and it was them that egged on her little leddyship to make the daring proposal to the earl. What was the proposal? It was no less than that the twa pipers should be ordered to play 'The Bonny House o' Airlie.' Dominie, I wonder you can tak it so calm when you ken that's the Ogilvy's sang, and that it's aimed at the clan o' Campbell."

"Pooh!" I said. "The Ogilvys and the Campbells used to be mortal enemies, but the feud has been long forgotten."

"Ay, I've heard tell," Waster Lunny said sceptically, "that Airlie and Argyle shakes hands now like Christians; but I'm thinking that's just afore the Queen. Dinna speak now, for I'm in the thick o't. Her little leddyship was all hingin in gold and jewels, the which winna be her ain till the morn; and she leans ower to the earl and whispers to him to get the pipers to play 'The Bonny House.' He wasna willing, for says he, 'There's Ogilvys at the table, and ane o' the pipers is a Campbell, and we'll better let sleeping dogs lie.' However, the Ogilvys lauched at his caution; and he was so infatuated wi' her little leddyship that he gae in, and he cried out to the pipers to strike up 'The Bonny House.'"

Waster Lunny pulled his chair nearer me and rested his hand on my knees.

"Dominie," he said in a voice that fell now and again into a whisper, "them looking on swears that when Lauchlan Campbell heard these monstrous orders his face became ugly and black, so that they kent in a jiffy what he would do. It's said a' body jumped back frae him in a sudden dread, except poor Angus, the other piper, wha was busy tuning up for 'The Bonny House.' Weel, Angus had got no farther in the tune than the first skirl when Lauchlan louped at him, and ripped up the startled crittur's pipes wi' his dirk. The pipes gae a roar o' agony like a stuck swine, and fell gasping on the floor. What happened next was that Lauchlan wi' his dirk handy for onybody that micht try to stop him, marched once round the table, playing 'The Campbells are Coming,' and then straucht out o' the Spittal, his chest far afore him, and his head so weel back that he could see what was going on ahint. Frae the Spittal to here he never stopped that fearsome tune, and I'se warrant he's blawing away at it at this moment through the streets o' Thrums."

Waster Lunny was not in his usual spirits, or he would have repeated his story before he left me, for he had usually as much difficulty in coming to an end as in finding a beginning. The drought was to him as serious a matter as death in the house, and as little to be forgotten for a lengthened period.

"There's to be a prayer-meeting for rain in the Auld Licit kirk the night," he told me as I escorted him as far as my side of the Quharity, now almost a dead stream, pitiable to see, "and I'm gaen; though I'm sweer to leave thae puir cattle o' mine. You should see how they look at me when I gie them mair o' that rotten grass to eat. It's eneuch to mak a man greet, for what richt hae I to keep kye when I canna meat them?"

Waster Lunny has said to me more than once that the great surprise of his life was when Elspeth was willing to take him. Many a time, however, I have seen that in him which might have made any weaver's daughter proud of such a man, and I saw it again when we came to the river side.

"I'm no ane o' thae farmers," he said, truthfully, "that's aye girding at the weather, and Elspeth and me kens that we hae been dealt wi' bountifully since we took this farm wi' gey anxious hearts. That woman, dominie, is eneuch to put a brave face on a coward, and it's no langer syne than yestreen when I was sitting in the dumps, looking at the aurora borealis, which I canna but regard as a messenger o' woe, that she put her hand on my shoulder and she says, 'Waster Lunny, twenty year syne we began life thegither wi' nothing but the claethes on our back, and an it please God we

can begin it again, for I hae you and you hae me, and I'm no cast down if you're no.' Dominie, is there mony sic women in the warld as that?"

"Many a one," I said.

"Ay, man, it shamed me, for I hae a kind o' delight in angering Elspeth, just to see what she'll say. I could hae ta'en her on my knee at that minute, but the bairns was there, and so it wouldna hae dune. But I cheered her up, for, after all, the drought canna put us so far back as we was twenty years syne, unless it's true what my father said, that the aurora borealis is the devil's rainbow. I saw it sax times in July month, and it made me shut my een. You was out admiring it, dominie, but I can never forget that it was seen in the year twelve just afore the great storm. I was only a laddie then, but I mind how that awful wind stripped a' the standing corn in the glen in less time than we've been here at the water's edge. It was called the deil's besom. My father's hinmost words to me was, 'It's time eneuch to greet, laddie, when you see the aurora borealis.' I mind he was so complete ruined in an hour that he had to apply for relief frae the poor's rates. Think o' that, and him a proud man. He would tak' nothing till one winter day when we was a' starving, and syne I gaed wi' him to speir for't, and he telled me to grip his hand ticht, so that the cauldness o' mine nicht gie him courage. They were doling out the charity in the Town's House, and I had never been in't afore. I canna look at it now without thinking o' that day when me and my father gaed up the stair thegither. Mr. Duthie was presiding at the time, and he wasna muckle older than Mr. Dishart is now. I mind he speired for proof that we was needing, and my father couldna speak. He just pointed at me. 'But you have a good coat on your back yoursel', ' Mr. Duthie said, for there were mony waiting, sair needing. 'It was lended him to come here,' I cried, and without a word my father opened the coat, and they saw he had nothing on aneath, and his skin blue wi' cauld. Dominie, Mr. Duthie handed him one shilling and saxpence, and my father's fingers closed greedily on't for a minute, and syne it fell to the ground. They put it back in his hand, and it slipped out again, and Mr. Duthie gave it back to him, saying, 'Are you so cauld as that?' But, oh, man, it wasna cauld that did it, but shame o' being on the rates. The blood a' ran to my father's head, and syne left it as quick, and he flung down the siller and walked out o' the Town House wi' me running after him. We warstled through that winter, God kens how, and it's near a pleasure to me to think o't now, for, rain or no rain, I can never be reduced to sic straits again."

The farmer crossed the water without using the stilts which were no longer necessary, and I little thought, as I returned to the school-house, what

terrible things were to happen before he could offer me his snuff-mull again. Serious as his talk had been it was neither of drought nor of the incident at the Spittal that I sat down to think. My anxiety about Gavin came back to me until I was like a man imprisoned between walls of his own building. It may be that my presentiments of that afternoon look gloomier now than they were, because I cannot return to them save over a night of agony, black enough to darken any time connected with it. Perhaps my spirits only fell as the wind rose, for wind ever takes me back to Harvie, and when I think of Harvie my thoughts are of the saddest. I know that I sat for some hours, now seeing Gavin pay the penalty of marrying the Egyptian, and again drifting back to my days with Margaret, until the wind took to playing tricks with me, so that I heard Adam Dishart enter our home by the sea every time the school-house door shook.

I became used to the illusion after starting several times, and thus when the door did open, about seven o'clock, it was only the wind rushing to my fire like a shivering dog that made me turn my head. Then I saw the Egyptian staring at me, and though her sudden appearance on my threshold was a strange thing, I forgot it in the whiteness of her face. She was looking at me like one who has asked a question of life or death, and stopped her heart for the reply.

"What is it?" I cried, and for a moment I believe I was glad she did not answer. She seemed to have told me already as much as I could bear.

"He has not heard," she said aloud in an expressionless voice, and, turning, would have slipped away without another word.

"Is any one dead?" I asked, seizing her hands and letting them fall, they were so clammy. She nodded, and trying to speak could not.

"He is dead," she said at last in a whisper. "Mr. Dishart is dead," and she sat down quietly.

At that I covered my face, crying, "God help Margaret!" and then she rose, saying fiercely, so that I drew back from her, "There is no Margaret; he only cared for me."

"She is his mother," I said hoarsely, and then she smiled to me, so that I thought her a harmless mad thing. "He was killed by a piper called Lauchlan Campbell," she said, looking up at me suddenly. "It was my fault."

"Poor Margaret!" I wailed.

"And poor Babbie," she entreated pathetically; "will no one say, 'Poor Babbie'?"