

CHAPTER XXX. - THE MEETING FOR RAIN.

Meanwhile the Auld Lichts were in church, waiting for their minister, and it was a full meeting, because nearly every well in Thrums had been scooped dry by anxious palms. Yet not all were there to ask God's rain for themselves. Old Charles Yuill was in his pew, after dreaming thrice that he would break up with the drought; and Bell Christison had come, though her man lay dead at home, and she thought it could matter no more to her how things went in the world.

You, who do not love that little congregation, would have said that they were waiting placidly. But probably so simple a woman as Meggy Rattray could have deceived you into believing that because her eyes were downcast she did not notice who put the three-penny-bit in the plate. A few men were unaware that the bell was working overtime, most of them farmers with their eyes on the windows, but all the women at least were wondering. They knew better, however, than to bring their thoughts to their faces, and none sought to catch another's eye. The men-folk looked heavily at their hats in the seats in front. Even when Hendry Munn, instead of marching to the pulpit with the big Bible in his hands, came as far as the plate and signed to Peter Tosh, elder, that he was wanted in the vestry, you could not have guessed how every woman there, except Bell Christison, wished she was Peter Tosh. Peter was so taken aback that he merely gaped at Hendry, until suddenly he knew that his five daughters were furious with him, when he dived for his hat and staggered to the vestry with his mouth open. His boots cheeped all the way, but no one looked up.

"I hadna noticed the minister was lang in coming," Waster Lunny told me afterward, "but Elspeth noticed it, and with a quickness that baffles me she saw I was thinking o' other things. So she let out her foot at me. I gae a low cough to let her ken I wasna sleeping, but in a minute out goes her foot again. Ay, syne I thocht I micht hae dropped my hanky into Snecky Hobart's pew, but no, it was in my tails. Yet her hand was on the board, and she was working her fingers in a way that I kent meant she would like to shake me. Next I looked to see if I was sitting on her frock, the which tries a woman sair, but I wasna, 'Does she want to change Bibles wi' me?' I wondered; 'or is she sliding yont a peppermint to me?' It was neither, so I edged as far frae her as I could gang. Weel, would you credit it, I saw her body coming nearer me inch by inch, though she was looking straucht afore her, till she was within kick o' me, and then out again goes her foot. At that,

dominie, I lost patience, and I whispered, fierce-like, 'Keep your foot to yoursel', you limmer!' Ay, her intent, you see, was to waken me to what was gaen on, but I couldna be expected to ken that."

In the vestry Hendry Munn was now holding counsel with three elders, of whom the chief was Lang Tammas.

"The laddie I sent to the manse," Hendry said, "canna be back this five minutes, and the question is how we're to fill up that time. I'll ring no langer, for the bell has been in a passion ever since a quarter-past eight. It's as sweer to clang past the quarter as a horse to gallop by its stable."

"You could gang to your box and gie out a psalm, Tammas," suggested John Spens.

"And would a psalm sung wi' sic an object," retorted the precentor, "mount higher, think you, than a bairn's kite? I'll insult the Almighty to screen no minister."

"You're screening him better by standing whaur you are," said the imperturbable Hendry; "for as lang as you dinna show your face they'll think it may be you that's missing instead o' Mr. Dishart."

Indeed, Gavin's appearance in church without the precentor would have been as surprising as Tammas's without the minister. As certainly as the shutting of a money-box is followed by the turning of the key, did the precentor walk stiffly from the vestry to his box a toll of the bell in front of the minister. Tammas's halfpenny rang in the plate as Gavin passed T'nowhead's pew, and Gavin's sixpence with the snapping-to of the precentor's door. The two men might have been connected by a string that tightened at ten yards.

"The congregation ken me ower weel," Tammas said, "to believe I would keep the Lord waiting."

"And they are as sure o' Mr. Dishart," rejoined Spens, with spirit, though he feared the precentor on Sabbaths and at prayer-meetings. "You're a hard man."

"I speak the blunt truth," Whamond answered.

"Ay," said Spens, "and to tak' credit for that may be like blawing that you're ower honest to wear claethes."

Hendry, who had gone to the door, returned now with the information that Mr. Dishart had left the manse two hours ago to pay visits, meaning to come to the prayer-meeting before he returned home.

"There's a quirk in this, Hendry," said Tosh. "Was it Mistress Dishart the laddie saw?"

"No," Hendry replied. "It was Jean. She canna get to the meeting because the mistress is nervous in the manse by herself; and Jean didna like to tell her that he's missing, for fear o' alarming her. What are we to do now?"

"He's an unfaithful shepherd," cried the precentor, while Hendry again went out. "I see it written on the walls."

"I dinna," said Spens doggedly.

"Because," retorted Tammas, "having eyes you see not."

"Tammas, I aye thocht you was fond o' Mr. Dishart."

"If my right eye were to offend me," answered the precentor. "I would pluck it out. I suppose you think, and baith o' you farmers too, that there's no necessity for praying for rain the nicht? You'll be content, will ye, if Mr. Dishart just drops in to the kirk some day, accidental-like, and offers up a bit prayer?"

"As for the rain," Spens said, triumphantly, "I wouldna wonder though it's here afore the minister. You canna deny, Peter Tosh, that there's been a smell o' rain in the air this twa hours back."

"John," Peter said agitatedly, "dinna speak so confidently. I've kent it," he whispered, "since the day turned; but it wants to tak' us by surprise, lad, and so I'm no letting on."

"See that you dinna make an idol o' the rain," thundered Whamond. "Your thochts is no wi' Him, but wi' the clouds; and, whaur your thochts are, there will your prayers stick also."

"If you saw my lambs," Tosh began; and then, ashamed of himself, said, looking upward, "He holds the rain in the hollow of His hand."

"And He's closing His neive ticht on't again," said the precentor solemnly. "Hearken to the wind rising!"

"God help me!" cried Tosh, wringing his hands. "Is it fair, think you," he said, passionately addressing the sky, "to show your wrath wi' Mr. Dishart by ruining my neeps?"

"You were richt, Tammas Whamond," Spens said, growing hard as he listened to the wind, "the sanctuary o' the Lord has been profaned this nicht by him wha should be the chief pillar o' the building."

They were lowering brows that greeted Hendry when he returned to say that Mr. Dishart had been seen last on the hill with the Glen Quharity dominie.

"Some thinks," said the kirk officer, "that he's awa hunting for Rob Dow."

"Nothing'll excuse him," replied Spens, "short o' his having fallen over the quarry."

Hendry's was usually a blank face, but it must have looked troubled now, for Tosh was about to say, "Hendry, you're keeping something back," when the precentor said it before him.

"Wi' that story o' Mr. Dishart's murder, no many hours auld yet," the kirk officer replied evasively, "we should be wary o' trusting gossip."

"What hae you heard?"

"It's through the town," Hendry answered, "that a woman was wi' the dominie."

"A woman!" cried Tosh, "The woman there's been sic talk about in connection wi' the minister? Whaur are they now?"

"It's no kent, but--the dominie was seen goin' hame by himsel'."

"Leaving the minister and her thegither!" cried the three men at once.

"Hendry Munn," Tammas said sternly, "there's mair about this; wha is the woman?"

"They are liars," Hendry answered, and shut his mouth tight.

"Gie her a name, I say," the precentor ordered, "or, as chief elder of this kirk, supported by mair than half o' the Session, I command you to lift your hat and go."

Hendry gave an appealing look to Tosh and Spens, but the precentor's solemnity had cowed them.

"They say, then," he answered sullenly, "that it's the Egyptian. Yes, and I believe they ken."

The two farmers drew back from this statement incredulously; but Tammas Whamond jumped at the kirk officer's throat, and some who were in the church that night say they heard Hendry scream. Then the precentor's fingers relaxed their grip, and he tottered into the middle of the room.

"Hendry," he pleaded, holding out his arms pathetically, "tak' back these words. Oh, man, have pity, and tak' them back!"

But Hendry would not, and then Lang Tammas's mouth worked convulsively, and he sobbed, crying, "Nobody kent it, but mair than mortal son, O God, I did love the lad!"

So seldom in a lifetime had any one seen into this man's heart that Spens said, amazed:

"Tammas, Tammas Whamond, it's no like you to break down."

The rusty door of Whamond's heart swung to.

"Who broke down?" he asked fiercely. "Let no member of this Session dare to break down till his work be done."

"What work?" Tosh said uneasily. "We canna interfere."

"I would rather resign," Spens said, but shook when Whamond hurled these words at him:

"And Jesus said unto him, No man, having put his hand to the plough and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God."

"It mayna be true," Hendry said eagerly.

"We'll soon see."

"He would gie her up," said Tosh.

"Peter Tosh," answered Whamond sternly, "I call upon you to dismiss the congregation."

"Should we no rather haud the meeting oursel's?"

"We have other work afore us," replied the precentor.

"But what can I say?" Tosh asked nervously, "Should I offer up a prayer?"

"I warn you all," broke in Hendry, "that though the congregation is sitting there quietly, they'll be tigers for the meaning o' this as soon as they're in the street."

"Let no ontruth be telled them," said the precentor. "Peter Tosh, do your duty. John Spens, remain wi' me."

The church emptied silently, but a buzz of excitement arose outside. Many persons tried to enter the vestry, but were ordered away, and when Tosh joined his fellow-elders the people were collecting in animated groups in the square, or scattering through the wynds for news.

"And now," said the precentor, "I call upon the three o' you to come wi' me. Hendry Munn, you gang first."

"I maun bide ahint," Hendry said, with a sudden fear, "to lock up the kirk."

"I'll lock up the kirk," Whamond answered harshly.

"You maun gie me the keys, though," entreated the kirk officer.

"I'll take care o' the keys," said Whamond.

"I maun hae them," Hendry said, "to open the kirk on Sabbath."

The precentor locked the doors, and buttoned up the keys in his trousers pockets.

"Wha kens," he said, in a voice of steel, "that the kirk'll be open next Sabbath?"

"Hae some mercy on him, Tamtnas," Spens implored. "He's no twa- and- twenty."

"Wha kens," continued the precentor, "but that the next time this kirk is opened will be to preach it toom?"

"What road do we tak'?"

"The road to the hill, whaur he was seen last."