

CHAPTER XXXI. - VARIOUS BODIES CONVERGING ON THE HILL.

It would be coming on for a quarter-past nine, and a misty night, when I reached the school-house, and I was so weary of mind and body that I sat down without taking off my bonnet. I had left the door open, and I remember listlessly watching the wind making a target of my candle, but never taking a sufficiently big breath to do more than frighten it. From this lethargy I was roused by the sound of wheels.

In the daytime our glen road leads to many parts, but in the night only to the doctor's. Then the gallop of a horse makes farmers start up in bed and cry, "Who's ill?" I went to my door and listened to the trap coming swiftly down the lonely glen, but I could not see it, for there was a trailing scarf of mist between the school-house and the road. Presently I heard the swish of the wheels in water, and so learned that they were crossing the ford to come to me. I had been unstrung by the events of the evening, and fear at once pressed thick upon me that this might be a sequel to them, as indeed it was.

While still out of sight the trap stopped, and I heard some one jump from it. Then came this conversation, as distinct as though it had been spoken into my ear:

"Can you see the school-house now, McKenzie?"

"I am groping for it, Rintoul. The mist seems to have made off with the path."

"Where are you, McKenzie? I have lost sight of you."

It was but a ribbon of mist, and as these words were spoken McKenzie broke through it. I saw him, though to him I was only a stone at my door.

"I have found the house, Rintoul," he shouted, "and there is a light in it, so that the fellow has doubtless returned."

"Then wait a moment for me."

"Stay where you are, Rintoul, I entreat you, and leave him to me. He may recognize you."

"No, no, McKenzie, I am sure he never saw me before. I insist on accompanying you."

"Your excitement, Rintoul, will betray you. Let me go alone. I can question him without rousing his suspicions. Remember, she is only a gypsy to him."

"He will learn nothing from me. I am quite calm now."

"Rintoul, I warn you your manner will betray you, and to-morrow it will be roared through the countryside that your bride ran away from the Spittal in a gypsy dress, and had to be brought back by force."

The altercation may have lasted another minute, but the suddenness with which I learned Babbie's secret had left my ears incapable of learning more. I daresay the two men started when they found me at my door, but they did not remember, as few do remember who have the noisy day to forget it in, how far the voice carries in the night.

They came as suddenly on me as I on them, for though they had given unintentional notice of their approach, I had lost sight of the speakers in their amazing words. Only a moment did young McKenzie's anxiety to be spokesman give me to regard Lord Rintoul. I saw that he was a thin man and tall, straight in the figure, but his head began to sink into his shoulders and not very steady on them. His teeth had grip of his under-lip, as if this was a method of controlling his agitation, and he was opening and shutting his hands restlessly. He had a dog with him which I was to meet again.

"Well met, Mr. Ogilvy," said McKenzie, who knew me slightly, having once acted as judge at a cock-fight in the school-house. "We were afraid we should have to rouse you."

"You will step inside?" I asked awkwardly, and while I spoke I was wondering how long it would be before the earl's excitement broke out.

"It is not necessary," McKenzie answered hurriedly. "My friend and I (this is Mr. McClure) have been caught in the mist without a lamp, and we thought you could perhaps favor us with one."

"Unfortunately I have nothing of the kind," I said, and the state of mind I was in is shown by my answering seriously.

"Then we must wish you a good-night and manage as best we can," he said; and then before he could touch, with affected indifference, on the real object of their visit, the alarmed earl said angrily, "McKenzie, no more of this."

"No more of this delay, do you mean, McClure?" asked McKenzie, and then, turning to me said, "By the way, Mr. Ogilvy, I think this is our second meeting to-night. I met you on the road a few hours ago with your wife. Or was it your daughter?"

"It was neither, Mr. McKenzie," I answered, with the calmness of one not yet recovered from a shock. "It was a gypsy girl."

"Where is she now?" cried Rintoul feverishly; but McKenzie, speaking loudly at the same time, tried to drown his interference as one obliterates writing by writing over it.

"A strange companion for a schoolmaster," he said. "What became of her?"

"I left her near Caddam Wood," I replied, "but she is probably not there now"

"Ah, they are strange creatures, these gypsies!" he said, casting a warning look at the earl. "Now I wonder where she had been bound for."

"There is a gypsy encampment on the hill," I answered, though I cannot say why.

"She is there!" exclaimed Rintoul, and was done with me.

"I daresay," McKenzie said indifferently. "However, it is nothing to us. Good-night, sir."

The earl had started for the trap, but McKenzie's salute reminded him of a forgotten courtesy, and, despite his agitation, he came back to apologize. I admired him for this. Then my thoughtlessness must needs mar all.

"Good-night, Mr. McKenzie," I said. "Good-night, Lord Rintoul."

I had addressed him by his real name. Never a turnip fell from a bumping, laden cart, and the driver more unconscious of it, than I that I had dropped that word. I re-entered the house, but had not reached my chair when McKenzie's hand fell roughly on me, and I was swung round.

"Mr. Ogilvy," he said, the more savagely I doubt not because his passions had been chained so long, "you know more than you would have us think. Beware, sir, of recognising that gypsy should you ever see her again in different attire. I advise you to have forgotten this night when you waken to-morrow morning."

With a menacing gesture he left me, and I sank into a chair, glad to lose sight of the glowering eyes with which he had pinned me to the wall. I did not hear the trap cross the ford and renew its journey. When I looked out next, the night had fallen very dark, and the glen was so deathly in its drowsiness that I thought not even the cry of murder could tear its eyes open.

The earl and McKenzie would be some distance still from the hill when the office-bearers had scoured it in vain for their minister. The gypsies, now dancing round their fires to music that, on ordinary occasions, Lang Tammis would have stopped by using his fists to the glory of God, had seen no minister, they said, and disbelieved in the existence of the mysterious Egyptian.

"Liars they are to trade," Spens declared to his companions, "but now and again they speak truth, like a standing clock, and I'm beginning to think the minister's lassie was invented in the square."

"Not so," said the precentor, "for we saw her oursel's a short year syne, and Hendry Munn there allows there's townsfolk that hae passed her in the glen mair recently."

"I only allowed," Hendry said cautiously, "that some sic talk had shot up sudden-like in the town. Them that pretends they saw her says that she joukit quick out o' sicht."

"Ay, and there's another quirk in that," responded the suspicious precentor.

"I'se uphaud the minister's sitting in the manse in his slippers by this time," Hendry said.

"I'm willing," replied Whamond, "to gang back and speir, or to search Caddam next; but let the matter drop I winna, though I ken you're a' awid to be hame now."

"And naturally," retorted Tosh, "for the nicht's coming on as black as pick, and by the time we're at Caddam we'll no even see the trees."

Toward Caddam, nevertheless, they advanced, hearing nothing but a distant wind and the wish of their legs in the broom.

"Whaur's John Spens?" Hendry said suddenly.

They turned back and found Spens rooted to the ground, as a boy becomes motionless when he thinks he is within arm's reach of a nest and the bird sitting on the eggs.

"What do you see, man?" Hendry whispered.

"As sure as death," answered Spens, awe-struck, "I felt a drap o' rain."

"It's no rain we're here to look for," said the precentor.

"Peter Tosh," cried Spens, "it was a drap! Oh, Peter! how are you looking at me so queer, Peter, when you should be thanking the Lord for the promise that's in that drap?"

"Come away," Whamond said, impatiently; "but Spens answered, "No till I've offered up a prayer for the promise that's in that drap. Peter Tosh, you've forgotten to take off your bonnet."

"Think twice, John Spens," gasped Tosh, "afore you pray for rain this nicht."

The others thought him crazy, but he went on, with a catch in his voice:

"I felt a drap o' rain mysel', just afore it came on dark so hurried, and my first impulse was to wish that I could carry that drap about wi' me and look at it. But, John Spens, when I looked up I saw sic a change running ower the sky that I thocht hell had taken the place o' heaven, and that there was waterspouts gathering therein for the drowning o' the world."

"There's no water in hell," the precentor said grimly.

"Genesis ix.," said Spens, "verses 8 to 17. Ay, but, Peter, you've startled me, and I'm thinking we should be stepping hame. Is that a licht?"

"It'll be in Nanny Webster's," Hendry said, after they had all regarded the light.

"I never heard that Nanny needed a candle to licht her to her bed," the precentor muttered.

"She was awa to meet Sanders the day as he came out o' the Tilliedrum gaol," Spens remembered, "and I daresay the licht means they're hame again."

"It's well kent--" began Hendry, and would have recalled his words.

Hendry Munn, "cried the precentor," if you hae minded onything that may help us, outwi't."

"I was just minding," the kirk officer answered reluctantly, "that Nanny allows it's Mr. Dishart that has been keeping her frae the poorhouse. You canna censure him for that, Tammas."

"Can I no?" retorted Whamond. "What business has he to befriend a woman that belongs to another denomination? I'll see to the bottom o' that this nicht. Lads, follow me to Nanny's, and dinna be surprised if we find baith the minister and the Egyptian there."

They had not advanced many yards when Spens jumped to the side, crying, "Be wary, that's no the wind; it's a machine!"

Immediately the doctor's dogcart was close to them, with Rob Dow for its only occupant. He was driving slowly, or Whamond could not have escaped the horse's hoofs.

"Is that you, Rob Dow?" said the precentor sourly. "I tell you, you'll be gaoled for stealing the doctor's machine."

"The Hielandman wasna muckle hurt, Rob," Hendry said, more good-naturedly.

"I ken that," replied Rob, scowling at the four of them. "What are you doing here on sic a nicht?"

"Do you see anything strange in the nicht, Rob?" Tosh asked apprehensively.

"It's setting to rain," Dow replied. "I dinna see it, but I feel it."

"Ay," said Tosh, eagerly, "but will it be a saft, cawdie sweet ding-on?"

"Let the heavens open if they will," interposed Spens recklessly. "I would swap the drought for rain, though it comes down in a sheet as in the year twelve."

"And like a sheet it'll come," replied Dow, "and the deil'll blaw it about wi' his biggest bellowses."

Tosh shivered, but Whamond shook him roughly, saying--

"Keep your oaths to yoursel', Rob Dow, and tell me, hae you seen Mr. Dishart?"

"I hinna," Rob answered curtly, preparing to drive on.

"Nor the lassie they call the Egyptian?"

Rob leaped from the dogcart, crying, "What does that mean?"

"Hands off," said the precentor, retreating from him. "It means that Mr. Dishart neglected the prayer-meeting this night to philander after that heathen woman."

"We're no sure o't, Tammas," remonstrated the kirk officer. Dow stood quite still. "I believe Rob kens it's true," Hendry added sadly, "or he would hae flown at your throat, Tammas Whamond, for saying these words."

Even this did not rouse Dow.

"Rob doesna worship the minister as he used to do," said Spens.

"And what for no?" cried the precentor. "Rob Dow, is it because you've found out about this woman?"

"You're a pack o' liars," roared Rob, desperately, "and if you say again that ony wandering hussy has haud o' the minister, I'll let you see whether I can loup at throats."

"You'll swear by the Book," asked Whamond, relentlessly, "that you've seen neither o' them this night, nor them thegither at any time?"

"I so swear by the Book," answered poor loyal Rob. "But what makes you look for Mr. Dishart here?" he demanded, with an uneasy look at the light in the mudhouse.

"Go hame," replied the precentor, "and deliver up the machine you stole, and leave this Session to do its duty. John, we maun fathom the meaning o' that licht."

Dow started, and was probably at that moment within an ace of felling Whamond.

"I'll come wi' you," he said, hunting in his mind for a better way of helping Gavin.

They were at Nanny's garden, but in the darkness Whamond could not find the gate. Rob climbed the paling, and was at once lost sight of. Then they saw his head obscure the window. They did not, however, hear the groan that startled Babbie.

"There's nobody there," he said, coming back, "but Nanny and Sanders. You'll mind Sanders was to be freed the day."

"I'll go in and see Sanders," said Hendry, but the precentor pulled him back, saying, "You'll do nothing o' the kind, Hendry Munn; you'll come awa wi' me now to the manse."

"It's mair than me and Peter'll do, then," said Spens, who had been consulting with the other farmer. "We're gaun as straucht hame as the darkness 'll let us."

With few more words the Session parted, Spens and Tosh setting off for their farms, and Hendry accompanying the precentor. No one will ever know where Dow went. I can fancy him, however, returning to the wood, and there drawing rein. I can fancy his mind made up to watch the mudhouse until Gavin and the gypsy separated, and then pounce upon her. I daresay his whole plot could be condensed into a sentence, "If she's got rid o' this nicht, we may cheat the Session yet," But this is mere surmise. All I know is that he waited near Nanny's house, and by and by heard another trap coming up Windyghoul. That was just before the ten o'clock bell began to ring.