

CHAPTER XXXIII. - WHILE THE TEN O'CLOCK BELL WAS RINGING.

In the square and wynds--weavers in groups:

"No, no, Davit, Mr. Dishart hadna felt the blow the piper gave him till he ascended the pulpit to conduct the prayer-meeting for rain, and then he fainted awa. Tammas Whamond and Peter Tosh carried him to the Session-house. Ay, an awful scene."

"How did the minister no come to the meeting? I wonder how you could expect it, Snecky, and his mother taen so suddenly ill; he's at her bedside, but the doctor has little hope."

"This is what has occurred, Tailor: Mr. Dishart never got the length of the pulpit. He fell in a swoon on the vestry floor. What caused it? Oh, nothing but the heat. Thrums is so dry that one spark would set it in a blaze."

"I canna get at the richts o' what kepted him frae the meeting, Femie, but it had something to do wi' an Egyptian on the hill. Very like he had been trying to stop the gypsy marriage there. I gaed to the manse to speir at Jean what was wrang, but I'm thinking I telled her mair than she could tell me."

"Man, man, Andrew, the wite o't lies wi' Peter Tosh. He thocht we was to hae sic a terrible rain that he implored the minister no to pray for it, and so angry was Mr. Dishart that he ordered the whole Session out o' the kirk. I saw them in Couthie's close, and mighty dour they looked."

"Yes, as sure as death, Tammas Whamond locked the kirk-door in Mr. Dishart's face."

"I'm a' shaking! And small wonder, Marget, when I've heard this minute that Mr. Dishart's been struck by lichtning while looking for Rob Dow. He's no killed, but, woe's me! they say he'll never preach again."

"Nothing o' the kind. It was Rob that the lichtning struck dead in the doctor's machine. The horse wasna touched; it came tearing down the Roods wi' the corpse sitting in the machine like a living man."

"What are you listening to, woman? Is it to a dog barking? I've heard it this while, but it's far awa."

In the manse kitchen:

"Jean, did you not hear me ring? I want you to--Why are you staring out at the window, Jean?"

"I--I was just hearkening to the ten o'clock bell, ma'am."

"I never saw you doing nothing before! Put the heater in the fire, Jean. I want to iron the minister's neckcloths. The prayer-meeting is long in coming out, is it not?"

"The--the drouth, ma'am, has been so cruel hard."

"And, to my shame, I am so comfortable that I almost forgot how others are suffering. But my son never forgets, Jean. You are not crying, are you?"

"No, ma'am."

"Bring the iron to the parlor, then. And if the minis--Why did you start, Jean? I only heard a dog barking."

"I thocht, ma'am--at first I thocht it was Mr. Dishart opening the door. Ay, it's just a dog; some gypsy dog on the hill, I'm thinking, for sound would carry far the night."

"Even you, Jean, are nervous at nights, I see, if there is no man in the house. We shall hear no more distant dogs barking, I warrant, when the minister comes home."

"When he comes home, ma'am."

On the middle of a hill--a man and a woman:

"Courage, beloved; we are nearly there."

"But, Gavin, I cannot see the encampment."

"The night is too dark."

"But the gypsy fires?"

"They are in the Toad's-hole."

"Listen to that dog barking."

"There are several dogs at the encampment, Babbie."

"There is one behind us. See, there it is!"

"I have driven it away, dear. You are trembling."

"What we are doing frightens me, Gavin. It is at your heels again!"

"It seems to know you."

"Oh, Gavin, it is Lord Rintoul's collie Snap. It will bite you."

"No, I have driven it back again. Probably the earl is following us."

"Gavin, I cannot go on with this."

"Quicker, Babbie."

"Leave me, dear, and save yourself."

"Lean on me, Babbie."

"Oh, Gavin, is there no way but this?"

"No sure way."

"Even though we are married to-night--"

"We shall be married in five minutes, and then, whatever befall, he cannot have you."

"But after?"

"I will take you straight to the manse, to my mother."

"Were it not for that dog, I should think we were alone on the hill."

"But we are not. See, there are the gypsy fires."

On the west side of the hill--two figures:

"Tammias, Tammias Whamond, I've lost you. Should we gang to the manse down the fields?"

"Wheesht, Hendry!"

"What are you listening for?"

"I heard a dog barking."

"Only a gypsy dog, Tammias, barking at the coming storm."

"The gypsy dogs are all tied up, and this one's atween us and the Toad's-hole. What was that?"

"It was nothing but the rubbing of the branches in the cemetery on one another. It's said, trees mak' that fearsome sound when they're terrified."

"It was a dog barking at somebody that's stoning it. I ken that sound, Hendry Munn."

"May I die the death, Tammas Whamond, if a great drap o' rain didna strike me the now, and I swear it was warm. I'm for running hame."

"I'm for seeing who drove awa that dog. Come back wi' me, Hendry."

"I winna. There's no a soul on the hill but you and me and thae daffing and drinking gypsies. How do you no answer me, Tammas? Hie, Tammas Whamond, whaur are you? He's gone! Ay, then I'll mak' tracks hame."

In the broom--a dogcart:

"Do you see nothing yet, McKenzie?"

"Scarce the broom at my knees, Rintoul. There is not a light on the hill."

"McKenzie, can that schoolmaster have deceived us?"

"It is probable."

"Urge on the horse, however. There is a road through the broom, I know. Have we stuck again?"

"Rintoul, she is not here. I promised to help you to bring her back to the Spittal before this escapade became known, but we have failed to find her. If she is to be saved, it must be by herself. I daresay she has returned already. Let me turn the horse's head. There is a storm brewing."

"I will search this gypsy encampment first, if it is on the hill. Hark! that was a dog's bark. Yes, it is Snap; but he would not bark at nothing. Why do you look behind you so often, McZenzie?"

"For some time, Rintoul, it has seemed to me that we are being followed. Listen!"

"I hear nothing. At last, McKenzie, at last, we are out of the broom."

"And as I live, Rintoul, I see the gypsy lights!"

It might have been a lantern that was flashed across the hill. Then all that part of the world went suddenly on fire. Everything was horribly distinct in that white light. The firs of Caddam were so near that it seemed to have

arrested them in a silent march upon the hill. The grass would not hide a pebble. The ground was scored with shadows of men and things. Twice the light flickered and recovered itself. A red serpent shot across it, and then again black night fell.

The hill had been illumined thus for nearly half a minute. During that time not even a dog stirred. The shadows of human beings lay on the ground as motionless as logs. What had been revealed seemed less a gypsy marriage than a picture. Or was it that during the ceremony every person on the hill had been turned into stone? The gypsy king, with his arm upraised, had not had time to let it fall. The men and women behind him had their mouths open, as if struck when on the point of calling out. Lord Rintoul had risen in the dogcart and was leaning forward. One of McKenzie's feet was on the shaft. The man crouching in the dogcart's wake had flung up his hands to protect his face. The precentor, his neck outstretched, had a hand on each knee. All eyes were fixed, as in the death glare, on Gavin and Babbie, who stood before the king, their hands clasped over the tongs. Fear was petrified on the woman's face, determination on the man's.

They were all released by the crack of the thunder, but for another moment none could have swaggered.

"That was Lord Rintoul in the dogcart," Babbie whispered, drawing in her breath.

"Yes, dear," Gavin answered resolutely, "and now is the time for me to have my first and last talk with him. Remain here, Babbie. Do not move till I come back."

"But, Gavin, he has seen. I fear him still."

"He cannot touch you now, Babbie. You are my wife."

In the vivid light Gavin had thought the dogcart much nearer than it was. He called Lord Rintoul's name, but got no answer. There were shouts behind, gypsies running from the coming rain, dogs whining, but silence in front. The minister moved on some paces. Away to the left he heard voices--

"Who was the man, McKenzie?"

"My lord, I have lost sight of you. This is not the way to the camp."

"Tell me, McKenzie, that you did not see what I saw."

"Rintoul, I beseech you to turn back. We are too late."

"We are not too late."

Gavin broke through the darkness between them and him, but they were gone. He called to them, and stopped to listen to their feet.

"Is that you, Gavin?" Babbie asked just then.

For reply, the man who had crept up to her clapped his hand upon her mouth. Only the beginning of a scream escaped from her. A strong arm drove her quickly southward.

Gavin heard her cry, and ran back to the encampment. Babbie was gone. None of the gypsies had seen her since the darkness came back. He rushed hither and thither with a torch that only showed his distracted face to others. He flung up his arms in appeal for another moment of light; then he heard Babbie scream again, and this time it was from a distance. He dashed after her; he heard a trap speeding down the green sward through the broom.

Lord Rintoul had kidnapped Babbie. Gavin had no other thought as he ran after the dogcart from which the cry had come. The earl's dog followed him, snapping at his heels. The rain began.