

CHAPTER XXVII—THE SABBATH DAY

It was indeed high time I should be gone from Swanston; but what I was to do in the meanwhile was another question. Rowley had received his orders last night: he was to say that I had met a friend, and Mrs. McRankine was not to expect me before morning. A good enough tale in itself; but the dreadful pickle I was in made it out of the question. I could not go home till I had found harbourage, a fire to dry my clothes at, and a bed where I might lie till they were ready.

Fortune favoured me again. I had scarce got to the top of the first hill when I spied a light on my left, about a furlong away. It might be a case of sickness; what else it was likely to be—in so rustic a neighbourhood, and at such an ungodly time of the morning—was beyond my fancy. A faint sound of singing became audible, and gradually swelled as I drew near, until at last I could make out the words, which were singularly appropriate both to the hour and to the condition of the singers. ‘The cock may crow, the day may daw,’ they sang; and sang it with such laxity both in time and tune, and such sentimental complaisance in the expression, as assured me they had got far into the third bottle at least.

I found a plain rustic cottage by the wayside, of the sort called double, with a signboard over the door; and, the lights within streaming forth

and somewhat mitigating the darkness of the morning, I was enabled to decipher the inscription: 'The Hunters' Tryst, by Alexander Hendry.

Porter Ales, and British Spirits. Beds.'

My first knock put a period to the music, and a voice challenged tipsily from within.

'Who goes there?' it said; and I replied, 'A lawful traveller.'

Immediately after, the door was unbarred by a company of the tallest lads my eyes had ever rested on, all astonishingly drunk and very decently dressed, and one (who was perhaps the drunkest of the lot) carrying a tallow candle, from which he impartially bedewed the clothes of the whole company. As soon as I saw them I could not help smiling to myself to remember the anxiety with which I had approached. They received me and my hastily-concocted story, that I had been walking from Peebles and had lost my way, with incoherent benignity; jostled me among them into the room where they had been sitting, a plain hedgerow alehouse parlour, with a roaring fire in the chimney and a prodigious number of empty bottles on the floor; and informed me that I was made, by this reception, a temporary member of the Six-Foot-High Club, an athletic society of young men in a good station, who made of the Hunters' Tryst a frequent resort. They told me I had intruded on an 'all-night sitting,' following upon an 'all-day Saturday tramp' of forty miles; and that the members would all be up and 'as right as ninepence' for the noonday service at some neighbouring church—Collingwood, if memory serves me right. At this

I could have laughed, but the moment seemed ill-chosen. For, though six feet was their standard, they all exceeded that measurement considerably; and I tasted again some of the sensations of childhood, as I looked up to all these lads from a lower plane, and wondered what they would do next. But the Six-Footers, if they were very drunk, proved no less kind. The landlord and servants of the Hunters' Tryst were in bed and asleep long ago. Whether by natural gift or acquired habit they could suffer pandemonium to reign all over the house, and yet lie ranked in the kitchen like Egyptian mummies, only that the sound of their snoring rose and fell ceaselessly like the drone of a bagpipe. Here the Six-Footers invaded them—in their citadel, so to speak; counted the bunks and the sleepers; proposed to put me in bed to one of the lasses, proposed to have one of the lasses out to make room for me, fell over chairs, and made noise enough to waken the dead: the whole illuminated by the same young torch-bearer, but now with two candles, and rapidly beginning to look like a man in a snowstorm. At last a bed was found for me, my clothes were hung out to dry before the parlour fire, and I was mercifully left to my repose.

I awoke about nine with the sun shining in my eyes. The landlord came at my summons, brought me my clothes dried and decently brushed, and gave me the good news that the Six-Foot-High Club were all abed and sleeping off their excesses. Where they were bestowed was a puzzle to me until (as I was strolling about the garden patch waiting for breakfast) I came on a barn door, and, looking in, saw all the red face mixed in the straw like

plums in a cake. Quoth the stalwart maid who brought me my porridge and bade me 'eat them while they were hot,' 'Ay, they were a' on the ran-dan last nicht! Hout! they're fine lads, and they'll be nane the waur of it. Forby Farbes's coat. I dinna see wha's to get the creish off that!' she added, with a sigh; in which, identifying Forbes as the torch-bearer, I mentally joined.

It was a brave morning when I took the road; the sun shone, spring seemed in the air, it smelt like April or May, and some over-venturous birds sang in the coppices as I went by. I had plenty to think of, plenty to be grateful for, that gallant morning; and yet I had a twitter at my heart. To enter the city by daylight might be compared to marching on a battery; every face that I confronted would threaten me like the muzzle of a gun; and it came into my head suddenly with how much better a countenance I should be able to do it if I could but improvise a companion. Hard by Merchiston I was so fortunate as to observe a bulky gentleman in broadcloth and gaiters, stooping with his head almost between his knees, before a stone wall. Seizing occasion by the forelock, I drew up as I came alongside and inquired what he had found to interest him.

He turned upon me a countenance not much less broad than his back.

'Why, sir,' he replied, 'I was even marvelling at my own indefeasible stupeedity: that I should walk this way every week of my life, weather permitting, and should never before have notticed that stone,' touching

it at the same time with a goodly oak staff.

I followed the indication. The stone, which had been built sideways into the wall, offered traces of heraldic sculpture. At once there came a wild idea into my mind: his appearance tallied with Flora's description of Mr. Robbie; a knowledge of heraldry would go far to clinch the proof; and what could be more desirable than to scrape an informal acquaintance with the man whom I must approach next day with my tale of the drovers, and whom I yet wished to please? I stooped in turn.

'A chevron,' I said; 'on a chief three mullets? Looks like Douglas, does it not?'

'Yes, sir, it does; you are right,' said he: 'it does look like Douglas; though, without the tinctures, and the whole thing being so battered and broken up, who shall venture an opinion? But allow me to be more personal, sir. In these degenerate days I am astonished you should display so much proficiency.'

'O, I was well grounded in my youth by an old gentleman, a friend of my family, and I may say my guardian,' said I; 'but I have forgotten it since. God forbid I should delude you into thinking me a herald, sir! I am only an ungrammatical amateur.'

'And a little modesty does no harm even in a herald,' says my new acquaintance graciously.

In short, we fell together on our onward way, and maintained very amicable discourse along what remained of the country road, past the suburbs, and on into the streets of the New Town, which was as deserted and silent as a city of the dead. The shops were closed, no vehicle ran, cats sported in the midst of the sunny causeway; and our steps and voices re-echoed from the quiet houses. It was the high-water, full and strange, of that weekly trance to which the city of Edinburgh is subjected: the apotheosis of the Sawbath; and I confess the spectacle wanted not grandeur, however much it may have lacked cheerfulness. There are few religious ceremonies more imposing. As we thus walked and talked in a public seclusion the bells broke out ringing through all the bounds of the city, and the streets began immediately to be thronged with decent church-goers.

‘Ah!’ said my companion, ‘there are the bells! Now, sir, as you are a stranger I must offer you the hospitality of my pew. I do not know whether you are at all used with our Scottish form; but in case you are not I will find your places for you; and Dr. Henry Gray, of St. Mary’s (under whom I sit), is as good a preacher as we have to show you.’

This put me in a quandary. It was a degree of risk I was scarce prepared for. Dozens of people, who might pass me by in the street with no more than a second look, would go on from the second to the third, and from that to a final recognition, if I were set before them, immobilised in a

pew, during the whole time of service. An unlucky turn of the head would suffice to arrest their attention. 'Who is that?' they would think: 'surely I should know him!' and, a church being the place in all the world where one has least to think of, it was ten to one they would end by remembering me before the benediction. However, my mind was made up:

I thanked my obliging friend, and placed myself at his disposal.

Our way now led us into the north-east quarter of the town, among pleasant new faubourgs, to a decent new church of a good size, where I was soon seated by the side of my good Samaritan, and looked upon by a whole congregation of menacing faces. At first the possibility of danger kept me awake; but by the time I had assured myself there was none to be apprehended, and the service was not in the least likely to be enlivened by the arrest of a French spy, I had to resign myself to the task of listening to Dr. Henry Gray.

As we moved out, after this ordeal was over, my friend was at once surrounded and claimed by his acquaintances of the congregation; and I was rejoiced to hear him addressed by the expected name of Robbie.

So soon as we were clear of the crowd—'Mr. Robbie?' said I, bowing.

'The very same, sir,' said he.

'If I mistake not, a lawyer?'

‘A writer to His Majesty’s Signet, at your service.’

‘It seems we were predestined to be acquaintances!’ I exclaimed. ‘I have here a card in my pocket intended for you. It is from my family lawyer. It was his last word, as I was leaving, to ask to be remembered kindly, and to trust you would pass over so informal an introduction.’

And I offered him the card.

‘Ay, ay, my old friend Daniel!’ says he, looking on the card. ‘And how does my old friend Daniel?’

I gave a favourable view of Mr. Romaine’s health.

‘Well, this is certainly a whimsical incident,’ he continued. ‘And since we are thus met already—and so much to my advantage!—the simplest thing will be to prosecute the acquaintance instantly. Let me propose a snack between sermons, a bottle of my particular green seal—and when nobody is looking we can talk blazons, Mr. Ducie!’—which was the name I then used and had already incidentally mentioned, in the vain hope of provoking a return in kind.

‘I beg your pardon, sir: do I understand you to invite me to your house?’ said I.

‘That was the idea I was trying to convey,’ said he. ‘We have the name of hospitable people up here, and I would like you to try mine.’

‘Mr. Robbie, I shall hope to try it some day, but not yet,’ I replied. ‘I hope you will not misunderstand me. My business, which brings me to your city, is of a peculiar kind. Till you shall have heard it, and, indeed, till its issue is known, I should feel as if I had stolen your invitation.’

‘Well, well,’ said he, a little sobered, ‘it must be as you wish, though you would hardly speak otherwise if you had committed homicide! Mine is the loss. I must eat alone; a very pernicious thing for a person of my habit of body, content myself with a pint of skinking claret, and meditate the discourse. But about this business of yours: if it is so particular as all that, it will doubtless admit of no delay.’

‘I must confess, sir, it presses,’ I acknowledged.

‘Then, let us say to-morrow at half-past eight in the morning,’ said he; ‘and I hope, when your mind is at rest (and it does you much honour to take it as you do), that you will sit down with me to the postponed meal, not forgetting the bottle. You have my address?’ he added, and gave it me—which was the only thing I wanted.

At last, at the level of York Place, we parted with mutual civilities,

and I was free to pursue my way, through the mobs of people returning from church, to my lodgings in St. James' Square.

Almost at the house door whom should I overtake but my landlady in a dress of gorgeous severity, and dragging a prize in her wake: no less than Rowley, with the cockade in his hat, and a smart pair of tops to his boots! When I said he was in the lady's wake I spoke but in metaphor. As a matter of fact he was squiring her, with the utmost dignity, on his arm; and I followed them up the stairs, smiling to myself.

Both were quick to salute me as soon as I was perceived, and Mrs. McRankine inquired where I had been. I told her boastfully, giving her the name of the church and the divine, and ignorantly supposing I should have gained caste. But she soon opened my eyes. In the roots of the Scottish character there are knots and contortions that not only no stranger can understand, but no stranger can follow; he walks among explosives; and his best course is to throw himself upon their mercy—'Just as I am, without one plea,' a citation from one of the lady's favourite hymns.

The sound she made was unmistakable in meaning, though it was impossible

to be written down; and I at once executed the manoeuvre I have recommended.

'You must remember I am a perfect stranger in your city,' said I. 'If I

have done wrong, it was in mere ignorance, my dear lady; and this afternoon, if you will be so good as to take me, I shall accompany you.'

But she was not to be pacified at the moment, and departed to her own quarters murmuring.

'Well, Rowley,' said I; 'and have you been to church?'

'If you please, sir,' he said.

'Well, you have not been any less unlucky than I have,' I returned. 'And how did you get on with the Scottish form?'

'Well, sir, it was pretty 'ard, the form was, and reether narrow,' he replied. 'I don't know w'y it is, but it seems to me like as if things were a good bit changed since William Wallace! That was a main queer church she took me to, Mr. Anne! I don't know as I could have sat it out, if she 'adn't 'a' give me peppermints. She ain't a bad one at bottom, the old girl; she do pounce a bit, and she do worry, but, law bless you, Mr. Anne, it ain't nothink really—she don't mean it. W'y, she was down on me like a 'undredweight of bricks this morning. You see, last night she 'ad me in to supper, and, I beg your pardon, sir, but I took the freedom of playing her a chune or two. She didn't mind a bit; so this morning I began to play to myself, and she flounced in, and flew up, and carried on no end about Sunday!'

'You see, Rowley,' said I, 'they're all mad up here, and you have to humour them. See and don't quarrel with Mrs. McRankine; and, above all, don't argue with her, or you'll get the worst of it. Whatever she says, touch your forelock and say, "If you please!" or "I beg pardon, ma'am." And let me tell you one thing: I am sorry, but you have to go to church with her again this afternoon. That's duty, my boy!'

As I had foreseen, the bells had scarce begun before Mrs. McRankine presented herself to be our escort, upon which I sprang up with readiness and offered her my arm. Rowley followed behind. I was beginning to grow accustomed to the risks of my stay in Edinburgh, and it even amused me to confront a new churchful. I confess the amusement did not last until the end; for if Dr. Gray were long, Mr. McCraw was not only longer, but more incoherent, and the matter of his sermon (which was a direct attack, apparently, on all the Churches of the world, my own among the number), where it had not the tonic quality of personal insult, rather inclined me to slumber. But I braced myself for my life, kept up Rowley with the end of a pin, and came through it awake, but no more.

Bethiah was quite conquered by this 'mark of grace,' though, I am afraid, she was also moved by more worldly considerations. The first is, the lady had not the least objection to go to church on the arm of an elegantly dressed young gentleman, and be followed by a spruce servant with a cockade in his hat. I could see it by the way she took possession of us, found us the places in the Bible, whispered to me the name of the

minister, passed us lozenges, which I (for my part) handed on to Rowley, and at each fresh attention stole a little glance about the church to make sure she was observed. Rowley was a pretty boy; you will pardon me if I also remembered that I was a favourable-looking young man. When we grow elderly, how the room brightens, and begins to look as it ought to look, on the entrance of youth, grace, health, and comeliness! You do not want them for yourself, perhaps not even for your son, but you look on smiling; and when you recall their images—again, it is with a smile. I defy you to see or think of them and not smile with an infinite and intimate, but quite impersonal, pleasure. Well, either I know nothing of women, or that was the case with Bethiah McRankine. She had been to church with a cockade behind her, on the one hand; on the other, her house was brightened by the presence of a pair of good-looking young fellows of the other sex, who were always pleased and deferential in her society and accepted her views as final.

These were sentiments to be encouraged; and, on the way home from church—if church it could be called—I adopted a most insidious device to magnify her interest. I took her into the confidence, that is, of my love affair, and I had no sooner mentioned a young lady with whom my affections were engaged than she turned upon me a face of awful gravity.

‘Is she bonny?’ she inquired.

I gave her full assurances upon that.

'To what denomination does she belong?' came next, and was so unexpected as almost to deprive me of breath.

'Upon my word, ma'am, I have never inquired,' cried I; 'I only know that she is a heartfelt Christian, and that is enough.'

'Ay!' she sighed, 'if she has the root of the matter! There's a remnant practically in most of the denominations. There's some in the McGlashanites, and some in the Glassites, and many in the McMillanites, and there's a leaven even in the Establishment.'

'I have known some very good Papists even, if you go to that,' said I.

'Mr. Ducie, think shame to yourself!' she cried.

'Why, my dear madam! I only—' I began.

'You shouldnae jest in serious matters,' she interrupted.

On the whole, she entered into what I chose to tell her of our idyll with avidity, like a cat licking her whiskers over a dish of cream; and, strange to say—and so expansive a passion is that of love!—that I derived a perhaps equal satisfaction from confiding in that breast of iron. It made an immediate bond: from that hour we seemed to be welded into a family-party; and I had little difficulty in persuading her to join us and to preside over our tea-table. Surely there was never so ill-matched

a trio as Rowley, Mrs. McRankine, and the Viscount Anne! But I am of the
Apostle's way, with a difference: all things to all women! When I cannot
please a woman, hang me in my cravat!