

CHAPTER IV.

JOHNNY GIBB'S POLITICAL EDUCATION.

THE reader who has followed me thus far has, I hope, obtained a sort of general notion of Johnny Gibb's character; but, while the worthy farmer of Gushetneuk is jogging leisurely home from Macduff in the cart all alone, leaving his charge to enjoy their eight-days' bathing till he should return again for them, I may be allowed to indicate a little further the stamp of man that Johnny was.

In point of worldly circumstances the goodman of Gushetneuk, by dint of honest industry and the possession of a reasonably-conditioned old tack, had come long ago to be very comfortable. He had the repute, indeed, of being rich; but to what figure his wealth really reached nobody could exactly say, or even very definitely guess, because he and his goodwife belonged to that worthy and unsophisticated order of people, now becoming rare, I fear, with whom increase of wealth brings no change either in tastes or habits of life. Johnny's table was not, in any noticeable degree, more sumptuously furnished than it had been thirty years before, when he began life on little beyond the mere labour o' his han's. He still duly every morning sat down by the little back table on the kitchen deece, whereof I have already spoken, and having put aside his bonnet and said grace, took up his horn spoon and suppit his porridge from a dainty wooden caup, the milk that seasoned it being contained in a smaller timmer luggie. The only difference

between him and the lads at the front dresser was, that Johnny had tea, and oat cakes and butter daily, whereas the lads got butter an' breid only on Sabbath mornings. At Klyack, Yule, and other festivals, master and servant feasted royally together at the same table, along with sundry invited guests, usually from among the residenters at Smiddyward. Johnny's clothing, moreover, was of exactly the same type as it had ever been; indeed, some pieces of it still extant and in use had been worn since he was a young man. What is yet more wonderful, when we think of the general habit of the prosperous part of society in this particular, Johnny had never once dreamed of "cutting" an old acquaintance because of the stigma attaching to him on account of his poverty. There was he, a man perfectly "independent" in pecuniary matters (and not less independent in his opinions and feelings), who certainly had a very good balance at his banker's, and, as was pretty broadly hinted, had, under a strong appeal, at one time actually lent money to his laird, and who yet, at kirk or market, would accost any dyker or ditcher in the parish on terms of perfect equality. The odd thing, too, was that all this did not seem in the least to lower Johnny in the respect of these poor folks, who accepted his opinions with greater deference than they were sometimes disposed to accord to those of people making much higher pretensions.

In politics, Johnny Gibb was what would be called an advanced Liberal,—only the term, I rather think, had not been invented then. When the first Reform Bill was under discussion he became conspicuous by his vehement declarations in its favour. The smith and the souter of Smiddyward had been wont to meet and discuss the subject, and to read, for mutual edification, all the Radical opinions they could find in print in the serial literature of the time. Johnny became a casual hearer, and, by and by, a not inapt pupil. And thus, when the Bill had passed and a contested election had come, Johnny went down to the polling place at the "Broch," and threw up his blue bonnet among the excited burghal crowd, who had rigged out the toon's

drummer to head their scattered procession and beat for victory. He stoutly shouted "Bruce for ever! Gordon never!" and, in place of accepting, like the other newly-enfranchised tenants in the lan', the directions of his laird, Sir Simon Frissal of Glensnicker, to vote for Captain Gordon, he resented the hint given, and at the polling place reminded Sir Simon, in very plain terms, that they two stood now, politically, on an equality.

"Step forward, John," said the rather pompous laird, when they met at the front of the polling-table. Sir Simon was inclined to hang on and see whether his presence would not overawe his refractory tenant even at the eleventh hour.

"Savin yer presence, sir," said Johnny, "I wud rather gi'e you the prefairence."

"Step forward," said the laird, severely.

"Weel, weel, sir," was the reply,— "to please you. We're a' voters alike noo, ye ken, Sir Seemon—ay, ay, we're a' alike noo. Fa is't, said ye? — Sir Mykaeal Breece!" shouted Johnny, in the ears of his astonished neighbours, and under the nose of his frowning laird. Then Johnny clapt on his bonnet, and strode away out unconcernedly.

Johnny Gibb's political opinions undoubtedly damaged his ecclesiastical prospects. The eldership in the parish, apart from Jonathan Tawse, the schoolmaster, had got worn down to two members, whereof one was much incapacitated by old age and deafness, and the other was but an unstable pillar at best, seeing that he not unfrequently got publicly tipsy on the market-day, and had been known to ride his pony belly-deep in a neighbour's dunghill on his way home, and then, when the animal could get no farther on, sit up in the saddle and shout to some supposed waitress, "Anither half-mutchkin, lassie!" The necessity of recruiting the eldership was patent, and the eyes of not a few were directed to Johnny Gibb as one fit and suitable person for the office. Others hinted at Roderick M'Aul, the souter; but, in those days, in the parish of Pyketillim, we liked to

select men of substance for the eldership. Besides, the souter was reckoned very wild in his religious opinions, inasmuch as he had agitated the question of a Sunday-School, and was believed to maintain family worship in his household.

The parish minister, the Rev. Andrew Sleekaboot, was a very peaceable man in the main, albeit a man that liked extremely well to have his own way, which, indeed, he generally got among his parishioners. The idea had been suggested to him before by Jonathan Tawse that, in order to keep Johnny Gibb docile and submissively attached to the Kirk, he should have him made an elder; and Mr. Sleekaboot was not indisposed to think that this might have prevented certain aberrations on the part of Johnny, who had been guilty of the irregularity of hearing and even entertaining as his guest a "missionar" minister, that came to the quarter occasionally on the invitation of the souter—a thing which no elder, so far as known in that region, had ever presumed to do. But now the daring course taken by Gushetneuk in setting his laird's political opinions and wishes at defiance fairly staggered Mr. Sleekaboot, and he determined to try the effect of indirect discipline in the matter. So he preached a sermon ostensibly on the qualities of those fitted to hold office in the Church, but in which his main strength was expended in picturing the dreadful offence of which they were guilty who refused in any manner of way to be subject to the powers that be. The allusions, though rather laboriously roundabout in their putting, were clear enough to the meanest capacity. The laird, Sir Simon Frissal, who, being in the quarter, had come to countenance the occasion, and who, from his boxed-in, or pumphel seat, as it was called by the irreverent youth of the parish, had nodded approval frequently during the delivery of the sermon, pronounced it "an excellent discourse," and spoke vaguely of getting it published. The general remark among the parishioners was of this sort, "Nyod, didnin he tak a gey fling at the 'lectioneerin' the day?" "Aw doot Gushetneuk cam in for a bit scaad yon'er."

Johnny Gibb met Mr. Sleekaboot in a day or two after the delivery of this famous discourse, when Johnny bluntly accosted him thus:—

“Weel, I daursay ye thocht ye hed me o’ the steel o’ repentance on Sunday, sir?”

“John! John! what do you mean by that?”

“Ou, brawly ken ye that, sir; ye’re nae so blate—yer discorse was mair like a hash o’ Tory poleetics, nor an expoondin’ o’ the Gospel.”

“John! let me warn you,—these Radical and irreverent notions of yours can end in no good.”

“That’s preceesely fat ye taul me fae the poopit on Sunday, sir.”

“I simply deduced from the passages of Scripture founded upon those general principles that ought to guide men in certain relations of life.”

“Maybe; but I think, wi’ a’ respeck, it cudna be coontit muckle short o’ a wrestin’ o’ the Word o’ Gweed to apply some o’ the remarks as ye did.”

“Mr. Gibb,” said the Rev. Mr. Sleekaboot, with some severity, “that’s a style of remark I have not been accustomed to from any parishioner.”

“Sae muckle the waur for ye, maybe,” was the undaunted reply.

“Will you be kind enough to condescend upon any remarks of mine that were not warranted by the Scripture?” added the minister.

“Weel, sir,” replied Johnny, “ye made a hantle o’ the poo’ers that be, an’ the duty o’ absolute subjection to them. Noo, sir, lat me tell ye that the Apos’le never inten’et to set up either the laird or the minaister as ane o’ the poo’ers ordeent’ to bear rowle owre’s i’ the fashion that ye seem’t to approve so muckle o’. The laird jist sets me a bit grun, an’ as lang as I keep my bargain an’ pay my rent, he has nae bizness wi’ maitters o’ conscience, temporal or spiritoal. As for the minaister, I gi’e him a’ due deference as my spiritoal instructor, gin he pruv ’imsel worthy o’ t; but fat mak’ ye o’ the text that he s’all be ‘servant of all’?”

Mr. Sleekaboot did not stay to make much of it one way or another, at that time at any rate. He mumbled out something about people being "opinionative" and "impracticable," and with a face expressive of a good deal more than he said, bade Johnny Gibb Good day.

A few Sundays thereafter it was announced from the pulpit that a batch of three new elders had been chosen; by whom was not stated, but the electing body was believed to consist of Mr. Sleekaboot and the office-bearers already referred to. Anyhow the batch did not include the name of John Gibb. The new pillars of the church were our old friend Mains of Yawal, Braeside (who was the brother-in-law of Peter Birse of Clinkstyle, hereafter to be introduced), and Teuchitsmyre. They were all men of reputable substance, and gifted with the minimum of liability to do or say anything original or remarkable.

As was fully to be anticipated, several expectant elders (and their wives) were highly exasperated at being passed over, and canvassed the gifts of the newly-ordained with some asperity. Johnny Gibb said nothing, though his unexpected exclusion caused more talk in the parish than even Mr. Sleekaboot altogether liked. And thus it came about, by and by, that, in quarters in amicable affinity with the manse, the confidentially-whispered averment was freely circulated that the unhappy tenant of Gushetneuk, greatly to the distress of his excellent pastor, had been found to be a good way from soun' on various fundamental points of doctrine; indeed, a man of violent and somewhat dangerous opinions generally.