

CHAPTER XIX.

MEG RAFFAN, THE HENWIFE.

ON the lands of Sir Simon Frissal it had been the practice from time immemorial to bind every tenant to pay yearly to the laird a "reek hen." In former days, however, the fowl in question had never been really exacted; it was merely a symbol of vassalage, as it were. But in the modernised form of lease to which the tenants who had renewed their tenure within a score of years bygone had been made subject, the figurative reek hen had, by the practical sagacity of Sir Simon's agents, been converted into half-a-dozen, nine, or a dozen "properly fed fowls," according to the size of the holding. These had to be paid over at the barn-yards in full tale; and when the damsels went thither with their arm-baskets, covered with such convenient piece of calico as they could fit on—the heads of the imprisoned birds bobbing up and down under the limp roof—it was seldom that Dawvid Hadden failed to be present to see their freights delivered. It was no part of Dawvid's duty to be there. Meg Raffan, the henwife, was quite fit to attend to her own business. But then Dawvid was a zealously diligent official; and a man's zeal may be expected to exhibit itself in the direction of that which is congenial to his nature. So it was that notwithstanding the uncomplimentary sneers of Meg Raffan, Dawvid would stand and not only count the fowls as they were discharged from the creels, but in so far as he could catch sight of them,

scrutinise every separate fowl with the eye of a connoisseur. His observations on the birds were oftener of a disparaging sort than otherwise ; and he had incurred the lasting enmity of Mrs. Birse, by remarking to her servant, on one occasion, in the audience of the henwife—"Nyod, lassie, the tae half o' that creaturs's never seen meal's corn seerly sin' they war oot o' the egg shall ; an' the lave, gin they ever laid ava, maun be poverees't wi' sax ouks clockin' ; an' some o' them actually leuks as gin they hed been in Tod Lowrie's cleuks, an' wun awa' wi' the half o' their claes aff. We maun raelly tell the laird about that."

It was an insolent speech that of Dawvid, to be sure, though the last sentence was uttered in a half jocular tone ; and when the servant damsel rehearsed it in the ears of Mrs. Birse, on her return to Clinkstyle, Mrs. Birse was naturally much incensed ; but it readily occurred to her that Meg Raffan, the henwife, was a much higher authority on gallinaceous matters than Dawvid Hadden, and her communications with Meg had hitherto been of a friendly nature. So, as Lowrin Fair was at hand, when Peter Birse senior, Peter Birse junior, and others—including Dawvid Hadden himself—would naturally be drafted off to the market, why not have Meg Raffan down to tea in a quiet way, and at any rate take hostages against any possible hostile operations on the part of Dawvid ? Only Miss Birse and herself would be privy to the transaction, and as secrecy was known to be an integral part of Meg's very nature, there was no risk of Clinkstyle gentility being tarnished by any sinister report going abroad ; and then the possible advantages to be derived from the interview were obvious.

"Mrs. Birse's compliments," etc., and would Meg Raffan come to tea ? Eh, Meg would be delighted ; and Meg came accordingly.

How hospitable Mrs. Birse of Clinkstyle and her amiable and accomplished daughter were, it needs not my pen to set forth. The henwife felt, and declared it to be "rael affec-kin ;" and how could she but indignantly rebut the aforesaid vile insinuations of Dawvid Hadden ? "Awat they war a'

richt snod, sizeable foolies," quoth Meg. "But he's jist a sneevlin, ill-fashion't creatur, 't maun be meddlin' wi' a'thing. 'Serve me, d' ye think 't the laird wud hear ony o' his ill-win' aboot respectable fowk; Sir Simon's mair o' a gentleman nor dee onything o' the kin'. Jist leuk sic an ongae's he's been haudin' aboot the Nons, an' that meetin' 't was doon i' the skweel at the Ward—aw 'm seer *that* was nane o' his bizziness."

"Weel, Mistress Raffan, fat kin' o' a conscience can he hae, fleein' i' the face o' the vera word o' Gweed?"

"The word o' Gweed! It's muckle 't he'll care for that, gin he cud get haud'n in wi' gryte fowk."

"Sir Seemon *hed* gi'en 'im orders to thraeten Sandy Peterkin, than?" suggested Mrs. Birse.

"Weel, aw 'm nae thinkin' 't he hed not mony orders, no. But the vera nicht aifter the meetin'—(aw div not believe but the creatur hed been lyin' at the back o' the dyke seein' them gedder)—faur's my gentleman awa' till, think ye?"

"Eh, but aw cudna say; ony wye but faur respectable fowk wud gae."

"Faur but dominie Tawse's! Ye see," continued Meg, attuning her voice to the very confidential pitch, "I gat a' this fae her hersel'. Eh, she has a sad life o' 't wi' 'im, the tyrannical, naisty, ill-livin' creatur; an' that vera nicht he cam' hame fae the dominie's bleezin—he's takin' sair to the drink, an' isna't a rael scunnerfu' thing to see the like o' Maister Tawse, a man o' leernin' an' pairts, colleagin wi' sic company?"

"Jonathan Tawse!—an aul' sneeshinie, drucken slype. Leernin' or than no!" said Mrs. Birse, scornfully. "It's jist sic mannie sic horsie atween the twa for that maitter."

"Deed, awat an' ye never spak a truer word," answered Meg, bethinking herself. "I 'm weel seer Maister Peterkin's a muckle mair discreet man to hae chairge o' onybody's bairns."

"He's seen a great deal more of the wordle; and been in better society than Tawse," interposed Miss Birse.

"Weel, 's aw was sayin'," continued Meg Raffan, "Mrs.

Hadden says to me at the time, says she, 'Dawvid was up b' cairts the streen, wusnin he?' 'But fan was Dawvid onything else wi' his tale?' says I. 'Gin we war to believe a't we hear, there's some fowk wud never mak' nor mell wi' naething less nor gentry.' I wudna lat 'er aff wi' och nor flee't aw cud help; for they're *that* upsettin', baith o' them. 'Ay but,' says she, 'that was nane o' yer dog-dirders an' ostlers forgedderin to get a bit boose, fan they gat their maister oot o' the road.' This was lattin at me, ye ken, for inveetin the coachman an' the gamekeeper up bye, aifter Sir Simon gaed awa'; aw 'm seer decenter or mair neebourly fowk ye wudna get i' the seyven pairis'es. But, aw b'lieve, I hed 'er there no. 'Keep me, Kirsty,' says I, 'ye dinn mean to say 't Dawvid actually was fou at this braw pairty than? There was fowk 't ye ken weel i' the Lodge this vera nicht, 't wud 'a threepit owre me that they saw Dawvid stoiterin as he gaed hame the streen. But I wud *not* latt'n them say 't.' Gin that didna tak' the stiffin oot o' Kirsty' cockernony, I'se lea'e 't."

"I 'm rael glaid 't ye chappit 'er in about the richt gate," said Mrs. Birse. "Settin' up their noses that wye, they wud need it—vulgar pack."

"Wi' that she pits 'er apron till 'er een, an' shak's 'er heid. 'Oh, Meggy,' says she, 'aw kent ye was aye my true freen; dinna mention 't to nae leevin. But Dawvid, though he was weel to live, was richt gweed company, an' was *not* nabal wi' me the streen.' 'It hed been a humoursome pairty, than, as weel's a braw ane?' says I. 'Weel, an' it was a' that,' says she; 'an' Dawvid was that newsie aifter he cam' hame 't I thocht never to get 'im till 's bed.' An' foo that she sud say that Mains o' Yawal was there, an' Teuchitsmyre, an' severals o' the muckle fairmers."

"An' that was Dawvid's braw fowk—I wuss 'im luck o' sic mennerly company—Han' up the kyaak basket wi' the short-breid, Eliza," said Mrs. Birse.

"They're stupid and ignorant people," observed Miss Birse; "and if Jonathan Tawse were accustomed to good company, he wudna ask them till 's hoose."

"Na—nae mair, aw thank ye," quoth Meg. "I've deen byous weel. I'll jist drink oot my drap at leasure. The third cup sudna be the warst, ye ken; an' awat ye've gi'en 's 't richt gweed."

Meg Raffan paused; and, with the facts as they actually were, Mrs. Birse was too shrewd a woman not to comprehend the significance of the last remark.

"Noo, Mrs. Birse, ye *wull not* pit fusky in amo' my tae; na—nae the fu' o' that gryte muckle gless; ye wull mak' me licht-heidit gin ever a body was 't."

It was evidently worth doing, however; and, truth to say, Meg Raffan offered no very strenuous resistance to the emptying of the glass into her cup. Neither did the emptying of the cup itself seem to produce very much of the effect she had dreaded. Meg only got more talkative, and went on to describe fully how she had pumped out of Mrs. Dawvid Hadden all that had been transacted at Jonathan Tawse's party concerning which Dawvid had been so mightily uplifted. It appeared that in addition to Pykettillim people, there had been present Jonathan's friend, the younger Dr. Drogemweal, who had settled doon throu', so as to be beyond the limits of his father's sucken; and that Dawvid had enumerated to the company the entire list of those who had been present at the Smiddyward meeting, the result thus far being a sort of critical analysis of each individual's character and position. Johnny Gibb, the smith, and the souter, had been classed together as hopeless incorrigibles, compounded in pretty nearly equal parts of the fanatic and the radical; and it was deemed prudent to say little more about them. Sandy Peterkin was denounced very severely; and it seemed that Dawvid, in his elevation, had freely avowed his intention, and even boasted of the power he possessed, to "sort him, at any rate." And not less was Dawvid incensed at that "fair-tongue't howffin, Hairry Muggart," by whom the zealous ground-officer all but confessed he had been fairly led on the ice, and on whom he declared his intention to be revenged. And then they had come nearer home.



"Noo, Mrs. Birse, aw wudna tell 't to my nain sister for warl's gear; but aw 'm seer she 'll never ken that it cam' fae me;" and Meg looked inquiringly toward Miss Birse, and next toward her mother, as much as to say, "Would it not be wise to remove her at any rate?"

"Eliza 's been taucht breedin' owre weel to cairry clypes," said Mrs. Birse, a little haughtily.

"Eh, forbid 't I sud mint at onything o' the kin', Mrs. Birse. She wudna be your dother to dee onything like that—weel the mair shame to them that sud speak aifter sic a fashion. 'An' hed they naething to say aboot the goodwife o' Clinkstyle?' says I to Kirsty, in a careless-like mainer. 'Weel, Meggy,' says she, speakin' aneth 'er breath—an' she gart my vera flesh creep fan she pat up 'er han' like a distrackit person—I ken I can lippen onything to you,' says she, 'but Dawvid wud fell me gin he thocht 't I war to apen my lips aboot it to my nain mither—Maister Tawse sud say to Dawvid, 'Weel, Davie, fat are ye to dee wi' that randy o' a wife o' Clinkstyle?'"—noo, Mrs. Birse, it's a Gweed's trowth 't aw 'm tellin' ye. Eh, he's a haivelless man; nae won'er nor ye was obleeg't to tak' yer innocent bairns awa' fae's skweel."

"Mamma," exclaimed Miss Birse, in great excitement, "I wud gar papa prosecute him."

"'Liza, gae an' see that Betty's nae mislippenin' 'er jots i' the kitchie," said Mrs. Birse, addressing her daughter with unwonted peremptoriness. Miss Birse, with very evident reluctance, obeyed, so far, at any rate, as to leave the parlour; and her mother continued, "I'm nae su'pris't at onything 't that creatur wud say; but fowk maun hae regaird for the edification an' richt upfeshin o' their affspring, as Mr. Macrory taul's weel-a-wat; an' I cudna lat the lassie sit an' hear 'er nain pawrents wilipen'it wi' the like o' 'im. Weel?"

"'Oh,' says Dawvid, 'aw 'm thinkin' nedder you nor Mr. Sleekaboot made yer plack a bawbee by tiggin wi' her. So I'se lat sleepin' tykes lie there.' An' trow ye me, Dawvid thocht he hed gi'en them a gey clever cut wi' that

—impident smatchet that he is. An' maister Tawse sud 'a said some rael roch words, rebattin on 'im like. Eh, but aw cudna come owre them, Mrs. Birse, on nae accoont."

"Far be't fae me to hear their coorse langige," said Mrs. Birse, "but it's richt that fowk sud ken fat kin' o' characters they are."

"'Deed, awat that's richt true; for as sair's it is to mention 't. 'Weel,' says they, 'an' fat comes o' a' your blawin aboot fat ye cud dee't nae ither man cud dee?' 'Oh,' says Dawvid, 'Peter 'imsel' 's a saft breet; he made oot to win free o' the meetin' by feingyin a drow. Jist bide ye still, fan the neist meetin' comes, gin I dinna mak' oot to fesh back 's drow till 'im as ill 's ever.' An' wi' that they hed haud'n the saddest hyse't cud be. Tawse an' this young doctor—he was aye a weirdless blackguard—i' the lang rin o' 't, made o' Dawvid, an' swall't the creatur's heid, till he was as prood 's oor aul' turkey cock, an' blawin at the rate o' nae allooance aboot fat he cud and sud dee. An' I'm seer, fae fat I gat oot o' Kirsty, that they hed eikit 'im up till as muckle mischief aboot this kirk wark 's they cud."

"I dinna doot that neen," said Mrs. Birse, with an air of grave self-satisfaction. "An' fat ither cud we expeck fae sic a weirdless mengyie makin' a teel o' an oonprencipl't drucken creatur?"

"Eh, he's a coorse ill-gate't ablich," continued Meg. "Hooever, that's the rinnin's o' the haille affair; an' aw 'm seer I cudna hed a licht conscience to keep it oot o' yer sicht; though—I was jist richt sair—owrecome—ere I cud mak' up—my min'—aboot tellin' ye 't."

Here Meg Raffan exhibited outward tokens of owrecome-ness, for which, happily, Mrs. Birse knew the practical remedy, and applied it. And on the whole she concluded that her trouble as the entertainer had been tolerably well repaid by the henwife's visit. The glimpse of Jonathan Tawse's party, and the sort of estimate she had been enabled to form of Dawvid Hadden's position in relation to matters polemical, had put her in possession of information which she did not doubt of being able to use with good effect afterwards.