

CHAPTER XII.

THE SMIDDYWARD PRAYER MEETING.

EVER since the time of his visit to the Wells in 1839, Johnny Gibb had been applying his mind more actively than before to current ecclesiastical questions. The conversation of his Marnoch friend had given him an impetus in that direction, which occasional epistolary communications from the same quarter, with accounts of the exciting intrusionist scenes enacted there, as recorded in the newspapers, had served to prolong and intensify. And whereas Johnny's burden against a jolly and ease-loving clergy had previously partaken very much of the nature of a general denunciation of them as "dumb dogs who cannot bark," he had now learnt clearly to distinguish between Moderates and Evangelicals, and these words were frequently on his lips. In the person of Mr. Sleekaboot, moreover, Johnny deemed that he found the very incarnation of Moderatism. This fact set the worthy man terribly on edge, and as the sounds of controversy in the Church courts fell ever and anon on his wakeful ears, he felt it only the more incumbent on him to stand boldly up for the good cause. His right-hand man in this crisis was Roderick M'Aul, the souter at Smiddyward, and it so happened that about the date now reached in my narrative, the Rev. Alister Macrory, whom the souter had known in his youth, and of whose gifts and piety he had a good opinion, but who, by some mischance, had hitherto failed in getting tied to any parish in particular, was passing

through the region, and felt that he could not do less than call upon his old acquaintance, by whom he was hospitably entertained. Johnny Gibb, of course, was asked over to enjoy the visitor's conversation; and it then occurred to the two friends that, as the Rev. Alister Macrory was not particularly pressed for time, they might retain his services for a few weeks, and give the parishioners of Pyketillim the opportunity for one of hearing the Gospel preached. It was an easy matter to secure the use of Sandy Peterkin's school for the purpose, and it was secured accordingly.

The school at Smiddyward was not an imposing structure, either as regards external appearance or interior decoration. It was straw-thatched, with the door halved transversely, and not longitudinally; and inside there were desks and seats of a very plain sort for about forty pupils. The roof was an "open" one, with the "wood-work" quite "visible" (so far as the accumulation of soot thereon admitted), and not less so the divots that overlaid it. There Sandy Peterkin bore rule. His school, let me say, was thriving in a way that fully equalled Sandy's most sanguine expectations. I don't think, however, that these were very extravagant. The first of Mr. Macrory's services had been held in the school on a week-day evening, with an audience that half filled the place; and the event had caused no little talk in the parish. Johnny Gibb precented, a service which the older parishioners could recollect his having occasionally performed, on emergencies, in the parish kirk, many long years ago; and the energetic oratory of Mr. Macrory, without any "paper" to aid him therein, was fitted to startle, apart altogether from the matter, by the very contrast it presented to the perfectly unimpassioned performance of Mr. Sleekaboot, as he read over once more the well-thumbed MS., which the more attentive parishioners knew so well by head-mark that they could give you day and date of its last preaching, and also predict, with tolerable accuracy, the next time it would be put to the same use. But the Rev. Alister Macrory, albeit a little uncouth and violent in his manner, and given to shaking



his fist and staring directly forward at a particular point in his audience, as if he wanted to single you out individually to be preached at, was, to all appearance, a man really in earnest, and the general impression made by his discourses was something new in the quarter.

Now, it so happened that at the very time Mrs. Birse withdrew her hopeful younger son, Benjie, from the pedagogic rule of Jonathan Tawse, one or two little incidents had occurred fitted to stagger that eminently prudent matron, and even to some extent to shake her belief in the human race generally. Miss Birse had spent the winter in Aberdeen, in attendance at a fashionable ladies' seminary; and, let me say it, had been wonderfully successful in picking up that uneasy polish and those stilted conventional phrases that lend such a charm to the manner of our proper and properly-trained young ladies. She was coming home "finished" in a style that should make her an acquisition in the best society in the parish. So thought her mamma; and the idea had occurred to her, that, as Eliza had boarded with a distant relative whose hospitality was deemed amply repaid by the presentation of a half-stane kebbuckie, once for all, with a dozen of eggs and a pound or two of butter every month, when fresh linen was despatched to the interesting young lady, Benjie might be sent to some school of classic repute, and fill his sister's vacated place as a lodger on the same terms. Mrs. Birse was scandalised when the ungrateful people made it known that they "cudna tak' a countra loon on nae accoont—they hed owre many mou's to fill o' their nain;" and she was more than scandalised at the "dryness" exhibited by them towards Eliza at parting, when the goodman of the house, as it seemed, had had to carry her things past Kittybrewster to the Flyboat house, and to supplement for Miss Birse the sixpence she was short of her fare homeward by that admirable medium of communication.

"I'm seer fowk wudna ken fat to dee to keep doon the ill crap o' some creaturs. Fan they war onfeelin aneuch to try a pawrent's hert b' refeesin the laddie, peer innocent,

they notna 'a latten oot their breath upo' her'; mony a bare aneuch day has she kent wi' them; an' weel may seem—her vera frocks needin' takin' in to keep them onfa'en aff o' her body. An' she hedna hed bawbees to get pieces till 'ersel files, oot o' sicht o' their bairns, aw div not believe but she wud 'a gotten a mischief o' hunger."

So said Mrs. Birse in her indignation.

However, as Benjie could not be transferred to Aberdeen, a dilemma had occurred; and during its continuance Master Benjamin, as has been said, seemed in nowise indisposed to enjoy rural life; in such forms as, for example, those of walking with Tam Meerison at the plough for hours, and riding the pony to water and back, and grooming it, despite the warnings of his mother as to the degrading tendency of such occupations on a young man destined to learned pursuits. His next elder brother being intended for the farm, it mattered less how his education was picked up. So things had gone on for some weeks, when all of a sudden Mrs. Birse announced that Benjie was to be sent to Sandy Peterkin to continue his studies. Peter Birse senior shook his head dubiously and protested. But Mrs. Birse was firm. Finding sundry other arguments unavailing, Peter urged—

"But, ye ken, Sandy disna preten' to be claer o' the Laitin 'imself', 'oman; an' ye cudna expeck him to leern 't weel till ithers."

"An' fat for no? There's fowk preten's to be claer upon 't that mak's but a peer shot at leernin ithers."

"Ou, but ye ken Maister Tawse hedna Benjie lang."

"An' hedna he Jock Ogg, the gauger's loon, hailt twa year at it; an' aifter a' his peer fader was forced to pack 'im awa' to the sea. The fient a flee hed he leern't but a lot o' ill tricks an' lees; for's nain gweed-mither taul' me oot o' 'er ain mou. An' that aul', greedy, sneeshinie howffin gaen on chairgin' an' ondeemas soom for skweel fees a' the time. A bonnie story to say that the peer innocent was feingyin fan he tyeuk a drow! Jist his nain strunge mainner an' ill natur' 't flegs the creaturs."

“Weel, I’m maist seer the minaster ’ll be ill pleas’t,” continued Peter.”

“An’ fat raiks? It’ll be lang ere ye be made fat aff o’ him! I’m seer they gat twa as gweed hens as ever swally’t black dist fae this toon at Aul’ Yeel; but I b’lieve, though they hed a’ the upsettin’ trash i’ the pairis’ at the Manse i’ the coorse o’ the winter, *we* never bruik breid wi’ them.”

“But it wudna dee to offen’ the minaster, ye ken—gin fowk war in tribble or onything”——

“Peter Birse, fat are ye raelly thinkin’ aboot? Fat has that to dee wi’ the edication o’ fowk’s bairns? Maister Sleekaboot may be a gweed aneuch man in’s ain place, an’ he war latt’n aleen b’ ’s nain ’t ocht to ken better. Leddies!—they wud need it! But the peer man’s siclike led, ’t aw raelly believe it’s the trowth that Gushetneuk says that he does *not* preach the Gospel.”

“Keep me, ’oman, I won’er at ye speakin’ that gate. His preachin’ ’s a hantle better nor we practeese.”

“Ou, I daursay some fowk’s but speakin’ the trowth fan they say that; but he’s a rael wor’dly-min’et person.”

“Hoot, I’m seer ye ken he’s a weel-meanin’ man, an’ a weel-leern’t.”

“Aweel, gin he get’s nain cronies a’ richt, he winna care fat the affcasts dee!—hm! So ye’ll jist gae doon wi’ me the nicht to the skweel at Smiddyward. We can see Sandy Peterkin aboot Benjie; and there’s to be a preachin’ i’ the skweel i’ the evenin’, by ane Macrory fae the wast kwintra. They say he’s weel worth the hearin, an’ we’se jist bide an’ get a word fae ’im.”

It was in vain for Peter to remonstrate. Mrs. Birse had found cause of offence in both Mr. Sleekaboot and Jonathan Tawse, and she was resolved to open a campaign against both. Jonathan would be punished by the conclusive withdrawal of her sons from his school, and sending them to that of his rival; and she knew that by their going to hear an itinerant preacher Mr. Sleekaboot would be at once incensed in a high degree, which would be likely to give

opportunity for at least reminding him, as she knew how, of his shortcomings in tending his flock.

It was on the evening appointed for the second sermon or address that the goodwife of Clinkstyle led her reluctant spouse down to Smiddyward. Their business with Sandy Peterkin was easily despatched, Sandy, who honestly confessed that his classics were a little rusted, undertaking to do the best he could with Benjie; and they were then free to attend the meeting.

"Ou, ay, it's a prayer meetin' the nicht," said Sandy Peterkin, when Mrs. Birse had announced her intention. "I'm gaen awa' to pit up the lights—they'll be gedderin eenoo. Ye'll jist sit still at the fireside here. I winna be a minute in bein' back."

Sandy groped in his aumry till he got hold of two penny candles, one of which he put in a tin candlestick, while he stuck the lower end of the other into a turnip suitably excavated. He lighted one of them, and when he had sidled away out, endeavouring to keep the wind from it until he should reach the school, Peter Birse made a last despairing appeal to his wife.

"Keep 's, 'oman, did ye hear that?"

"Hear fat?"

"Sandy says it's a prayer meetin', an' nae a preachin'."

"Weel; an' fat for no?"

"Ye seerly winna gang till 't, than?"

"There'll naebody tak' a bite o' 's though we dee."

"Hoot, 'oman, it's owre sairious for jokin'. It's as ill's the vera missionars. There wus never the like heard o' in this pairis'."

"This pairis'! humph! This pairis' is some mark or than no."

"Fat will the minaster say, an' my ain gweed-breeder ane o' his el'ers?"

Peter's remonstrances were cut short by the return of Sandy Peterkin, who announced that they were now "feckly gedder't." So at his goodwife's beck and bidding, and in the circumstances, as to public facts and general feeling, which

he had accurately described, Clinkstyle had to do his conscience the direct violence involved in attending a prayer meeting.

When they entered, the audience was found to consist mainly of women and young people, though, as far as might be seen by the dim candle-light, there were six or eight grown-up men present.

Mr. Macrory conducted the opening services, and then read and expounded a chapter, making sundry very pointed applications; and leaving it to be clearly understood that the cold morality which was droned into the ears of the people from Sabbath to Sabbath was of no avail to save either the teacher or the taught from everlasting perdition. The sort of direct onslaught, both in word and look, in which the speaker indulged, made Peter Birse feel a good way short of perfectly comfortable; and, judging by appearances, others of his neighbours could have dispensed with some small part of Mr. Macrory's energy, without complaining. As for Mrs. Birse, she at once adopted an air of edifying demureness; and took care to sidle up far enough to be full in sight of Johnny and Mrs. Gibb, who were seated near by the preacher, their servants, Jinse Deans and Willy M'Aul, with the lassie, occupying the seat next behind them. Mr. Macrory had finished his exposition; he gave out a psalm to be sung, and then, when the singing was concluded, in a very audible and deliberate tone announced that "Our brother, Mr. M'Aul, will engage in prayer." There was a sort of electric start among a considerable part of the audience at this intimation, as much as to say, "The souter engage in prayer!" And, no doubt, if they had known the ancient adage primarily applying to men of his calling, they would have mentally repeated it. All the same, they felt the sentiment therein expressed. It had beforetime been bruited abroad that Roderick M'Aul kept up family worship daily, and two or three customers who had at sundry times accidentally stumbled in when he was about to commence, had gone through sensations which they were shy of attempting to describe, on being asked by Roderick to join in the

devotions. But that Roderick M'Aul should stand up before a public audience, and offer up prayer—Roderick M'Aul, who was just a souter, and with not a shred of clerical character about him—the thing was so utterly beyond the scope of the most fervid imagination among the general body of the parishioners of Pyketillim, that not only did several of the audience at the meeting, besides Peter Birse, feel in some doubt whether they stood with their heads or their heels uppermost, but the news of what had occurred spread rapidly through the parish next day. The deed was declared by several to be “daurin’,” and by quite as great a number to be “blasphemous.”

Nevertheless, the example set by the souter did not, I think, fail in having its effects. If the simple and fervent, albeit slightly ungrammatical utterance of the devotional feelings within him had the effect of dumfounding and scandalising some, there were others of his audience that were impressed in a more wholesome way; and among these was Johnny Gibb, who went home with the honest conviction in his breast that Roderick M'Aul was a better man than himself. “For,” said Johnny, “he’s ready to confess Christ afore men aifter a fashion that I hae never mintit to dee yet.”

CHAPTER XIII.

THE DISTRIBUTION MEETING—ECCLESIASTICAL OPINIONS.

OF course, Mr. Sleekaboot was speedily made acquainted with the operations of the Rev. Alister Macrory at Smiddyward; but he took it all very coolly. There had been ranting fanatics in the world long before now, and there would no doubt be so till the end of time, said the Rev. Mr. Sleekaboot.

At the quarterly Distribution, when all the bawbees gathered by the brod for the bygone three months were to be fully reckoned and apportioned, the elders met at the Manse; and each got his share to pay over to the various recipients—quiet, and not particularly uncomfortable old bodies of both sexes; real old residenters; not your modern paupers of the clamorous, thriftless, and unsatisfied sort. And this part of their duty the Session discharged with creditable assiduity, and even more than creditable humanity. Have I not seen Mains of Yawal, who lived farthest from the kirk, time after time, carrying home his portion of the offering, all too bulky to go into any pouch he had, carefully enclosed in his blue-spotted "pocket-napkin," and dangling in his hand with solid weight? And he would thereafter go his round, be it fair night or foul, to see Saun'ers Tapp, and Lizzy Glegg, and their ancient contemporaries, and all to give to each his or her due share of the offering bawbees.

But, meanwhile, I am not concerned with the details of the distribution. Sometimes when the elders met to arrange for it at the Manse—though, I daresay, this formed no part

of the *res gestæ* to be minuted by Jonathan Tawse—the sederunt would be wound up by a quiet glass of toddy. Such was the case at the distribution meeting that occurred just two nights after Mr. Macrory's meeting at Smiddyward. And the elders were all present, with the exception of Clinkstyle's sister's husband, Braeside. Of course the subject of the prayer meeting came up.

"An' fa div ye think sud' 'a been there hearin' this ranter but Clinkstyle an' 's wife?" said Mains of Yawal.

"Poor man, poor man," answered Mr. Sleekaboot, with a smile. "I fancy he had hardly been left to the freedom of his own will in the matter."

"Deed, I can believe ye're richt there, sir," said Mr. Tawse, taking a heavy pinch of snuff. "That wife o' his is a perfect Xantippe."

"Oh—I presume she heckled you when she withdrew her precious son from the school."

"For that maitter I can usually gi'e as gweed as I get," said Mr. Tawse. "But she's a rude vulgar hizzie, natheless; an' for the loon, I never ruggit the lugs o' a more complete dunce."

"Did you venture to tell that in the audience of the maternal ears, Jonathan?" asked the minister, the jocularly of the query being shared in by only the dominie and himself, as the rest of the company failed to catch its flavour, couched in such refined English.

"Deed, I believe I fell little short o' 't. But what was that ye was sayin', Mains, aboot this fanatic, Macrory, settin the souter to gi'e a prayer at the meetin' in Sawney Peterkin's hovel?"

"Oh, it was fat they ca' a prayer meetin'; an' aifter he hed roar't on for a file 'imself, he cries oot 'Some broder 'll engagee noo;' fan up startit the souter an' gya them a screed o' 't by ordinar'. Several o' them hed been sair pitt'n oot aboot it, aw 'm thinkin'."

"An' little won'er," quoth Teuchitsmyre, the other new elder, who was a fat, red-nosed man with a very thick neck. "Ta'en a fup to them wud 'a sair't them richt."

"And heard you who all were present?" asked Mr. Sleekaboot.

"Weel, aw 'm thinkin' Gushetneuk an' 's wife, forbye, 's I was sayin', the fowk o' Clinkstyle. The lave wud be feckly the aul' wives about the Ward, an' maybe a fyoun young fowk."

"Did John Gibb take any part?"

"Eh—aw didna hear that said; but he 's been ane o' the heid deesters about feshin this Macrory to the pairt."

"A fractious, heidstrong creatur," said Jonathan Tawse. "But there's some brains in 'im tee; that was aye my opinion."

"He 's too anxious to make himself and his opinions prominent," answered Mr. Sleekaboot.

"It was a great mistak' in you, Mr. Sleekaboot—savin' the presence o' Mains an' Teuchitsmyre—to keep Gushets an' the souter oot o' the el'ership."

"How, how—men who act thus?"

"Ou ay, but an' they had been made pillars i' the kirk, like the lave o' 's, ye wud hae heard less o' any sic divisive coorses, depen' ye upon 't," said the dominie.

"I don't know; we——"

"My dear sir, fan did ye ever hear o' an el'er in the parish o' Pyketillim gaen about a kwintra side cantin' an' prayin', as this souter does, it seems? An', tak' ye my word for 't, ye 'll hae Gushetneuk followin' 's example neist."

"Well, but, Mr. Tawse," said the minister, evidently disposed to get very serious on the point, "as I was saying, and as you know, we must take good care for the order of the Church. There can be nothing more perilous to the peace of our Zion than the presence of unbridled spirits in office within her bosom. And I, in the position of spiritual head of this parish, I being responsible alike to the Presbytery and the patron Sir Simon Frissal, I would never for a moment brook the revolutionary opinions held by those men."

"Ye're vera richt, Maister Sleekaboot—vera richt," said Mains, with great emphasis. He was getting hot and red

in the face; and I think had by this time based his opinion on a tolerably wide induction, when, suddenly changing the theme, and emptying his glass, he added, "Nyod, that's capital fusky."

Teuchitsmyre nodded approvingly, and said, "It's the rael Glendronach, seerly."

"Weel, weel, as ye please, sir," replied Mr. Tawse. "I was half jokin', ye ken. But ye canna won'er though a sair-dung dominie sud try to save's nain credit by sayin' that it mitha been worth while, as a stroke o' policy, till hae latt'n Clinkstyle on to the el'ership."

"He would have been in nowise a more efficient member of session than his excellent relative, Braeside."

"Neen, neen—jist sax i' the ane an' half-a-dizzen i' the ither. Baith hairmless breets. But ye see Braeside hisna an ambitious wife—D' ye see my drift? Hooever, to pass fae that point, I think ye really ocht, in some way, to tak' an order o' these fanatics."

"Of Gibb and M'Aul?"

"Na, na; ye had better lat ill aleen there. But it mithna be difficult to frichten Peterkin fae gi'ein' that bit hole to lat them meet in."

"Well; it'll die out. There has been in all ages of the Christian Church, as I have said, an ever-recurring tendency, especially among the unlearned, to lapse into fanaticism; though the admirable organisation and discipline of our own Church have effectually repressed serious outbreaks at all times."

"An' may it be for ever sae," said Jonathan Tawse. "But fat are ye to mak' o' a' this uncanny steer o' the Non-intrusion party i' the Kirk? Ye'll hae some difficulty, *cæteris paribus*, in disciplinin' the major part o' the Kirk itsel'."

"Ay, Mr. Tawse," said the minister, with a half chuckle, "but it's not a case of *cæteris paribus*, my good friend. There is such a thing as the law of the land, and the civil power. With that at our back we need never fear the hot-headed party in the Church. Keep yourself easy."

“Ou, it winna brak’ my rest, sir. But I dinna muckle like the leuk o’ these bits o’ collisions atween the spiritual poo’er as they ca’ t, an’ the civil: siclike as in the bygone case o’ Lethendy; an’ syne, nearer han’ hame, at Marnoch; whaur, in the first case, the Coort o’ Session steps in to interdict a sattlement by a Presbytery; an’ in the neist its aid is requir’t to force an unacceptable presentee on a congregation. An’, of coorse, I needna speak o’ the starshie sinsyne still nearer oor ain door, at Culsalmond, wi’ the goodman o’ Teetaboutie.”

“Well, I have you there, Jonathan. General arguments are never so convincing as special facts. I’m glad that the brethren in Strathbogie had the firmness to endeavour to vindicate the just rights of presentees. Here you have an instance in my own case. When I had the honour of receiving a presentation from Sir Simon to the Parish of Pyketillim, I met a very cold reception, let me tell you, from the people. I don’t believe that, but for the personal presence of Sir Simon—with whom, though I say it myself, I stood high from the first—half-a-dozen people in the parish would have signed the call then. Now, I’m sure, there’s not half-a-dozen in the whole parish who would not sign it.”

“I’m seer o’ that, sir,” said Mains of Yawal; and Teuchitsmyre’s whole body gave a confirmatory hitch.

“So much for the popular voice—nothing could be more delusive,” added Mr. Sleekaboot, with an air of something like triumph.

I do not know that the Rev. Jonathan Tawse would have disputed this last sentiment at any rate; but inasmuch as he in his own case had not been so fortunate as Mr. Sleekaboot in finding a backer to enable him to get over the initial unpopularity incidental to him as a preacher, there was not exactly identity of feeling between him and his respected minister on this particular point. Therefore Jonathan took snuff afresh, refilled his tumbler, and incontinently turned the conversation to topics more congenial to Mains and Teuchitsmyre, who, being unable to follow the high argument

that the two divines had got into, had contented themselves by listening with as much of an elderlike and interested air as they could manage to assume.

The weather, and the markets for grain and live stock, subjects of common interest, and on which the whole party could speak with practical intelligence, were discussed *ad longam*, during the latter part of the evening.

The case put by Mr. Sleekaboot, and which had brought the ecclesiastical part of the conversation to a close, had been, all through the early part at least of the Ten Years' Conflict, his standing illustration of the utter fallaciousness of the Non-intrusion principle. He had quoted it repeatedly to his brethren, as well as to outsiders, and had even ventured to direct the attention of Sir Simon Frissal to it. Sir Simon had signified his approval. "Yes, yes, your style was very poor indeed," added the baronet; and Mr. Sleekaboot felt as much gratified as the circumstances allowed.

Now, it so happened in course of this very spring of 1842, and not many weeks after the distribution, that Johnny Gibb was jogging home on a market night on his trusty gray pony, and whom should he overtake but the Rev. Andrew Sleekaboot, jogging home too, from the Presbytery. Johnny's principle of action, as it concerned differences between himself and others, was always to dunt it oot as he went along. Consequently, when he and Mr. Sleekaboot met, Johnny hailed the minister as freely and frankly as if they had never cas'en oot in their lives. And Mr. Sleekaboot, who had a lingering suspicion that it might be otherwise, felt once more somewhat warmed towards his parishioner, of whom he, under the mild impulse of the moment, almost thought there might be hope even yet. Johnny was keen on ecclesiastical matters, at any rate, and perhaps his disposition toward debate had not been lessened by his share in a friendly gill with a neighbour at the stabler's before he took out his shalt. His questions about what the Presbytery had been doing did not elicit much information, but Mr. Sleekaboot could not help being dragged into a

discussion on the general Church question, when it became more and more evident to him that Johnny Gibb was a very distinct and confirmed specimen of the Non-intrusionist. So he determined for once to floor Johnny. They had just got to the point where their roads separated, and they and their shalts paused in the gloamin light.

“I tell you it’s the greatest delusion in the world. A veto law against a presentee involves the greatest fallacy as well as the greatest injustice;” and then Mr. Sleekaboot began the irrefutable illustration, “When I was settled at Pyketillim I don’t believe that I would have got almost any of the parishioners to have signed the call——”

But here Johnny broke in abruptly—

“An’ ye kent it weel, sir; feint a vera mony wud ye get yet!”

Mr. Sleekaboot was grievously taken aback. In place of finishing the statement of his favourite illustration, he said something about the “insolence of ignorant uneducated persons,” whereat Johnny, who had at least equalled his pastor in the rapidity with which he managed to get up his temper, retorted in words perhaps more vehement than respectful.

And so they parted; Mr. Sleekaboot riding off toward the Manse, while Johnny turned the head of the gray shalt in the direction of Gushetneuk.