

Jeannie Sinclair, OR THE LILY OF THE STRATH.

CHAPTER XXIII.

GEORGE MUNRO IN A HORRIBLE DILEMMA—THE VOLUNTEER HANGMAN AND HIS ASSISTANT—INTERVIEW IN THE CONDEMNED CELL BETWEEN THE PRISONER AND HIS EXECUTIONER.

'Good gracious, the Provost!' cried George, starting up. 'It must be something concerning the execution. I trust in Providence I shall not be required to be present.'

'You, George?' exclaimed Mary, with a look of blank dismay. 'The Magistrates,' he answered, 'are bound to see the sentence carried out, but I was in hopes of being exempted from the disagreeable spectacle.'

On entering the room where the Provost sat, the banker was struck by the excessive perturbation and great anxiety of countenance which he manifested.

'Good evening, Provost. This is a severe storm which has set in.' 'It threatens to be so. You were not at the meeting of Council this afternoon?' 'No, I have been a journey to-day, and am home not more than half-an-hour ago. I hope, Provost, the arrangements regarding the sad event of to-morrow are all complete, and that my attendance will not be needed.'

'It is just about that I came to speak,' returned the Provost, his gravity and perturbation increasing rather than diminishing. 'A matter of the greatest anxiety is troubling us. The executioner, who ought to have been here this morning, has not yet come.'

'Good heaven, that is a business!' cried the banker. 'He certainly should have been here ere this. But undoubtedly he will present himself to-night.'

'I trust so—I sincerely trust so,' returned the Provost. 'What a dreadful thing it will be should he not come forward.'

'What would be done if he didn't?' said the banker. 'In that case the execution would have to be postponed.'

'Impossible, my dear sir. The execution cannot be postponed. If not over by to-morrow at mid-day the convict can demand his liberty, and we, the Magistrates, are responsible for the miscarriage of justice. The execution must take place.'

'What! Without the executioner?' 'Even so. If he do not come, another must do his office.'

'It will be impossible to find a substitute,' said George. 'Who would be bribed to do such a horrible and odious work? The poorest man in Shawhead would spurn the overture.'

'That is just what I fear,' said the Provost, eyeing George with a peculiarly pitying look. 'For such a case the law must make allowance,' added the banker.

'The law makes no allowance,' rejoined the Provost. 'The sentence must be carried out or we must answer it.'

'Well, our answer will not be difficult to make. No individual could be got to do it.' 'With that the law has nothing to do. The warrant for execution is given to us, and we are required in virtue of our office to see it carried out.'

'But if no individual—' 'Pardon me, Mr. Munro. In absence of the common executioner there is an individual on whom the duty devolves.'

'Eleanore, is it so? And who is the unfortunate individual—the jailer?' 'No.'

'Not the jailer! Then, who?' 'The youngest bailie.'

George recoiled in horror and dismay. 'My God!' he exclaimed, 'I am the youngest bailie.'

The Provost responded only with a silent and mournful bow. 'And I, George, I am required to do the—' 'Oh, Provost, you are—you must be joking.'

'My dear Mr. Munro, bethink yourself. This is not the time or the place for a joke. I have told you the truth. It is a dreadful necessity, but there is no evading it.'

'But I refuse, Provost. I positively refuse,' exclaimed George. 'No power on earth can force me to do what I consider to be a crime.'

'Yes, Mr. Munro. I believe there is one power will constrain you to do it.'

'There is not, sir. I tell you there is not. Believe me, Provost, there is not.'

'I will not believe you against yourself, Bailie. The power I speak of is the power of your own honour. You will maintain that, I am sure, at whatever cost.'

'But how can a refusal to do this vile and odious thing affect my honor?' 'Because it will be a violation of your official oath, and would entail your public declaration. If I know you at all, Mr. Munro, I know you will prefer honor to life itself—that is, if it should come to be absolutely necessary; but it is quite possible that you may succeed in getting some one who, for a heavy payment, will relieve you, or what is more likely still, the executioner may arrive. Nay, perchance he has come already. We had better step over to the Court House, where it may be found you have no cause for anxiety at all.'

The banker mutely acquiesced, though his face was fully expressive of the consternation and dismay which filled his mind. He was pale as ashes, and looked like one under a hideous dream. However, he was able to realize the necessity of concealing from Mary his agitation and its cause, and with as firm a step as he could command he opened the door of the sitting room where she was, and, without showing his tell-tale face, said in as calm a tone as he could articulate—

'I am going to the Council Room with the Provost, Mary. It may be late before I return, so pray do not sit up for me. Mary rose up with alacrity to go to him, but ere she could gain the lobby he and the Provost were gone; and poor Mary had to return to sit by herself in the room where they had expected to spend the evening so happily together.'

When they entered the Council Room the blank faces of the Magistrates told them only too plainly that the finisher of the law had not yet made his appearance. All were at their wits' end, and George Munro was almost frantic with desperation. They waited for another hour, but still the executioner came not, and the hope of his appearance gradually faded away.

Stormy as the night was, it being the eve of the execution, the town was astir. Groups were congregated in the market-place, round the Cross and in front of the prison, towards the dark and gloomy walls of which many eyes were directed in fear and awe, and conjectures were whispered from lip to lip as to what the doomed man would be thinking and feeling at that hour.

Suddenly it became known that the hangman had not come, and that a large sum would be given to any one who would take his place. Almost immediately there came into the market-place George Munro, the banker, in a state of wild agitation, making loud offer of fifty pounds to the man who would take the executioner's place and do his office. But the proposition was met by expressions of scornful horror. The very poorest laborer in these groups of rural Scottish people rejected with loathing the performance of the hangman's work. From group to group, until the banker, use Briggs' Alleviator. The mucus will be immediately discharged from the head, nose and throat, the eyes brighten and sparkle with delight; the head feels natural again, all pain has fled, and life is once more desirable. Price 1 per bottle. Sold by E. Harvey & Co., and all druggists.

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