

**WHEN A MAN'S
SINGLE: A TALE OF
LITERARY LIFE**

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G. VERNON BENNETT

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WHEN A MAN'S SINGLE.

CHAPTER I.

ROB ANGUS IS NOT A FREE MAN.

ONE still Saturday afternoon some years ago a child pulled herself through a small window into a kitchen in the kirk wynd of Thrums. She came from the old graveyard, whose only outlets, when the parish church gate is locked, are the windows of the wynd houses that hoop it round. Squatting on a three-legged stool, she gazed wistfully at a letter on the chimney-piece, and then, tripping to the door, looked up and down the wynd.

Snecky Hobart, the bellman, hobbled past, and though Davy was only four years old, she knew that as he had put on his blue top-coat he expected the evening to be fine. Tammie McQuhatty, the farmer of T'nowhead, met him at the corner, and they came to a stand-still to say, "She's hard, Sneck," and "She is so, T'nowhead," referring to the weather. Observing that they had stopped, they moved on again.

Women and children and a few men squeezed through their windows into the kirk-yard, the women to knit stockings on fallen tombstones, and the men to dander pleasantly from grave to grave reading the inscriptions. All the men were well up in years, for though, with the Auld Lichts, the Sabbath began to come on at six o'clock on

Saturday evening, the young men were now washing themselves cautiously in tin basins before going into the square to talk about women.

The clatter of more than one loom could still have been heard by Davy had not her ears been too accustomed to the sound to notice it. In the adjoining house Bell Meal-maker was peppering her newly washed floor with sand, while her lodger, Hender Robb, with a rusty razor in his hand, looked for his chin in a tiny glass that was peeling on the wall. Jinny Tosh had got her husband, Aundra Lunan, who always spoke of her as She, ready, so to speak, for church eighteen hours too soon, and Aundra sat stiffly at the fire, putting his feet on the ribs every minute, to draw them back with a scared look at Her as he remembered that he had on his blacks. In a handbox beneath the bed was his silk hat, which had been knocked down to him at Jamie Ramsay's roup, and Jinny had already put his red handkerchief, which was also a pictorial history of Scotland, into a pocket of his coat-tails, with a corner hanging gracefully out. Her puckered lips signified that however much her man might desire to do so, he was not to carry his handkerchief to church in his hat, where no one could see it. On working-days Aundra held his own, but at six o'clock on Saturday nights he passed into Her hands.

Across the wynd, in which a few hens wandered, Pete Todd was supping in his shirt-sleeves. His blacks lay ready for him in the coffin-bed, and Pete, glancing at them at intervals, supped as slowly as he could. In one hand he held a saucer, and in the other a chunk of bread, and they were as far apart as Pete's out-stretched arms could put them. His chair was a yard from the table, on which, by careful balancing, he rested a shoeless foot, and his face was twisted to the side. Every time Easie Whamond,

his wife, passed him she took the saucer from his hand, remarking that when a genteel man sat down to tea he did not turn his back on the table. Pete took this stolidly, like one who had long given up trying to understand the tantrums of women, and who felt that, as a lord of creation, he could afford to let it pass.

Davy sat on her three-legged stool keeping guard over her uncle Rob the saw-miller's letter, and longing for him to come. She screwed up her eyebrows as she had seen him do when he read a letter, and she felt that it would be nice if every one would come and look at her taking care of it. After a time she climbed up on her stool and stretched her dimpled arms towards the mantle-piece. From a string suspended across this, socks and stockings hung drying at the fire, and clutching one of them, Davy drew herself nearer. With a chuckle, quickly suppressed, lest it should bring in Kitty Wilkie, who ought to have been watching her instead of wandering down the wynd to see who was to have salt fish for supper, the child clutched the letter triumphantly, and toddling to the door, slipped out of the house.

For a moment Davy faltered at the mouth of the wynd. There was no one there to whom she could show the letter. A bright thought entered her head, and immediately a dimple opened on her face and swallowed all the puckers. Rob had gone to the Whunny muir for wood, and she would take the letter to him. Then when Rob saw her he would look all around him, and if there was no one there to take note he would lift her to his shoulder, when they could read the letter together.

Davy ran out of the wynd into the square, thinking she heard Kitty's Sabbath voice, which reminded the child of the little squeaking saw that Rob used for soft wood. On week-days Kitty's voice was the big saw that puled and

rasped, and Mag Wilkie shivered at it. Except to her husband, Mag spoke with her teeth closed, so politely that no one knew what she said.

Davy stumbled up the steep brae down which men are blown in winter to their work, until she reached the rim of the hollow in which Thrums lies. Here the road stops short, as if frightened to cross the common of whin that bars the way to the north. On this common there are many cart-tracks over bumpy sward and slippery roots, that might be the ribs of the earth showing, and Davy, with a dazed look in her eyes, ran down one of them, the whins catching her frock to stop her, and then letting go, as if, after all, one child more or less in the world was nothing to them.

By-and-by she found herself on another road, along which Rob had trudged earlier in the day with a saw on his shoulder; but he had gone east, and the child's face was turned westward. It is a muddy road even in summer, and those who use it frequently get into the habit of lifting their legs high as they walk, like men picking their way through beds of rotting leaves. The light had faded from her baby face now, but her mouth was firm-set, and her bewildered eyes were fixed straight ahead.

The last person to see Davy was Tammas Haggart, who, with his waistcoat buttoned over his jacket, and garters of yarn round his trousers, was slowly breaking stones, though the road swallowed them quicker than he could feed it. Tammas heard the child approaching, for his hearing had become very acute, owing to his practice when at home of listening through the floor to what the folks below were saying, and of sometimes joining in. He leaned on his hammer and watched her trot past.

The strength went gradually from Tammas's old arms, and again resting on his hammer he removed his specta-

cles and wiped them on his waistcoat. He took a comprehensive glance around at the fields, as if he now had an opportunity of seeing them for the first time during his sixty years' pilgrimage in these parts, and his eyes wandered aimlessly from the sombre firs and laughing beeches to the white farms that dot the strath. In the foreground two lazy colts surveyed him critically across a dike. To the north the frowning Whunny hill had a white scarf round its neck.

Something troubled Tammas. It was the vision of a child in a draggled pinafore; and stepping into the middle of the road, he looked down it in the direction in which Davy had passed.

"Chirsty Angus's lassieky," he murmured.

Tammas sat down cautiously on the dike and untied the red handkerchief that contained the remnants of his dinner. When he had smacked his lips over his flagon of cold kail, and seen the last of his crumbling oatmeal and cheese, his uneasiness returned, and he again looked down the road.

"I maun turn the bairn," was his reflection.

It was now, however, half an hour since Davy had passed Tammas Haggart's cairn.

To Haggart, pondering between the strokes of his hammer, came a mole-catcher, who climbed the dike and sat down beside him.

"Ay, ay," said the new-comer; to which Tammas replied, abstractedly,

"Jamie."

"Hae ye seen Davy Dundas?" the stone-breaker asked, after the pause that followed this conversation.

The mole-catcher stared heavily at his corduroys.

"I dinna ken him," he said at last, "but I hae seen naebody this twa oors."

"It's no' a him, it's a her. Ye canna hae been a winter here without kennin' Rob Angus."

"Ay, the saw-miller. He was i' the wud the day. I saw his cart gae hame. Ou, in coorse I ken Rob. He's an amazin' crittur."

Tammas broke another stone as carefully as if it were a nut.

"I dinna deny," he said, "but what Rob's a curiosity. So was his faither afore 'im."

"I've heard auld Rob was a queer body," said Jamie, adding, incredulously, "they say he shaved twice i' the week an' wore a clean dicky ilka day."

"No' what ye wad say ilka day, but oftener than was called for. Rob wasna naturally ostentatious; na, it was the wife 'at insistit on't. Nanny was a terrible tid for cleanness. Ay, an' it's a guid thing in moderation, but she juist overdid it; yes, she overdid it. Man, it had sic a haud on her 'at even on her death-bed they had to bring a basin to her to wash her hands in."

"Ay, ay? When there was sic a pride in her I wonder she didna lat young Rob to the college, an' him sae keen on't."

"Ou, he was gaen, but ye see auld Rob got gey dottle after Nanny's death, an' so young Rob stuck to the saw-mill. It's curious hoo a body misses his wife when she's gone. Ay, it's like the clock stoppin'."

"Weel, Rob's no' gettin' to the college hasna made 'im humble."

"Ye dinna like Rob?"

"Hoo did ye find that oot?" asked Jamie, a little taken aback. "Man, Tammas," he added, admiringly, "ye're mighty quick i' the uptak."

Tammas handed his snuff-mull to the mole-catcher, and then helped himself.

"I daur say, I daur say," he said, thoughtfully.

"I've naething to say agin the saw-miller," continued Jamie, after thinking it out, "but there's something in's face 'at's no' sociable. He looks as if he was takkin' ye aff in's inside."

"Ay, auld Rob was a sarcectic stock too. It rins i' the blood."

"I prefer a mair common kind o' man, bein' o' the common kind mysel'."

"Ay, there's naething sarcectic about you, Jamie," admitted the stone-breaker.

"I'm an ord'nar' man, Tammas."

"Ye are, Jamie, ye are."

"Maybe no' sae oncommon ord'nar', either."

"Middlin' ord'nar', middlin' ord'nar'."

"I'm thinkin' ye're braw an' sarcectic yersel', Tammas?"

"I'd aye that repootation, Jeames. Am no' an every-day sarcecticist, but juist 'noos an' nans. There was ae time I was speakin' tae Easie Webster, an' I said a terrible sarcectic thing. Ay, I dinna mind what it was, but-it was mighty sarcectic."

"It's a gift," said the mole-catcher.

"A gift it is," said Tammas.

The stone-breaker took his flagon to a spring near at hand and rinsed it out. Several times while pulling it up and down the little pool an uneasy expression crossed his face as he remembered something about a child, but in washing his hands, using sand for soap, Davy slipped his memory, and he returned cheerfully to the cairn. Here Jamie was wagging his head from side to side like a man who had caught himself thinking.

"I'll warrant, Tammas," he said, "ye cudna tell's what set's on to speak aboot Rob Angus?"

"Na, it's a thing as has often puzzled me hoo we select