

CHAPTER X - GAVINIA ON THE TRACK

Corp, you remember, had said that he would go to the stake rather than break his promise; and he meant it, too, though what the stake was, and why such a pother about going to it, he did not know. He was to learn now, however, for to the stake he had to go. This was because Gavinia, when folding up his clothes, found in one of the pockets a glove wrapped in silk paper.

Tommy had forgotten it until too late, for when he asked Corp for the glove it was already in Gavinia's possession, and she had declined to return it without an explanation. "You must tell her nothing," Tommy said sternly. He was uneasy, but relieved to find that Corp did not know whose glove it was, nor even why gentlemen carry a lady's glove in their pocket.

At first Gavinia was mildly curious only, but her husband's refusal to answer any questions roused her dander. She tried cajolery, fried his take of trout deliciously for him, and he sat down to them sniffing. They were small, and the remainder of their brief career was in two parts. First he lifted them by the tail, then he laid down the tail. But not a word about the glove.

She tried tears. "Dinna greet, woman," he said in distress. "What would the bairn say if he kent I made you greet?"

Gavinia went on greeting, and the baby, waking up, promptly took her side.

"D----n the thing!" said Corp.

"Your ain bairn!"

"I meant the glove!" he roared.

It was curiosity only that troubled Gavinia. A reader of romance, as you may remember, she had encountered in the printed page a score of ladies who, on finding such parcels in their husbands' pockets, left their homes at once and for ever, and she had never doubted but that it was the only course to follow; such is the power of the writer of fiction. But when the case was her own she was merely curious; such are the limitations of the

writer of fiction. That there was a woman in it she did not believe for a moment. This, of course, did not prevent her saying, with a sob, "Wha is the woman?"

With great earnestness Corp assured her that there was no woman. He even proved it: "Just listen to reason, Gavinia. If I was sich a black as to be chief wi' ony woman, and she wanted to gie me a present, weel, she might gie me a pair o' gloves, but one glove, what use would one glove be to me? I tell you, if a woman had the impidence to gie me one glove, I would fling it in her face."

Nothing could have been clearer, and he had put it thus considerately because when a woman, even the shrewdest of them, is excited (any man knows this), one has to explain matters to her as simply and patiently as if she were a four-year-old; yet Gavinia affected to be unconvinced, and for several days she led Corp the life of a lodger in his own house.

"Hands off that poor innocent," she said when he approached the baby.

If he reproved her, she replied meekly, "What can you expect frae a woman that doesna wear gloves?"

To the baby she said: "He despises you, my bonny, because you hae no gloves. Ay, that's what maks him turn up his nose at you. But your mother is fond o' you, gloves or no gloves."

She told the baby the story of the glove daily, with many monstrous additions.

When Corp came home from his work, she said that a poor, love-lorn female had called with a boot for him, and a request that he should carry it in the pocket of his Sabbath breeks.

Worst of all, she listened to what he said in the night. Corp had a habit of talking in his sleep. He was usually taking tickets at such times, and it had been her custom to stop him violently; but now she changed her tactics: she encouraged him. "I would be lying in my bed," he said to Tommy, "dreaming that a man had fallen into the Slugs, and instead o' trying to save him I cried out, 'Tickets there, all tickets ready,' and first he hands me a glove and neist he hands me a boot and havers o' that kind sich as onybody dreams. But in the middle o' my dream it comes ower me that I had better waken up to see what Gavinia's doing, and I

open my een, and there she is, sitting up, hearkening avidly to my every word, and putting sly questions to me about the glove."

"What glove?" Tommy asked coldly.

"The glove in silk paper."

"I never heard of it," said Tommy.

Corp sighed. "No," he said loyally, "neither did I"; and he went back to the station and sat gloomily in a wagon. He got no help from Tommy, not even when rumours of the incident at the Slugs became noised abroad.

"A'body kens about the laddie now," he said.

"What laddie?" Tommy inquired.

"Him that fell into the Slugs."

"Ah, yes," Tommy said; "I have just been reading about it in the paper. A plucky fellow, this Captain Ure who saved him. I wonder who he is."

"I wonder!" Corp said with a groan.

"There was an Alexander Bett with him, according to the papers," Tommy went on. "Do you know any Bett?"

"It's no a Thrums name," Corp replied thankfully. "I just made it up."

"What do you mean?" Tommy asked blankly.

Corp sighed, and went back again to the wagon. He was particularly truculent that evening when the six-o'clock train came in. "Tickets, there; look slippy wi' your tickets." His head bobbed up at the window of another compartment. "Tick----" he began, and then he ducked.

The compartment contained a boy looking as scared as if he had just had his face washed, and an old woman who was clutching a large linen bag as if expecting some scoundrel to appear through the floor and grip it. With her other hand she held on to the boy, and being unused to travel, they were both sitting very self-conscious, humble, and defiant, like persons in church who have forgotten to bring their Bible. The general effect, however, was lost on Corp, for whom it was enough that in one of them he recognized the boy of the Slugs. He thought he had seen the old

lady before, also, but he could not give her a name. It was quite a relief to him to notice that she was not wearing gloves.

He heard her inquiring for one Alexander Bett, and being told that there was no such person in Thrums, "He's married on a woman of the name of Gavinia," said the old lady; and then they directed her to the house of the only Gavinia in the place. With dark forebodings Corp skulked after her. He remembered who she was now. She was the old woman with the nut-cracker face on whom he had cried in, more than a year ago, to say that Gavinia was to have him. Her mud cottage had been near the Slugs. Yes, and this was the boy who had been supping porridge with her. Corp guessed rightly that the boy had remembered his unlucky visit. "I'm doomed!" Corp muttered to himself--pronouncing it in another way.

The woman, the boy, and the bag entered the house of Gavinia, and presently she came out with them. She was looking very important and terrible. They went straight to Ailie's cottage, and Corp was wondering why, when he suddenly remembered that Tommy was to be there at tea to-day.