

CHAPTER II. - RUNS ALONGSIDE THE MAKING OF A MINISTER.

On the east coast of Scotland, hidden, as if in a quarry, at the foot of cliffs that may one day fall forward, is a village called Harvie. So has it shrunk since the day when I skulked from it that I hear of a traveller's asking lately at one of its doors how far he was from a village; yet Harvie throve once and was celebrated even in distant Thrums for its fish. Most of our weavers would have thought it as unnatural not to buy harvies in the square on the Muckle Friday, as to let Saturday night pass without laying in a sufficient stock of halfpennies to go round the family twice.

Gavin was born in Harvie, but left it at such an early age that he could only recall thatched houses with nets drying on the roofs, and a sandy shore in which coarse grass grew. In the picture he could not pick out the house of his birth, though he might have been able to go to it had he ever returned to the village. Soon he learned that his mother did not care to speak of Harvie, and perhaps he thought that she had forgotten it too, all save one scene to which his memory still guided him. When his mind wandered to Harvie, Gavin saw the door of his home open and a fisherman enter, who scratched his head and then said, "Your man's drowned, missis." Gavin seemed to see many women crying, and his mother staring at them with a face suddenly painted white, and next to hear a voice that was his own saying, "Never mind, mother; I'll be a man to you now, and I'll need breeks for the burial." But Adam required no funeral, for his body lay deep in the sea.

Gavin thought that this was the tragedy of his mother's life, and the most memorable event of his own childhood. But it was neither. When Margaret, even after she came to Thrums, thought of Harvie, it was not at Adam's death she shuddered, but at the recollection of me.

It would ill become me to take a late revenge on Adam Dishart now by saying what is not true of him. Though he died a fisherman he was a sailor for a great part of his life, and doubtless his recklessness was washed into him on the high seas, where in his time men made a crony of death, and drank merrily over dodging it for another night. To me his roars of laughter without cause were as repellent as a boy's drum; yet many faces that were long in my company brightened at his coming, and women, with whom, despite my yearning, I was in no wise a favorite, ran to their doors to listen to him as readily as to the bell-man. Children scurried from him if his mood was savage, but to him at all other times, while me they merely disregarded.

There was always a smell of the sea about him. He had a rolling gait, unless he was drunk, when he walked very straight, and before both sexes he boasted that any woman would take him for his beard alone. Of this beard he took prodigious care, though otherwise thinking little of his appearance, and I now see that he understood women better than I did, who had nevertheless reflected much about them. It cannot be said that he was vain, for though he thought he attracted women strangely, that, I maintain, is a weakness common to all men, and so no more to be marvelled at than a stake in a fence. Foreign oaths were the nails with which he held his talk together, yet I doubt not they were a curiosity gathered at sea, like his chains of shells, more for his own pleasure than for others' pain. His friends gave them no weight, and when he wanted to talk emphatically he kept them back, though they were then as troublesome to him as eggs to the bird-nesting boy who has to speak with his spoil in his mouth.

Adam was drowned on Gavin's fourth birthday, a year after I had to leave Harvie. He was blown off his smack in a storm, and could not reach the rope his partner flung him. "It's no go, lad," he shouted; "so long, Jim," and sank.

A month afterwards Margaret sold her share in the smack, which was all Adam left her, and the furniture of the house was roused. She took Gavin to Glasgow, where her only brother needed a housekeeper, and there mother and son remained until Gavin got his call to Thrums. During those seventeen years I lost knowledge of them as completely as Margaret had lost knowledge of me. On hearing of Adam's death I went back to Harvie to try to trace her, but she had feared this, and so told no one where she was going.

According to Margaret, Gavin's genius showed itself while he was still a child. He was born with a brow whose nobility impressed her from the first. It was a minister's brow, and though Margaret herself was no scholar, being as slow to read as she was quick at turning bannocks on the girdle, she decided, when his age was still counted by months, that the ministry had need of him. In those days the first question asked of a child was not, "Tell me your name," but "What are you to be?" and one child in every family replied, "A minister." He was set apart for the Church as doggedly as the shilling a week for the rent, and the rule held good though the family consisted of only one boy. From his earliest days Gavin thought he had been fashioned for the ministry as certainly as a spade for digging, and Margaret rejoiced and marvelled thereat, though she had made her own puzzle. An enthusiastic mother may bend her son's mind as she chooses if

she begins it once; nay, she may do stranger things. I know a mother in Thrums who loves "features," and had a child born with no chin to speak of. The neighbors expected this to bring her to the dust, but it only showed what a mother can do. In a few months that child had a chin with the best of them.

Margaret's brother died, but she remained in his single room, and, ever with a picture of her son in a pulpit to repay her, contrived to keep Gavin at school. Everything a woman's fingers can do Margaret's did better than most, and among the wealthy people who employed her--would that I could have the teaching of the sons of such as were good to her in those hard days!--her gentle manner was spoken of. For though Margaret had no schooling, she was a lady at heart, moving and almost speaking as one even in Harvie, where they did not perhaps like her the better for it.

At six Gavin hit another boy hard for belonging to the Established Church, and at seven he could not lose himself in the Shorter Catechism. His mother expounded the Scriptures to him till he was eight, when he began to expound them to her. By this time he was studying the practical work of the pulpit as enthusiastically as ever medical student cut off a leg. From a front pew in the gallery Gavin watched the minister's every movement, noting that the first thing to do on ascending the pulpit is to cover your face with your hands, as if the exalted position affected you like a strong light, and the second to move the big Bible slightly, to show that the kirk officer, not having had a university education, could not be expected to know the very spot on which it ought to lie. Gavin saw that the minister joined in the singing more like one countenancing a seemly thing than because he needed it himself, and that he only sang a mouthful now and again after the congregation was in full pursuit of the precentor. It was noteworthy that the first prayer lasted longer than all the others, and that to read the intimations about the Bible-class and the collection elsewhere than immediately before the last Psalm would have been as sacrilegious as to insert the dedication to King James at the end of Revelation. Sitting under a minister justly honoured in his day, the boy was often some words in advance of him, not vainglorious of his memory, but fervent, eager, and regarding the preacher as hardly less sacred than the Book. Gavin was encouraged by his frightened yet admiring mother to see the air from their pew as the minister sawed it in the pulpit, and two benedictions were pronounced twice a Sabbath in that church, in the same words, the same manner, and simultaneously.

There was a black year when the things of this world, especially its pastimes, took such a grip of Gavin that he said to Margaret he would rather be good at the high jump than the author of "The Pilgrim's Progress." That year passed, and Gavin came to his right mind. One afternoon Margaret was at home making a glen-garry for him out of a piece of carpet, and giving it a tartan edging, when the boy bounded in from school, crying, "Come quick, mother, and you'll see him." Margaret reached the door in time to see a street musician flying from Gavin and his friends. "Did you take stock of him, mother?" the boy asked when he reappeared with the mark of a muddy stick on his back. "He's a Papist!--a sore sight, mother, a sore sight. We stoned him for persecuting the noble Martyrs."

"When Gavin was twelve he went to the university, and also got a place in a shop as errand boy. He used to run through the streets between his work and his classes. Potatoes and salt fish, which could then be got at two pence the pound if bought by the half-hundred weight, were his food. There was not always a good meal for two, yet when Gavin reached home at night there was generally something ready for him, and Margaret had supped "hours ago." Gavin's hunger urged him to fall to, but his love for his mother made him watchful.

"What did you have yourself, mother?" he would demand suspiciously.

"Oh, I had a fine supper, I assure you."

"What had you?"

"I had potatoes, for one thing."

"And dripping?"

"You may be sure."

"Mother, you're cheating me. The dripping hasn't been touched since yesterday."

"I dinna--don't--care for dripping--no much."

Then would Gavin stride the room fiercely, a queer little figure.

"Do you think I'll stand this, mother? Will I let myself be pampered with dripping and every delicacy while you starve?"

"Gavin, I really dinna care for dripping."

"Then I'll give up my classes, and we can have butter."

"I assure you I'm no hungry. It's different wi' a growing laddie."

"I'm not a growing laddie," Gavin would say, bitterly; "but, mother, I warn you that not another bite passes my throat till I see you eating too."

So Margaret had to take her seat at the table, and when she said "I can eat no more," Gavin retorted sternly, "Nor will I, for fine I see through you."

These two were as one far more than most married people, and, just as Gavin in his childhood reflected his mother, she now reflected him. The people for whom she sewed thought it was contact with them that had rubbed the broad Scotch from her tongue, but she was only keeping pace with Gavin. When she was excited the Harvie words came back to her, as they come back to me. I have taught the English language all my life, and I try to write it, but everything I say in this book I first think to myself in the Doric. This, too, I notice, that in talking to myself I am broader than when gossiping with the farmers of the glen, who send their children to me to learn English, and then jeer at them if they say "old lights" instead of "auld lights."

To Margaret it was happiness to sit through the long evenings sewing, and look over her work at Gavin as he read or wrote or recited to himself the learning of the schools. But she coughed every time the weather changed, and then Gavin would start.

"You must go to your bed, mother," he would say, tearing himself from his books; or he would sit beside her and talk of the dream that was common to both--a dream of a manse where Margaret was mistress and Gavin was called the minister. Every night Gavin was at his mother's bedside to wind her shawl round her feet, and while he did it Margaret smiled.

"Mother, this is the chaff pillow you've taken out of my bed, and given me your featherone."

"Gavin, you needna change them. I winna have the feather pillow."

"Do you dare to think I'll let you sleep on chaff? Put up your head. Now, is that soft?"

"It's fine. I dinna deny but what I sleep better on feathers. Do you mind, Gavin, you bought this pillow for me the moment you got your bursary money?"

The reserve that is a wall between many of the Scottish poor had been broken down by these two. When he saw his mother sleeping happily,

Gavin went back to his work. To save the expense of a lamp, he would put his book almost beneath the dying fire, and, taking the place of the fender, read till he was shivering with cold.

"Gavin, it is near morning, and you not in your bed yet! What are you thinking about so hard?"

"Oh, mother, I was wondering if the time would ever come when I would be a minister, and you would have an egg for your breakfast every morning."

So the years passed, and soon Gavin would be a minister. He had now sermons to prepare, and every one of them was first preached to Margaret. How solemn was his voice, how his eyes flashed, how stern were his admonitions.

"Gavin, such a sermon I never heard. The spirit of God is on you. I'm ashamed you should have me for a mother."

"God grant, mother," Gavin said, little thinking what was soon to happen, or he would have made this prayer on his knees, "that you may never be ashamed to have me for a son."

"Ah, mother," he would say wistfully, "it is not a great sermon, but do you think I'm preaching Christ? That is what I try, but I'm carried away and forget to watch myself."

"The Lord has you by the hand, Gavin; and mind, I dinna say that because you're myladdie."

"Yes, you do, mother, and well I know it, and yet it does me good to hear you."

That it did him good I, who would fain have shared those days with them, am very sure. The praise that comes of love does not make us vain, but humble rather. Knowing what we are, the pride that shines in our mother's eyes as she looks at us is about the most pathetic thing a man has to face, but he would be a devil altogether if it did not burn some of the sin out of him.

Not long before Gavin preached for our kirk and got his call, a great event took place in the little room at Glasgow. The student appeared for the first time before his mother in his ministerial clothes. He wore the black silk hat, that was destined to become a terror to evil-doers in Thrums, and I dare say he was rather puffed up about himself that day. You would probably have smiled at him.

"It's a pity I'm so little, mother," he said with a sigh.

"You're no what I would call a particularly long man," Margaret said, "but you're just the height I like."

Then Gavin went out in his grandeur, and Margaret cried for an hour. She was thinking of me as well as of Gavin, and as it happens, I know that I was thinking at the same time of her. Gavin kept a diary in those days, which I have seen, and by comparing it with mine, I discovered that while he was showing himself to his mother in his black clothes, I was on my way back from Tilliedrum, where I had gone to buy a sand-glass for the school. The one I bought was so like another Margaret had used at Harvie that it set me thinking of her again all the way home. This is a matter hardly worth mentioning, and yet it interests me.

Busy days followed the call to Thrums, and Gavin had difficulty in forcing himself to his sermons when there was always something more to tell his mother about the weaving town they were going to, or about the manse or the furniture that had been transferred to him by the retiring minister. The little room which had become so familiar that it seemed one of a family party of three had to be stripped, and many of its contents were sold. Among what were brought to Thrums was a little exercise book, in which Margaret had tried, unknown to Gavin, to teach herself writing and grammar, that she might be less unfit for a manse. He found it accidentally one day. It was full of "I am, thou art, he is," and the like, written many times in a shaking hand. Gavin put his arms round his mother when he saw what she had been doing. The exercise book is in my desk now, and will be my little maid's when I die.

"Gavin, Gavin," Margaret said many times in those last days at Glasgow, "to think it has all come true!"

"Let the last word you say in the house be a prayer of thankfulness," she whispered to him when they were taking a final glance at the old home.

In the bare room they called the house, the little minister and his mother went on their knees, but, as it chanced, their last word there was not addressed to God.

"Gavin," Margaret whispered as he took her arm, "do you think this bonnet sets me?"