

CHAPTER IV. - FIRST COMING OF THE EGYPTIAN WOMAN.

A learned man says in a book, otherwise beautiful with truth, that villages are family groups. To him Thrums would only be a village, though town is the word we have ever used, and this is not true of it. Doubtless we have interests in common, from which a place so near (but the road is heavy) as Tilliedrum is shut out, and we have an individuality of our own too, as if, like our red houses, we came from a quarry that supplies no other place. But we are not one family. In the old days, those of us who were of the Tenements seldom wandered to the Croft head, and if we did go there we saw men to whom we could not always give a name. To flit from the Tanage brae to Haggart's road was to change one's friends. A kirk- wynd weaver might kill his swine and Tillyloss not know of it until boys ran westward hitting each other with the bladders. Only the voice of the dulsemen could be heard all over Thrums at once. Thus even in a small place but a few outstanding persons are known to everybody.

In eight days Gavin's figure was more familiar in Thrums than many that had grown bent in it. He had already been twice to the cemetery, for a minister only reaches his new charge in time to attend a funeral. Though short of stature he cast a great shadow. He was so full of his duties, Jean said, that though he pulled to the door as he left the manse, he had passed the currant bushes before it sneaked. He darted through courts, and invented ways into awkward houses. If you did not look up quickly he was round the corner. His visiting exhausted him only less than his zeal in the pulpit, from which, according to report, he staggered damp with perspiration to the vestry, where Hendry Munn wrung him like a wet cloth. A deaf lady, celebrated for giving out her washing, compelled him to hold her trumpet until she had peered into all his crannies, with the Shorter Catechism for a lantern. Janet Dundas told him, in answer to his knock, that she could not abide him, but she changed her mind when he said her garden was quite a show. The wives who expected a visit scrubbed their floors for him, cleaned out their presses for him, put diamond socks on their bairns for him, rubbed their hearthstones blue for him, and even tidied up the garret for him, and triumphed over the neighbours whose houses he passed by. For Gavin blundered occasionally by inadvertence, as when he gave dear old Betty Davie occasion to say bitterly--

"Ou ay, you can sail by my door and gang to Easie's, but I'm thinking you would stop at mine too if I had a brass handle on't."

So passed the first four weeks, and then came the fateful night of the seventeenth of October, and with it the strange woman. Family worship at the manse was over and Gavin was talking to his mother, who never crossed the threshold save to go to church (though her activity at home was among the marvels Jean sometimes slipped down to the Tenements to announce). when Wearyworld the policeman came to the door "with Rob Dow's compliments, and if you're no wi' me by ten o'clock I'm to break out again." Gavin knew what this meant, and at once set off for Rob's.

"You'll let me gang a bit wi' you," the policeman entreated, "for till Rob sent me on this errand not a soul has spoken to me the day; ay, mony a ane hae I spoken to, but not a man, woman, nor bairn would fling me a word."

"I often meant to ask you," Gavin said as they went along the Tenements, which smelled at that hour of roasted potatoes, "why you are so unpopular."

"It's because I'm police. I'm the first ane that has ever been in Thrums, and the very folk that appointed me at a crown a week looks upon me as a disgraced man for accepting. It's Gospel that my ain wife is short wi' me when I've on my uniform, though weel she kens that I would rather hae stuck to the loom if I hadna ha'en sic a queer richt leg. Nobody feels the shame o' my position as I do mysel', but this is a town without pity."

"It should be a consolation to you that you are discharging useful duties."

"But I'm no. I'm doing harm. There's Charles Dickson says that the very sight o' my uniform rouses his dander so muckle that it makes him break windows, though a peaceably-disposed man till I was appointed. And what's the use o' their haeing a policeman when they winna come to the lock-up after I lay hands on them?"

"Do they say they won't come?"

"Say? Catch them saying onything! They just gie me a wap into the gutters. If they would speak I wouldna complain, for I'm nat'rally the sociablest man in Thrums."

"Rob, however, had spoken to you."

"Because he had need o' me. That was ay Rob's way, converted or no converted. When he was blind drunk he would order me to see him safe hame, but would he crack wi' me? Na, na."

Wearyworld, who was so called because of his forlorn way of muttering, "It's a weary warld, and nobody bides in't," as he went his melancholy rounds, sighed like one about to cry, and Gavin changed the subject.

"Is the watch for the soldiers still kept up?" he asked.

"It is, but the watchers winna let me in aside them. I'll let you see that for yoursel' at me head o' the Roods, for they watch there in the auld windmill."

Most of the Thrums lights were already out, and that in the windmill disappeared as footsteps were heard.

"You're desperate characters," the policeman cried, but got no answer. He changed his tactics.

"A fine nicht for the time o' year," he cried. No answer.

"But I wouldna wonder," he shouted, "though we had rain afore morning." No answer.

"Surely you could gie me a word frae ahint the door. You're doing an onlawful thing, but I dinna ken wha you are."

"You'll swear to that?" some one asked gruffly.

"I swear to it, Peter."

Wearyworld tried another six remarks in vain.

"Ay," he said to the minister, "that's what it is to be an onpopular man. And now I'll hae to turn back, for the very anes that winna let me join them would be the first to complain if I gaed out o' bounds."

Gavin found Dow at New Zealand, a hamlet of mud houses, whose tenants could be seen on any Sabbath morning washing themselves in the burn that trickled hard by. Rob's son, Micah, was asleep at the door, but he brightened when he saw who was shaking him.

"My father put me out," he explained, "because he's daft for the drink, and was fleid he would curse me. He hasna cursed me," Micah added, proudly, "for an aught days come Sabbath. Hearken to him at his loom. He daurna take his feet off the treadles for fear o' running straucht to the drink."

Gavin went in. The loom, and two stools, the one four-footed and the other a buffet, were Rob's most conspicuous furniture. A shaving-strap hung on the wall. The fire was out, but the trunk of a tree, charred at one end,

showed how he heated his house. He made a fire of peat, and on it placed one end of a tree trunk that might be six feet long. As the tree burned away it was pushed further into the fireplace, and a roaring fire could always be got by kicking pieces of the smouldering wood and blowing them into flame with the bellows. When Rob saw the minister he groaned relief and left his loom. He had been weaving, his teeth clenched, his eyes on fire, for seven hours.

"I wasna fleid," little Micah said to the neighbours afterwards, "to gang in wi' the minister. He's a fine man that. He didna ca' my father names. Na, he said, 'You're a brave fellow, Rob,' and he took my father's hand, he did. My father was shaking after his fecht wi' the drink, and, says he, 'Mr. Dishart,' he says, 'if you'll let me break out nows and nans, I could, bide straucht atween times, but I canna keep sober if I hinna a drink to look forrit to.' Ay, my father prigged sair to get one fou day in the month, and he said, 'Syne if I die sudden, there's thirty chances to one that I gang to heaven, so it's worth risking.' But Mr. Dishart wouldna hear o't, and he cries, 'No, by God,' he cries, 'we'll wrestle wi' the devil till we throttle him,' and down him and my father gaed on their knees.

"The minister prayed a lang time till my father said his hunger for the drink was gone, 'but', he says, 'it swells up in me o' a sudden aye, and it may be back afore you're hame.' 'Then come to me at once,' says Mr. Dishart; but my father says, 'Na, for it would haul me into the public-house as if it had me at the end o' a rope, but I'll send the laddie."

"You saw my father crying the minister back? It was to gie him twa pound, and, says my father, 'God helping me,' he says, 'I'll droon mysel in the dam rather than let the drink master me, but in case it should get haud o' me and I should die drunk, it would be a mighty gratification to me to ken that you had the siller to bury me respectable without ony help frae the poor's rates.' The minister wasna for taking it at first, but he took it when he saw how earnest my father was. Ay, he's a noble man. After he gaed awa my father made me learn the names o' the apostles frae Luke sixth, and he says to me, 'Miss out Bartholomew,' he says, 'for he did little, and put Gavin Dishart in his place.'"

Feeling as old as he sometimes tried to look, Gavin turned homeward. Margaret was already listening for him. You may be sure she knew his step. I think our steps vary as much as the human face. My book-shelves were made by a blind man who could identify by their steps nearly all who passed his window. Yet he has admitted to me that he could not tell

wherein my steps differed from others; and this I believe, though rejecting his boast that he could distinguish a minister's step from a doctor's, and even tell to which denomination the minister belonged.

I have sometimes asked myself what would have been Gavin's future had he gone straight home that night from Dow's. He would doubtless have seen the Egyptian before morning broke, but she would not have come upon him like a witch. There are, I dare say, many lovers who would never have been drawn to each other had they met for the first time, as, say, they met the second time. But such dreaming is to no purpose. Gavin met Sanders Webster, the mole-catcher, and was persuaded by him to go home by Caddam Wood.

Gavin took the path to Caddam, because Sanders told him the Wild Lindsays were there, a gypsy family that threatened the farmers by day and danced devilishly, it was said, at night. The little minister knew them by repute as a race of giants, and that not many persons would have cared to face them alone at midnight; but he was feeling as one wound up to heavy duties, and meant to admonish them severely.

Sanders, an old man who lived with his sister Nanny on the edge of the wood, went with him, and for a time both were silent. But Sanders had something to say.

"Was you ever at the Spittal, Mr. Dishart?" he asked.

"Lord Rintoul's house at the top of Glen Quharity? No."

"Hae you ever looked on a lord?"

"No."

"Or on an auld lord's young leddyship? I have."

"What is she?"

"You surely ken that Rintoul's auld, and is to be married on a young leddyship. She's no' a leddyship yet, but they're to be married soon, so I may say I've seen a leddyship. Ay, an impressive sight. It was yestreen."

"Is there a great difference in their ages?"

"As muckle as atween auld Peter Spens and his wife, wha was saxteen when he was saxty, and she was playing at dumps in the street when her man was waiting for her to make his porridge. Ay, sic a differ doesna suit wi' common folk, but of course earls can please themsels. Rintoul's so fond

o' the leddyship 'at is to be, that when she was at the school in Edinbury he wrote to her ilka day. Kaytherine Crummie telled me that, and she says aince you're used to it, writing letters is as easy as skinning moles. I dinna ken what they can write sic a heap about, but I daur say he gies her his views on the Chartist agitation and the potato disease, and she'll write back about the romantic sights o' Edinbury and the sermons o' the grand preachers she hears. Sal, though, thae grand folk has no religion to speak o', for they're a' English kirk. You're no' speiring what her leddyship said to me?"

"What did she say?"

"Weel, you see, there was a dancing ball on, and Kaytherine Crummie took me to a window whaur I could stand on a flower-pot and watch the critturs whirling round in the ball like teetotums. What's mair, she pointed out the leddyship that's to be to me, and I just glowered at her, for thinks I, 'Take your fill, Sanders, and whaur there's lords and leddyships, dinna waste a minute on colonels and honourable misses and sic like dirt.' Ay, but what wi' my een blinking at the blaze o' candles, I lost sicht o' her till all at aince somebody says at my lug, 'Well, my man, and who is the prettiest lady in the room?' Mr. Dishart, it was her leddyship. She looked like a star."

"And what did you do?"

"The first thing I did was to fall aff the flower-pot; but syne I came to, and says I, wi' a polite smirk, 'I'm thinking your leddyship,' says I, 'as you're the bonniest yourself.'"

"I see you are a cute man, Sanders.'"

"Ay, but that's no' a'. She lauched in a pleased way and tapped me wi' her fan, and says she, 'Why do you think me the prettiest?' I dinna deny but what that staggered me, but I thocht a minute, and took a look at the other dancers again, and syne I says, mighty sly like, 'The other leddies,' I says, 'has sic sma'feet.'"

Sanders stopped here and looked doubtingly at Gavin.

"I canna make up my mind," he said, "whether she liked that, for she rapped my knuckles wi' her fan fell sair, and aff she gaed. Ay, I consulted Tammas Haggart about it, and he says, 'The flirty crittur,' he says. What would you say, Mr. Dishart?"

Gavin managed to escape without giving an answer, for here their roads separated. He did not find the Wild Lindsays, however. Children of whim, of prodigious strength while in the open, but destined to wither quickly in the hot air of towns, they had gone from Caddam, leaving nothing of themselves behind but a black mark burned by their fires into the ground. Thus they branded the earth through many counties until some hour when the spirit of wandering again fell on them, and they forsook their hearths with as little compunction as the bird leaves its nest.

Gavin had walked quickly, and he now stood silently in the wood, his hat in his hand. In the moonlight the grass seemed tipped with hoar frost. Most of the beeches were already bare, but the shoots, clustering round them, like children at their mother's skirts, still retained their leaves red and brown. Among the pines these leaves were as incongruous as a wedding-dress at a funeral. Gavin was standing on grass, but there were patches of heather within sight, and broom, and the leaf of the blaeberry. Where the beeches had drawn up the earth with them as they grew, their roots ran this way and that, slippery to the feet and looking like disinterred bones. A squirrel appeared suddenly on the charred ground, looked doubtfully at Gavin to see if he was growing there, and then glided up a tree, where it sat eyeing him, and forgetting to conceal its shadow. Caddam was very still. At long intervals came from far away the whack of an axe on wood. Gavin was in a world by himself, and this might be someone breaking into it.

The mystery of woods by moonlight thrilled the little minister. His eyes rested on the shining roots, and he remembered what had been told him of the legend of Caddam, how once on a time it was a mighty wood, and a maiden most beautiful stood on its confines, panting and afraid, for a wicked man pursued her; how he drew near, and she ran a little way into the wood, and he followed her, and she still ran, and still he followed, until both were for ever lost, and the bones of her pursuer lie beneath a beech, but the lady may still be heard singing in the woods if the night be fine, for then she is a glad spirit, but weeping when there is wild wind, for then she is but a mortal seeking a way out of the wood.

The squirrel slid down the fir and was gone. The axe's blows ceased. Nothing that moved was in sight. The wind that has its nest in trees was circling around with many voices, that never rose above a whisper, and were often but the echo of a sigh. Gavin was in the Caddam of past days, where the beautiful maiden wanders ever, waiting for him who is so pure that he may find her. He will wander over the tree-tops looking for her, with the moon for his lamp, and some night he will hear her singing. The little

minister drew a deep breath, and his foot snapped a brittle twig. Then he remembered who and where he was, and stooped to pick up his staff. But he did not pick it up, for as his fingers were closing on it the lady began to sing.

For perhaps a minute Gavin stood stock still, like an intruder. Then he ran towards the singing, which seemed to come from Windy ghoul, a straight road through Caddam that farmers use in summer, but leave in the back end of the year to leaves and pools. In Windyghoul there is either no wind or so much that it rushes down the sieve like an army, entering with a shriek of terror, and escaping with a derisive howl. The moon was crossing the avenue. But Gavin only saw the singer.

She was still fifty yards away, sometimes singing gleefully, and again letting her body sway lightly as she came dancing up Windyghoul. Soon she was within a few feet of the little minister, to whom singing, except when out of tune, was a suspicious thing, and dancing a device of the devil. His arm went out wrathfully, and his intention was to pronounce sentence on this woman.

But she passed, unconscious of his presence, and he had not moved nor spoken. Though really of the average height, she was a little thing to the eyes of Gavin, who always felt tall and stout except when he looked down. The grace of her swaying figure was a new