

CHAPTER V. - A WARLIKE CHAPTER, CULMINATING IN THE FLOUTING OF THE MINISTER BY THE WOMAN.

"Mr. DISHART!"

Jean had clutched at Gavin in Bank Street. Her hair was streaming, and her wrapper but half buttoned.

"Oh, Mr. Dishart, look at the mistress! I couldna keep her in the manse."

Gavin saw his mother beside him, bare-headed, trembling.

"How could I sit still, Gavin, and the town full o' the skirls of women and bairns? Oh, Gavin, what can I do for them? They will suffer most this night."

As Gavin took her hand he knew that Margaret felt for the people more than he.

"But you must go home, mother," he said, "and leave me to do my duty. I will take you myself if you will not go with Jean. Be careful of her, Jean."

"Ay, will I," Jean answered, then burst into tears. "Mr. Dishart," she cried, "if they take my father they'd best take my mither too."

The two women went back to the manse, where Jean re-lit the fire, having nothing else to do, and boiled the kettle, while Margaret wandered in anguish from room to room.

Men nearly naked ran past Gavin, seeking to escape from Thrums by the fields he had descended. When he shouted to them they only ran faster. A Tillyloss weaver whom he tried to stop struck him savagely and sped past to the square. In Bank Street, which was full move. He had heard the horn. Thrice it sounded, and thrice it struck him to the heart. He looked again and saw a shadow stealing along the Tenements, then, another, then half-a-dozen. He remembered Mr. Carfrae's words, "If you ever hear that horn, I implore you to hasten to the square," and in another minute he had reached the Tenements.

Now again he saw the gypsy. She ran past him, half-a-score of men, armed with staves and pikes, at her heels. At first he thought they were chasing her. but they were following her as a leader. Her eyes sparkled as she waved them to the square with her arms.

"The soldiers, the soldiers!" was the universal cry.

"Who is that woman?" demanded Gavin, catching hold of a frightened old man.

"Curse the Egyptian limmer," the man answered, "she's egging my laddie on to fecht."

"Bless her rather," the son cried, "for warning us that the sojers is coming. Put your ear to the ground, Mr. Dishart, and you'll hear the dirl o' their feet."

The young man rushed away to the square, flinging his father from him. Gavin followed. As he turned into the school wynd, the town drum began to beat, windows were thrown open, and sullen men ran out of closes where women were screaming and trying to hold them back. At the foot of the wynd Gavin passed Sanders Webster.

"Mr. Dishart," the mole-catcher cried, "hae you seen that Egyptian? May I be struck dead if it's no' her little leddyship."

But Gavin did not hear him. thing in the world to him. Only while she passed did he see her as a gleam of colour, a gypsy elf poorly clad, her bare feet flashing beneath a short green skirt, a twig of rowan berries stuck carelessly into her black hair. Her face was pale. She had an angel's loveliness. Gavin shook.

Still she danced onwards, but she was very human, for when she came to muddy water she let her feet linger in it, and flung up her arms, dancing more wantonly than before. A diamond on her finger shot a thread of fire over the pool. Undoubtedly she was the devil.

Gavin leaped into the avenue, and she heard him and looked behind. He tried to cry "Woman!" sternly, but lost the word, for now she saw him, and laughed with her shoulders, and beckoned to him, so that he shook his fist at her. She tripped on, but often turning her head beckoned and mocked him, and he forgot his dignity and his pulpit and all other things, and ran after her. Up Windyghoul did he pursue her, and it was well that the precentor was not there to see. She reached the mouth of the avenue, and kissing her hand to Gavin, so that the ring gleamed again, was gone.

The minister's one thought was to find her, but he searched in vain. She might be crossing the hill on her way to Thrums, or perhaps she was still laughing at him from behind a tree. After a longer time than he was aware

of, Gavin realised that his boots were chirping and his trousers streaked with mud. Then he abandoned the search and hastened homewards in a rage.

From the hill to the manse the nearest way is down two fields, and the little minister descended them rapidly. Thrums, which is red in daylight, was grey and still as the cemetery. He had glimpses of several of its deserted streets. To the south the watch-light showed brightly, but no other was visible. So it seemed to Gavin, and then--suddenly--he lost the power to of people at one moment and empty the next, the minister stumbled over old Charles Yuill,

"Take me and welcome," Yuill cried, mistaking Gavin for the enemy. He had only one arm through the sleeve of his jacket, and his feet were bare.

"I am Mr. Dishart. Are the soldiers already in the square, Yuill?"

"They'll be there in a minute."

The man was so weak that Gavin had to hold him.

"Be a man, Charles. You have nothing to fear. It is not such as you the soldiers have come for. If need be, I can swear that you had not the strength, even if you had the will, to join in the weavers' riot."

"For God's sake, Mr. Dishart," Yuill cried, his hands chattering on Gavin's coat, "dinna swear that. My laddie was in the thick o' the riot; and if he's ta'en there's the poor's-house gaping for Kitty and me, for I couldna weave half a web a week. If there's a warrant agin onybody o' the name of Yuill, swear it's me; swear I'm a desperate character, swear I'm mighty strong for all I look palsied; and if when they take me, my courage breaks down, swear the mair, swear I confessed my guilt to you on the Book."

As Yuill spoke the quick rub-a-dub of a drum was heard.

"The soldiers!" Gavin let go his hold of the old man, who hastened away to give himself up.

"That's no the sojers," said a woman; "it's the folk gathering in the square. This'll be a watery Sabbath In Thrums."

"Rob Dow," shouted Gavin, as Dow flung past with a scythe in his hand, "lay down that scythe."

"To hell wi' religion!" Rob retorted, fiercely; "it spoils a' thing."

"Lay down that scythe; I command you."

Rob stopped undecidedly, then cast the scythe from him, but its rattle on the stones was more than he could bear.

"I winna," he cried, and, picking it up, ran to the square.

An upper window in Bank Street opened, and Dr. McQueen put out his head. He was smoking as usual.

"Mr. Dishart," he said, "you will return home at once if you are a wise man; or, better still, come in here. You can do nothing with these people to-night."

"I can stop their fighting."

"You will only make black blood between them and you."

"Dinna heed him, Mr. Dishart," cried some women.

"You had better heed him," cried a man.

"I will not desert my people," Gavin said.

"Listen, then, to my prescription," the doctor replied. "Drive that gypsy lassie out of the town before the soldiers reach it. She is firing the men to a red-heat through sheer devilry."

"She brocht the news, or we would have been nipped in our beds," some people cried.

"Does any one know who she is?" Gavin demanded, but all shook their heads. The Egyptian, as they called her, had never been seen in these parts before.

"Has any other person seen the soldiers?" he asked. "Perhaps this is a false alarm."

"Several have seen them within the last few minutes," the doctor answered. "They came from Tilliedrum, and were advancing on us from the south, but when they heard that we had got the alarm they stopped at the top of the brae, near T'nowhead's farm. Man, you would take these things more coolly if you smoked."

"Show me this woman," Gavin said sternly to those who had been listening. Then a stream of people carried him into the square.

The square has altered little, even in these days of enterprise, when Tillyloss has become Newton Bank. and the Craft Head Croft Terrace, with enamelled labels on them for the guidance of slow people, who forget their address and have to run to the end of the street and look up every time they write a letter. The stones on which the butter-wives sat have disappeared, and with them the clay walls and the outside stairs. Gone, too, is the stair of the town-house, from the top of which the drummer roared the gossip of the week on Sabbaths to country folk, to the scandal of all who knew that the proper thing on that day is to keep your blinds down; but the townhouse itself, round and red, still makes exit to the south troublesome. Wherever streets meet the square there is a house in the centre of them, and thus the heart of Thrums is a box, in which the stranger finds himself suddenly, wondering at first how he is to get out, and presently how he got in.

To Gavin, who never before had seen a score of people in the square at once, here was a sight strange and terrible. Andrew Struthers, an old soldier, stood on the outside stair of the town-house, shouting words of command to some fifty weavers, many of them scantily clad, but all armed with pikes and poles. Most were known to the little minister, but they wore faces that were new to him. Newcomers joined the body every moment. If the drill was clumsy the men were fierce. Hundreds of people gathered around, some screaming, some shaking their fists at the old soldier, many trying to pluck their relatives out of danger. Gavin could not see the Egyptian. Women and old men, fighting for the possession of his ear, implored him to disperse the armed band. He ran up the town-house stair, and in a moment it had become a pulpit.

"Dinna dare to interfere, Mr. Dishart," Struthers said savagely.

"Andrew Struthers," said Gavin solemnly, "in the name of God I order you to leave me alone. If you don't," he added ferociously, "I'll fling you over the stair."

"Dinna heed him, Andrew," some one shouted and another cried, "He canna understand our sufferings; he has dinner ilka day."

Struthers faltered, however, and Gavin cast his eye over the armed men.

"Rob Dow," he said, "William Carmichael, Thomas Whamond, William Munn, Alexander Hobart, Henders Haggart, step forward."

These were Auld Lichts, and when they found that the minister would not take his eyes off them, they obeyed, all save Rob Dow.

"Never mind him, Rob," said the atheist, Cruickshanks, "it's better playing cards in hell than singing psalms in heaven."

"Joseph Cruickshanks," responded Gavin grimly, "you will find no cards down there."

Then Rob also came to the foot of the stair. There was some angry muttering from the crowd, and young Charles Yuill exclaimed, "Curse you, would you lord it over us on week-days as well as on Sabbaths?"

"Lay down your weapons," Gavin said to the six men.

They looked at each other. Hobart slipped his pike behind his back.

"I hae no weapon," he said slyly.

"Let me hae my fling this nicht," Dow entreated, "and I'll promise to bide sober for a twelvemonth."

"Oh, Rob, Rob!" the minister said bitterly, "are you the man I prayed with a few hours ago?"

The scythe fell from Rob's hands.

"Down wi' your pikes," he roared to his companions, "or I'll brain you wi' them."

"Ay, lay them down," the precentor whispered, "but keep your feet on them."

Then the minister, who was shaking with excitement, though he did not know it, stretched forth his arms for silence, and it came so suddenly as to frighten the people in the neighboring streets.

"If he prays we're done for," cried young Charles Yuill. but even in that hour many of the people were unbonneted.

"Oh, Thou who art the Lord of hosts," Gavin prayed, "we are in Thy hands this night. These are Thy people, and they have sinned; but Thou art a merciful God, and they were sore tried, and knew not what they did. To Thee, our God, we turn for deliverance, for without Thee we are lost."

The little minister's prayer was heard all round the square, and many weapons were dropped as an Amen to it.

"If you fight," cried Gavin, brightening as he heard the clatter of the iron on the stones, "your wives and children may be shot in the streets. These

soldiers have come for a dozen of you; will you be benefited if they take away a hundred?"

"Oh, hearken to him," cried many women.

"I winna," answered a man, "for I'm ane o' the dozen. Whaur's the Egyptian?"

"Here."

Gavin saw the crowd open, and the woman of Windy ghoull come out of it, and, while he should have denounced her, he only blinked, for once more her loveliness struck him full in the eyes. She was beside him on the stair before he became a minister again.

"How dare you, woman?" he cried; but she flung a rowan berry at him.

"If I were a man," she exclaimed, addressing the people, "I wouldna let myself be caught like a mouse in a trap."

"We winna," some answered.

"What kind o' women are you," cried the Egyptian, her face gleaming as she turned to her own sex, "that bid your men folk gang to gaol when a bold front would lead them to safety? Do you want to be husbandless and hameless?"

"Disperse, I command you!" cried Gavin. "This abandoned woman is inciting you to riot."

"Dinna heed this little man," the Egyptian retorted.

It is curious to know that even at that anxious moment Gavin winced because she called him little.

"She has the face of a mischief-maker," he shouted, "and her words are evil."

"You men and women o' Thrums," she responded, "ken that I wish you weel by the service I hae done you this nicht. Wha telled you the sojers was coming?"

"It was you; it was you!"

"Ay, and mony a mile I ran to bring the news, Listen, and I'll tell you mair."

"She has a false tongue," Gavin cried; "listen not to the brazen woman."

"What I have to tell," she said, "is as true as what I've telled already, and how true that is you a' ken. You're wondering how the sojers has come to a stop at the tap o' the brae instead o' marching on the town. Here's the reason. They agreed to march straucht to the square if the alarm wasna given, but if it was they were to break into small bodies and surround the town so that you couldna get out. That's what they're doing now."

At this the screams were redoubled, and many men lifted the weapons they had dropped.

"Believe her not," cried Gavin. "How could a wandering gypsy know all this?"

"Ay, how can you ken?" some demanded.

"It's enough that I do ken," the Egyptian answered. "And this mair I ken, that the captain of the soldiers is confident he'll nab every one o' you that's wanted anless you do one thing."

"What is 't?"

"If you a' run different ways you're lost, but if you keep thegither you'll be able to force a road into the country, whaur you can scatter. That's what he's fleid you'll do."

"Then it's what we will do."

"It is what you will not do," Gavin said passionately. "The truth is not in this wicked woman."

But scarcely had he spoken when he knew that startling news had reached the square. A murmur arose on the skirts of the mob, and swept with the roar of the sea towards the town-house. A detachment of the soldiers were marching down the Roods from the north.

"There's some coming frae the east-town end," was the next intelligence; "and they've gripped Sanders Webster, and auld Charles Yuill has given himsel' up."

"You see, you see," the gypsy said, flashing triumph at Gavin.

"Lay down your weapons," Gavin cried, but his power over the people had gone.

"The Egyptian spoke true," they shouted; "dinna heed the minister."

Gavin tried to seize the gypsy by the shoulders, but she slipped past him down the stair, and crying "Follow me!" ran round the town-house and down the brae.

"Woman!" he shouted after her, but she only waved her arms scornfully. The people followed her, many of the men still grasping their weapons, but all in disorder. Within a minute after Gavin saw the gleam of the ring on her finger, as she waved her hands, he and Dow were alone in the square.

"She's an awfu' woman that," Rob said. "I saw her laughing."

Gavin ground his teeth.

"Rob Dow," he said, slowly, "if I had not found Christ I would have throttled that woman. You saw how she flouted me?"