

CHAPTER VIII. - 3 A.M.--MONSTROUS AUDACITY OF THE WOMAN.

Not till the stroke of three did Gavin turn homeward, with the legs of a ploughman, and eyes rebelling against over-work. Seeking to comfort his dejected people, whose courage lay spilt on the brae, he had been in as many houses as the policemen. The soldiers marching through the wynds came frequently upon him, and found it hard to believe that he was always the same one. They told afterwards that Thrums was remarkable for the ferocity of its women, and the number of its little ministers. The morning was nipping cold, and the streets were deserted, for the people had been ordered within doors. As he crossed the Roods, Gavin saw a gleam of red-coats. In the back wynd he heard a bugle blown. A stir in the Banker's close spoke of another seizure. At the top of the school wynd two policeman, of whom one was Wearyworld, stopped the minister with the flash of a lantern.

"We dauredna let you pass, sir," the Tilliedrum man said, "without a good look at you. That's the orders."

"I hereby swear," said Wearyworld, authoritatively, "that this is no the Egyptian. Signed, Peter Spens, policeman, called by the vulgar, Wearyworld. Mr. Dishart, you can pass, unless you'll bide a wee and gie us your crack."

"You have not found the gypsy, then?" Gavin asked.

"No," the other policeman said, "but we ken she's within cry o' this very spot, and escape she canna."

"What mortal man can do," Wearyworld said, "we're doing: ay, and mair, but she's auld wecht, and may find bilbie in queer places. Mr. Dishart, my official opinion is that this Egyptian is fearsomely like my snuff-spoon. I've kent me drap that spoon on the fender, and be beat to find it in an hour. And yet, a' the time I was sure it was there. This is a gey mysterious world, and women's the uncanniest things in't. It's hardly mous to think how uncanny they are."

"This one deserves to be punished," Gavin said, firmly; "she incited the people to riot."

"She did," agreed Weary world, who was supping ravenously on sociability; "ay, she even tried her tricks on me, so that them that kens no better thinks she fooled me. But she's cracky. To gie her her due, she's cracky,

and as for her being a cuttie, you've said yoursel, Mr. Dishart, that we're all desperately wicked, But we're sair tried. Has it ever struck you that the trouts bites best on the Sabbath? God's critturs tempting decent men."

"Come alang," cried the Tilliedrum man, impatiently.

"I'm coming, but I maun give Mr. Dishart permission to pass first. Hae you heard, Mr. Dishart," Wearyworld whispered, "that the Egyptian diddled baith the captain and the shirra? It's my official opinion that she's no better than a roasted onion, the which, if you grip it firm, jumps out o' sicht, leaving its coat in your fingers. Mr. Dishart, you can pass."

The policeman turned down the school wynd, and Gavin, who had already heard exaggerated accounts of the strange woman's escape from the town-house, proceeded along the Tenements. He walked in the black shadows of the houses, though across the way there was the morning light.

In talking of the gypsy, the little minister had, as it were, put on the black cap; but now, even though he shook his head angrily with every thought of her, the scene in Windyghoul glimmered before his eyes. Sometimes when he meant to frown he only sighed, and then having sighed he shook himself. He was unpleasantly conscious of his right hand, which had flung the divit. Ah, she was shameless, and it would be a bright day for Thrums that saw the last of her. He hoped the policemen would succeed in--. It was the gladsomeness of innocence that he had seen dancing in the moonlight. A mere woman could not be like that. How soft--. And she had derided him; he, the Auld Licht minister of Thrums, had been flouted before his people by a hussy. She was without reverence, she knew no difference between an Auld Licht minister, whose duty it was to speak and hers to listen, and herself. This woman deserved to be--. And the look she cast behind her as she danced and sang! It was sweet, so wistful; the presence of purity had silenced him. Purity! Who had made him fling that divit? He would think no more of her. Let it suffice that he knew what she was. He would put her from his thoughts. Was it a ring on her finger?

Fifty yards in front of him Gavin saw the road end in a wall of soldiers. They were between him and the manse, and he was still in darkness. No sound reached him, save the echo of his own feet. But was it an echo? He stopped, and turned round sharply. Now he heard nothing, he saw nothing. Yet was not that a human figure standing motionless in the shadow behind?

He walked on, and again heard the sound. Again he looked behind, but this time without stopping. The figure was following him. He stopped. So did it. He turned back, but it did not move. It was the Egyptian!

Gavin knew her, despite the lane of darkness, despite the long cloak that now concealed even her feet, despite the hood over her head. She was looking quite respectable, but he knew her.

He neither advanced to her nor retreated. Could the unhappy girl not see that she was walking into the arms of the soldiers? But doubtless she had been driven from all her hiding-places. For a moment Gavin had it in his heart to warn her. But it was only for a moment. The next a sudden horror shot through him. She was stealing toward him, so softly that he had not seen her start. The woman had designs on him! Gavin turned from her. He walked so quickly that judges would have said he ran.

The soldiers, I have said, stood in the dim light. Gavin had almost reached them, when a little hand touched his arm.

"Stop," cried the sergeant, hearing some one approaching, and then Gavin stepped out of the darkness with the gypsy on his arm.

"It is you, Mr. Dishart," said the sergeant, "and your lady?"

"I--." said Gavin.

His lady pinched his arm.

"Yes," she answered, in an elegant English voice that made Gavin stare at her, "but, indeed, I am sorry I ventured into the streets to-night. I thought I might be able to comfort some of these unhappy people, captain, but I could do little, sadly little."

"It is no scene for a lady, ma'am, but your husband has--. Did you speak, Mr. Dishart?"

"Yes, I must inf--"

"My dear," said the Egyptian, "I quite agree with you, so we need not detain the captain."

"I'm only a sergeant, ma'am."

"Indeed!" said the Egyptian, raising her pretty eyebrows, "and how long are you to remain in Thrums, sergeant?"

"Only for a few hours, Mrs. Dishart. If this gypsy lassie had not given us so much trouble, we might have been gone by now."

"Ah, yes, I hope you will catch her, sergeant."

"Sergeant," said Gavin, firmly, "I must--"

"You must, indeed, dear," said the Egyptian, "for you are sadly tired. Good-night, sergeant."

"Your servant, Mrs. Dishart. Your servant, sir."

"But--," cried Gavin.

"Come, love," said the Egyptian, and she walked the distracted minister through the soldiers and up the manse road.

The soldiers left behind, Gavin flung her arm from him, and, standing still, shook his fist in her face.

"You--you--woman!" he said.

This, I think, was the last time he called her a woman.

But she was clapping her hands merrily.

"It was beautiful!" she exclaimed.

"It was iniquitous!" he answered. "And I a minister!"

"You can't help that," said the Egyptian, who pitied all ministers heartily.

"No," Gavin said, misunderstanding her, "I could not help it. No blame attaches to me."

"I meant that you could not help being a minister, You could have helped saving me, and I thank you so much."

"Do not dare to thank me. I forbid you to say that I saved you. I did my best to hand you over to the authorities."

"Then why did you not hand me over?"

Gavin groaned.

"All you had to say," continued the merciless Egyptian, "was, 'This is the person you are in search of.' I did not have my hand over your mouth. Why did you not say it?"

"Forbear!" said Gavin, woefully.

"It must have been," the gypsy said, "because you really wanted to help me."

"Then it was against my better judgment," said Gavin.

"I am glad of that," said the gypsy. "Mr. Dishart, I do believe you like me all the time."

"Can a man like a woman against his will?" Gavin blurted out.

"Of course he can," said the Egyptian, speaking as one who knew. "That is the very nicest way to be liked."

Seeing how agitated Gavin was, remorse filled her, and she said in a wheedling voice--

"It is all over, and no one will know."

Passion sat on the minister's brow, but he said nothing, for the gypsy's face had changed with her voice, and the audacious woman was become a child.

"I am very sorry," she said, as if he had caught her stealing jam. The hood had fallen back, and she looked pleadingly at him. She had the appearance of one who was entirely in his hands.

There was a torrent of words in Gavin, but only these trickled forth--

"I don't understand you."

"You are not angry any more?" pleaded the Egyptian.

"Angry!" he cried, with the righteous rage of one who when his leg is being sawn off is asked gently if it hurts him.

"I know you are," she sighed, and the sigh meant that men are strange.

"Have you no respect for law and order?" demanded Gavin.

"Not much," she answered, honestly.

He looked down the road to where the red-coats were still visible, and his face became hard. She read his thoughts.

"No," she said, becoming a woman again, "it is not yet too late. Why don't you shout to them?"

She was holding herself like a queen, but there was no stiffness in her. They might have been a pair of lovers, and she the wronged one. Again she looked timidly at him, and became beautiful in a new way. Her eyes said that he was very cruel, and she was only keeping back her tears till he had gone. More dangerous than her face was her manner, which gave Gavin the privilege of making her unhappy; it permitted him to argue with her; it never implied that though he raged at her he must stand afar off; it called him a bully, but did not end the conversation.

Now (but perhaps I should not tell this) unless she is his wife a man is shot with a thrill of exultation every time a pretty woman allows him to upbraid her.

"I do not understand you," Gavin repeated weakly, and the gypsy bent her head under this terrible charge.

"Only a few hours ago," he continued, "you were a gypsy girl in a fantastic dress, barefooted--"

The Egyptian's bare foot at once peeped out mischievously from beneath the cloak, then again retired into hiding.

"You spoke as broadly," complained the minister, somewhat taken aback by this apparition, "as any woman in Thrums, and now you fling a cloak over your shoulders, and immediately become a fine lady. Who are you?"

"Perhaps," answered the Egyptian, "it is the cloak that has bewitched me." She slipped out of it. "Ay, ay, ou losh?" she said, as if surprised, "it was just the cloak that did it, for now I'm a pair ignorant bit lassie again. My, certie, but claites does make a differ to a woman?"

This was sheer levity, and Gavin walked scornfully away from it.

"Yet, if you will not tell me who you are," he said, looking over his shoulder, "tell me where you got the cloak."

"Na faags," replied the gypsy out of the cloak. "Really, Mr. Dishart, you had better not ask," she added, replacing it over her.

She followed him, meaning to gain the open by the fields to the north of the manse.

"Good-bye," she said, holding out her hand, "if you are not to give me up."

"I am not a policeman," replied Gavin, but he would not take her hand.

"Surely, we part friends, then?" said the Egyptian, sweetly.

"No," Gavin answered. "I hope never to see your face again."

"I cannot help," the Egyptian said, with dignity, "your not liking my face." Then, with less dignity, she added, "There is a splotch of mud on your own, little minister; it came off the divit you flung at the captain."

With this parting shot she tripped past him, and Gavin would not let his eyes follow her. It was not the mud on his face that distressed him, nor even the hand that had flung the divit. It was the word "little." Though, even Margaret was not aware of it, Gavin's shortness had grieved him all his life. There had been times when he tried to keep the secret from himself. In his boyhood he had sought a remedy by getting his larger comrades to stretch him. In the company of tall men he was always self-conscious. In the pulpit he looked darkly at his congregation when he asked them who, by taking thought, could add a cubit to his stature. When standing on a hearthrug his heels were frequently on the fender. In his bedroom he has stood on a footstool and surveyed himself in the mirror. Once he fastened high heels to his boots, being ashamed to ask Hendry Munn to do it for him; but this dishonesty shamed him, and he tore them off. So the Egyptian had put a needle into his pride, and he walked to the manse gloomily.

Margaret was at her window, looking for him, and he saw her though she did not see him. He was stepping into the middle of the road to wave his hand to her, when some sudden weakness made him look towards the fields instead. The Egyptian saw him and nodded thanks for his interest in her, but he scowled and pretended to be studying the sky. Next moment he saw her running back to him.

"There are soldiers at the top of the field," she cried. "I cannot escape that way."

"There is no other way," Gavin answered.

"Will you not help me again?" she entreated.

She should not have said "again." Gavin shook his head, but pulled her closer to the manse dyke, for his mother was still in sight.

"Why do you do that?" the girl asked, quickly, looking round to see if she were pursued. "Oh, I see," she said, as her eyes fell on the figure at the window.

"It is my mother," Gavin said, though he need not have explained, unless he wanted the gypsy to know that he was a bachelor.

"Only your mother?"

"Only! Let me tell you she may suffer more than you for your behaviour to-night!"

"How can she?"

"If you are caught, will it not be discovered that I helped you to escape?"

"But you said you did not."

"Yes, I helped you," Gavin admitted. "My God! what would my congregation say if they knew I had let you pass yourself off as-- as my wife?"

He struck his brow, and the Egyptian had the propriety to blush.

"It is not the punishment from men I am afraid of," Gavin said, bitterly, "but from my conscience. No, that is not true. I do fear exposure, but for my mother's sake. Look at her; she is happy, because she thinks me good and true; she has had such trials as you cannot know of, and now, when at last I seemed able to do something for her, you destroy her happiness. You have her life in your hands."

The Egyptian turned her back upon him, and one of her feet tapped angrily on the dry ground. Then, child of impulse as she always was, she flashed an indignant glance at him, and walked quickly down the road.

"Where are you going?" he cried.

"To give myself up. You need not be alarmed; I will clear you."

There was not a shake in her voice, and she spoke without looking back.

"Stop!" Gavin called, but she would not, until his hand touched her shoulder.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"Why--" whispered Gavin, giddily, "why--why do you not hide in the manse garden?--No one will look for you there."

There were genuine tears in the gypsy's eyes now.

"You are a good man," she said; "I like you."

"Don't say that," Gavin cried in horror. "There is a summer-seat in the garden."

Then he hurried from her, and without looking to see if she took his advice, hastened to the manse. Once inside, he snibbed the door.