

CHAPTER X. - FIRST SERMON AGAINST WOMEN.

On the afternoon of the following Sabbath, as I have said, something strange happened in the Auld Licht pulpit. The congregation, despite their troubles, turned it over and peered at it for days, but had they seen into the inside of it they would have weaved few webs until the session had sat on the minister. The affair baffled me at the time, and for the Egyptian's sake I would avoid mentioning it now, were it not one of Gavin's milestones. It includes the first of his memorable sermons against Woman.

I was not in the Auld Licht church that day, but I heard of the sermon before night, and this, I think, is as good an opportunity as another for showing how the gossip about Gavin reached me up here in the Glen school-house. Since Margaret and her son came to the manse I had kept the vow made to myself and avoided Thrums. Only once had I ventured to the kirk, and then, instead of taking my old seat, the fourth from the pulpit, I sat down near the plate, where I could look at Margaret without her seeing me. To spare her that agony I even stole away as the last word of the benediction was pronounced, and my haste scandalised many, for with Auld Lichts it is not customary to retire quickly from the church after the manner of the godless U. P.'s (and the Free Kirk is little better), who have their hats in their hand when they rise for the benediction, so that they may at once pour out like a burst dam. We resume our seats, look straight before us, clear our throats and stretch out our hands for our womenfolk to put our hats into them. In time we do get out, but I am never sure how.

One may gossip in a glen on Sabbaths, though not in a town, without losing his character, and I used to await the return of my neighbour, the farmer of Waster Lunny, and of Silva Birse, the Glen Quharity post, at the end of the school-house path. Waster Lunny was a man whose care in his leisure hours was to keep from his wife his great pride in her. His horse, Catlaw, on the other hand, he told outright what he thought of it, praising it to its face and blackguarding it as it deserved, and I have seen him when completely baffled by the brute, sit down before it on a stone and thus harangue: "You think you're clever, Catlaw, my lass, but you're mista'en. You're a thrawn limmer, that's what you are. You think you have blood in you. You hae blood! Gae away, and dinna blether. I tell you what, Catlaw, I met a man yestreen that kent your mither, and he says she was a feikie fushionless besom. What do you say to that?"

As for the post, I will say no more of him than that his bitter topic was the unreasonableness of humanity, which treated him graciously when he had a letter for it, but scowled at him when he had none. "aye implying that I hae a letter, but keep it back."

On the Sabbath evening after the riot, I stood at the usual place awaiting my friends, and saw before they reached me that they had something untoward to tell. The farmer, his wife and three children, holding each other's hands, stretched across the road. Birse was a little behind, but a conversation was being kept up by shouting. All were walking the Sabbath pace, and the family having started half a minute in advance, the post had not yet made up on them.

"It's sitting to snaw," Waster Lunny said, drawing near, and just as I was to reply, "It is so," Silva slipped in the words before me.

"You wasna at the kirk," was Elspeth's salutation. I had been at the Glen church, but did not contradict her, for it is Established, and so neither here nor there. I was anxious, too, to know what their long faces meant, and so asked at once--

"Was Mr. Dishart on the riot?"

"Forenoon, ay; afternoon, no," replied Waster Lunny, walking round his wife to get nearer me. "Dominie, a queery thing happened in the kirk this day, sic as--"

"Waster Lunny," interrupted Elspeth sharply; "have you on your Sabbath shoon or have you no on your Sabbath shoon?"

"Guid care you took I should hae the dagont oncanny things on," retorted the farmer.

"Keep out o' the gutter, then," said Elspeth, "on the Lord's day."

"Him," said her man, "that is forced by a foolish woman to wear genteel 'lastic-sided boots canna forget them till he takes them aff. Whaur's the extra reverence in wearing shoon twa sizes ower sma?"

"It mayna be mair reverent," suggested Birse, to whom Elspeth's kitchen was a pleasant place, "but it's grand, and you canna expect to be baith grand and comfortable."

I reminded them that they were speaking of Mr. Dishart.

"We was saying," began the post briskly, "that--"

"It was me that was saying it," said Waster Lunny. "So, dominie--"

"Haud your gabs, baith o' you," interrupted Elspeth, "You've been roaring the story to ane another till you're hoarse."

"In the forenoon," Waster Lunny went on determinedly, "Mr. Dishart preached on the riot, and fine he was. Oh, dominie, you should hae heard him ladling it on to Lang Tammas, no by name but in sic a way that there was no mistaking wha he was preaching at, Sal! oh losh! Tammas got it strong."

"But he's dull in the uptake," broke in the post, "by what I expected. I spoke to him after the sermon, and I says, just to see if he was properly humbled, 'Ay, Tammas,' I says, 'them that discourse was preached against, winna think themselves seven feet men for a while again.' 'Ay, Birse,' he answers, 'and glad I am to hear you admit it, for he had you in his eye.' I was fair scunnered at Tammas the day."

"Mr. Dishart was preaching at the whole clanjamfray o' you," said Elspeth.

"Maybe he was," said her husband, leering; "but you needna cast it at us, for, my certie, if the men got it frae him in the forenoon, the women got it in the afternoon."

"He redd them up most mighty," said the post. "Thae was his very words or something like them. 'Adam,' says he, 'was an erring man, but aside Eve he was respectable.'"

"Ay, but it wasna a' women he meant," Elspeth explained, "for when he said that, he pointed his finger direct at T'nowhead's lassie, and I hope it'll do her good."

"But I wonder," I said, "that Mr. Dishart chose such a subject to- day. I thought he would be on the riot at both services."

"You'll wonder mair," said Elspeth, "when you hear what happened afore he began the afternoon sermon. But I canna get in a word wi' that man o' mine."

"We've been speaking about it," said Birse, "ever since we left the kirk door. Tod, we've been sawing it like seed a' along the glen."

"And we meant to tell you about it at once," said Waster Lunny; "but there's aye so muckle to say about a minister. Dagont, to hae ane keeps a body out

o' langour. Ay, but this breaks the drum. Dominie, either Mr. Dishart wasna weel, or he was in the devil's grip."

This startled me, for the farmer was looking serious.

"He was weel eneuch," said Birse, "for a heap o' fowk speired at Jean if he had ta'en his porridge as usual, and she admitted he had. But the lassie was skeered hersel', and said it was a mercy Mrs. Dishart wasna in the kirk."

"Why was she not there?" I asked anxiously.

"Oh, he winna let her out in sic weather."

"I wish you would tell me what happened," I said to Elspeth.

"So I will," she answered, "if Waster Lunny would haud his wheesht for a minute. You see the afternoon diet began in the ordinary way, and a' was richt until we came to the sermon. 'You will find my text,' he says, in his piercing voice, 'in the eighth chapter of Ezra.'"

"And at thae words," said Waster Lunny, "my heart gae a loup, for Ezra is an unca ill book to find; ay, and so is Ruth."

"I kent the books o' the Bible by heart," said Elspeth, scornfully, "when I was a sax year auld."

"So did I," said Waster Lunny, "and I ken them yet, except when I'm hurried. When Mr. Dishart gave out Ezra he a sort o' keeked round the kirk to find out if he had puzzled onybody, and so there was a kind o' a competition among the congregation wha would lay hand on it first. That was what doited me. Ay, there was Ruth when she wasna wanted, but Ezra, dagont, it looked as if Ezra had jumped clean out o' the Bible."

"You wasna the only distressed crittur," said his wife. "I was ashamed to see Eppie McLaren looking up the order o' the books at the beginning o' the Bible."

"Tibbie Birse was even mair brazen," said the post, "for the sly cuttie opened at Kings and pretended it was Ezra."

"None o' thae things would I do," said Waster Lunny, "and sal, I dauredna, for Davit Lunan was glowering over my shuther. Ay, you may scowl at me, Elspeth Proctor, but as far back as I can mind, Ezra has done me. Mony a time afore I start for the kirk I take my Bible to a quiet place and look Ezra up. In the very pew I says canny to mysel', 'Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Job,'

the which should be a help, but the moment the minister gi'es out that awfu' book, away goes Ezra like the Egyptian."

"And you after her," said Elspeth, "like the weavers that wouldna fecht. You make a windmill of your Bible."

"Oh, I winna admit I'm beat. Never mind there's queer things in the world forby Ezra. How is cripples aye so puffed up mair than other folk? How does flour-bread aye fall on the buttered side?"

"I will mind," Elspeth said, "for I was terrified the minister would admonish you frae the pulpit."

"He couldna hae done that, for was he no baffled to find Ezra himsel'?"

"Him no find Ezra!" cried Elspeth. "I hae telled you a dozen times he found it as easy as you could yoke a horse."

"The thing can be explained in no other way," said her husband, doggedly, "if he was weel and in sound mind."

"Maybe the dominie can clear it up," suggested the post, "him being a scholar."

"Then tell me what happened," I asked.

"Godsake, hae we no telled you?" Birse said. "I thocht we had."

"It was a terrible scene," said Elspeth, giving her husband a shove. "As I said, Mr. Dishart gave out Ezra eighth. Weel, I turned it up in a jiffy, and syne looked cautiously to see how Eppie McLaren was getting on. Just at that minute I heard a groan frae the pulpit. It didna stop short o' a groan. Ay, you may be sure I looked quick at the minister, and there I saw a sicht that would hae made the grandest gape. His face was as white as a baker's, and he had a sort of fallen against the back o' the pulpit, staring demented-like at his open Bible."

"And I saw him," said Birse, "put up his hand atween him and the Book, as if he thocht it was to jump at him."

"Twice," said Elspeth, "he tried to speak, and twice he let the words fall."

"That," says Waster Lunny, "the whole congregation admits, but I didna see it mysel', for a' this time you may picture me hunting savage-like for Ezra. I thocht the minister was waiting till I found it."

"Hendry Munn," said Birse, "stood upon one leg, wondering whether he should run to the session-house for a glass of water."

"But by that time," said Elspeth, "the fit had left Mr. Dishart, or rather it had ta'en a new turn. He grew red, and it's gospel that he stamped his foot."

"He had the face of one using bad words," said the post, "He didna swear, of course, but that was the face he had on."

"I missed it," said Waster Lunny, "for I was in full cry after Ezra, with the sweat running down my face."

"But the most astounding thing has yet to be telled," went on Elspeth. "The minister shook himsel' like one wakening frae a nasty dream, and he cries in a voice of thunder, just as if he was shaking his fist at somebody--"

"He cries," Birse interposed, cleverly, "he cries, 'You will find the text in Genesis, chapter three, verse six.'"

"Yes," said Elspeth, "first he gave out one text, and then he gave out another, being the most amazing thing to my mind that ever happened in the town of Thrums. What will our children's children think o't? I wouldna hae missed it for a pound note."

"Nor me," said Waster Lunny, "though I only got the tail o't. Dominie, no sooner had he said Genesis third and sixth, than I laid my finger on Ezra. Was it no provoking? Onybody can turn up Genesis, but it needs an able-bodied man to find Ezra."

"He preached on the Fall," Elspeth said, "for an hour and twenty-five minutes, but powerful though he was I would rather he had telled us what made him gie the go-by to Ezra."

"All I can say," said Waster Lunny, "is that I never heard him mair awe-inspiring. Whaur has he got sic a knowledge of women? He riddled them, he fair riddled them, till I was ashamed o' being married."

"It's easy kent whaur he got his knowledge of women," Birse explained, "it's a' in the original Hebrew. You can howk ony mortal thing out o' the original Hebrew, the which all ministers hae at their finger ends. What else makes them ken to jump a verse now and then when giving out a psalm?"

"It wasna women like me he denounced," Elspeth insisted, "but young lassies that leads men astray wi' their abominable wheedling ways."

"Tod," said her husband, "if they try their hands on Mr. Dishart they'll meet their match."

"They will," chuckled the post. "The Hebrew's a grand thing, though teuch, I'm telled, mighty teuch."

"His sublimest burst," Waster Lunny came back to tell me, "was about the beauty o' the soul being everything and the beauty o' the face no worth a snuff. What a scorn he has for bonny faces and toom souls! I dinna deny but what a bonny face fell takes me, but Mr. Dishart wouldna gie a blade o' grass for't. Ay, and I used to think that in their foolishness about women there was dagont little differ atween the unlearned and the highly edicated."

The gossip about Gavin brought hitherto to the schoolhouse had been as bread to me, but this I did not like. For a minister to behave thus was as unsettling to us as a change of Government to Londoners, and I decided to give my scholars a holiday on the morrow and tramp into the town for fuller news. But all through the night it snowed, and next day, and then intermittingly for many days, and every fall took the school miles farther away from Thrums. Birse and the crows had now the glen road to themselves, and even Birse had twice or thrice to bed with me. At these times had he not been so interested in describing his progress through the snow, maintaining that the crying want of our glen road was palings for postmen to kick their feet against, he must have wondered why I always turned the talk to the Auld Licht minister.

"Ony explanation o' his sudden change o' texts?' Birse said, repeating my question. "Tod, and there is and to spare, for I hear tell there's saxteen explanations in the Tenements alone. As Tammias Haggart says, that's a blessing, for if there had just been twa explanations the kirk nicht hae split on them."

"Ay," he said at another time, "twa or three even dared to question the minister, but I'm thinking they made nothing o't. The majority agrees that he was just inspired to change his text. But Lang Tammias is dour. Tammias telled the session a queer thing. He says that after the diet o' worship on that eventful afternoon Mr. Dishart carried the Bible out o' the pulpit instead o' leaving that duty as usual to the kirk-officer. Weel, Tammias, being precentor, has a richt, as you ken, to leave the kirk by the session-house door, just like the minister himsel'. He did so that afternoon, and what, think you, did he see? He saw Mr. Dishart tearing a page out o' the Bible, and flinging it savagely into the session-house fire. You dinna credit it? Weel, it's staggering, but there's Hendry Munn's evidence too. Hendry

took his first chance o' looking up Ezra in the minister's Bible, and, behold, the page wi' the eighth chapter was gone. Them that thinks Tammas wasna blind wi' excitement hauds it had been Ezra eighth that gaed into the fire. Onyway, there's no doubt about the page's being missing, for whatever excitement Tammas was in, Hendry was as cool as ever."

A week later Birse told me that the congregation had decided to regard the incident as adding lustre to their kirk. This was largely, I fear, because it could then be used to belittle the Established minister. That fervent Auld Licht, Snecky Hobart, feeling that Gavin's action was unsound, had gone on the following Sabbath to the parish kirk and sat under Mr. Duthie. But Mr. Duthie was a close reader, so that Snecky flung himself about in his pew in misery. The minister concluded his sermon with these words: "But on this subject I will say no more at present."

"Because you canna," Snecky roared, and strutted out of the church. Comparing the two scenes, it is obvious that the Auld Lichts had won a victory. After preaching impromptu for an hour and twenty-five minutes, it could never be said of Gavin that he needed to read. He became more popular than ever. Yet the change of texts was not forgotten. If in the future any other indictments were brought against him, it would certainly be pinned to them.

I marvelled long over Gavin's jump from Ezra to Genesis, and at this his first philippic against Woman, but I have known the cause for many a year. The Bible was the one that had lain on the summer-seat while the Egyptian hid there. It was the great pulpit Bible which remains in the church as a rule, but Gavin had taken it home the previous day to make some of its loose pages secure with paste. He had studied from it on the day preceding the riot, but had used a small Bible during the rest of the week. When he turned in the pulpit to Ezra, where he had left the large Bible open in the summer-seat, he found this scrawled across chapter eight:--

"I will never tell who flung the clod at Captain Halliwell. But why did you fling it? I will never tell that you allowed me to be called Mrs. Dishart before witnesses. But is not this a Scotch marriage? Signed, Babbie the Egyptian."