

CHAPTER XIII. - SECOND COMING OF THE EGYPTIAN WOMAN.

The gypsy had been passing the house, perhaps on her way to Thrums for gossip, and it was only curiosity, born suddenly of Gavin's cry, that made her enter. On finding herself in unexpected company she retained hold of the door, and to the amazed minister she seemed for a moment to have stepped into the mud house from his garden. Her eyes danced, however, as they recognised him, and then he hardened. "This is no place for you," he was saying fiercely, when Nanny, too distraught to think, fell crying at the Egyptian's feet.

"They are taking me to the poorhouse," she sobbed; "dinna let them, dinna let them."

The Egyptian's arms clasped her, and the Egyptian kissed a sallow cheek that had once been as fair as yours, madam, who may read this story. No one had caressed Nanny for many years, but do you think she was too poor and old to care for these young arms around her neck? There are those who say that women cannot love each other, but it is not true. Woman is not undeveloped man, but something better, and Gavin and the doctor knew it as they saw Nanny clinging to her protector. When the gypsy turned with flashing eyes to the two men she might have been a mother guarding her child.

"How dare you!" she cried, stamping her foot; and they quaked like malefactors.

"You don't see--" Gavin began, but her indignation stopped him.

"You coward!" she said.

Even the doctor had been impressed, so that he now addressed the gypsy respectfully.

"This is all very well," he said, "but a woman's sympathy--"

"A woman!--ah, if I could be a man for only five minutes!"

She clenched her little fists, and again turned to Nanny.

"You poor dear," she said tenderly, "I won't let them take you away."

She looked triumphantly at both minister and doctor, as one who had foiled them in their cruel designs.

"Go!" she said, pointing grandly to the door.

"Is this the Egyptian of the riots," the doctor said in a low voice to Gavin, "or is she a queen? Hoots, man, don't look so shamefaced. We are not criminals. Say something."

Then to the Egyptian Gavin said firmly--

"You mean well, but you are doing this poor woman a cruelty in holding out hopes to her that cannot be realised. Sympathy is not meal and bedclothes, and these are what she needs."

"And you who live in luxury," retorted the girl, "would send her to the poorhouse for them. I thought better of you!"

"Tuts!" said the doctor, losing patience, "Mr. Dishart gives more than any other man in Thrums to the poor, and he is not to be preached to by a gypsy. We are waiting for you, Nanny."

"Ay, I'm coming," said Nanny, leaving the Egyptian. "I'll hae to gang, lassie. Dinna greet for me."

But the Egyptian said, "No, you are not going. It is these men who are going. Go, sirs, and leave us."

"And you will provide for Nanny?" asked the doctor contemptuously.

"Yes."

"And where is the siller to come from?"

"That is my affair, and Nanny's. Begone, both of you. She shall never want again. See how the very mention of your going brings back life to her face."

"I won't begone," the doctor said roughly, "till I see the colour of your siller."

"Oh, the money," said the Egyptian scornfully. She put her hand into her pocket confidently, as if used to well-filled purses, but could only draw out two silver pieces.

"I had forgotten," she said aloud, though speaking to herself.

"I thought so," said the cynical doctor. "Come, Nanny."

"You presume to doubt me!" the Egyptian said, blocking his way to the door.

"How could I presume to believe you?" he answered. "You are a beggar by profession, and yet talk as if--pooh, nonsense."

"I would live on terrible little," Nanny whispered, "and Sanders will be out again in August month."

"Seven shillings a week," rapped out the doctor.

"Is that all?" the Egyptian asked. "She shall have it."

"When?"

"At once. No, it is not possible to-night, but to-morrow I will bring five pounds; no, I will send it; no, you must come for it."

"And where, O daughter of Dives, do you reside?" the doctor asked.

No doubt the Egyptian could have found a ready answer had her pity for Nanny been less sincere; as it was, she hesitated, wanting to propitiate the doctor, while holding her secret fast.

"I only asked," McQueen said, eyeing her curiously, "because when I make an appointment I like to know where it is to be held. But I suppose you are suddenly to rise out of the ground as you have done to-day, and did six weeks ago."

"Whether I rise out of the ground or not," the gypsy said, keeping her temper with an effort, "there will be a five-pound note in my hand. You will meet me tomorrow about this hour at--say the Kaims of Cushie?"

"No," said the doctor after a moment's pause; "I won't. Even if I went to the Kaims I should not find you there. Why can you not come to me?"

"Why do you carry a woman's hair," replied the Egyptian, "in that locket on your chain?"

Whether she was speaking of what she knew, or this was only a chance shot, I cannot tell, but the doctor stepped back from her hastily, and could not help looking down at the locket.

"Yes," said the Egyptian calmly, "it is still shut; but why do you sometimes open it at nights?"

"Lassie," the old doctor cried, "are you a witch?"

"Perhaps," she said; "but I ask for no answer to my questions. If you have your secrets, why may I not have mine? Now will you meet me at the Kaims?"

"No; I distrust you more than ever. Even if you came, it would be to play with me as you have done already. How can a vagrant have five pounds in her pocket when she does not have five shillings on her back?"

"You are a cruel, hard man," the Egyptian said, beginning to lose hope. "But, see," she cried, brightening, "look at this ring. Do you know its value?"

She held up her finger, but the stone would not live in the dull light.

"I see it is gold," the doctor said cautiously, and she smiled at the ignorance that made him look only at the frame.

"Certainly, it is gold," said Gavin, equally stupid.

"Mercy on us!" Nanny cried; "I believe it's what they call a diamond."

"How did you come by it?" the doctor asked suspiciously.

"I thought we had agreed not to ask each other questions," the Egyptian answered drily. "But, see, I will give it to you to hold in hostage. If I am not at the Kaims to get it back you can keep it."

The doctor took the ring in his hand and examined it curiously.

"There is a quirk in this," he said at last, "that I don't like. Take back your ring, lassie. Mr. Dishart, give Nanny your arm, and I'll carry her box to the machine."

Now all this time Gavin had been in the dire distress of a man possessed of two minds, of which one said, "This is a true woman," and the other, "Remember the seventeenth of October." They were at war within him, and he knew that he must take a side, yet no sooner had he cast one out than he invited it back. He did not answer the doctor.

"Unless," McQueen said, nettled by his hesitation, "you trust this woman's word."

Gavin tried honestly to weigh those two minds against each other, but could not prevent impulse jumping into one of the scales.

"You do trust me," the Egyptian said, with wet eyes; and now that he looked on her again--

"Yes," he said firmly, "I trust you," and the words that had been so difficult to say were the right words. He had no more doubt of it.

"Just think a moment first," the doctor warned him. "I decline to have anything to do with this matter. You will go to the Kaims for the siller?"

"If it is necessary," said Gavin.

"It is necessary," the Egyptian said.

"Then I will go."

Nanny took his hand timidly, and would have kissed it had he been less than a minister.

"You dare not, man," the doctor said gruffly, "make an appointment with this gypsy. Think of what will be said in Thrums."

I honour Gavin for the way in which he took this warning. For him, who was watched from the rising of his congregation to their lying down, whose every movement was expected to be a text to Thrums, it was no small thing that he had promised. This he knew, but he only reddened because the doctor had implied an offensive thing in a woman's presence,

"You forget yourself, doctor," he said sharply.

"Send some one in your place," advised the doctor, who liked the little minister.

"He must come himself and alone," said the Egyptian. "You must both give me your promise not to mention who is Nanny's friend, and she must promise too."

"Well," said the doctor, buttoning up his coat, "I cannot keep my horse freezing any longer. Remember, Mr. Dishart, you take the sole responsibility of this."

"I do," said Gavin, "and with the utmost confidence."

"Give him the ring then, lassie," said McQueen.

She handed the minister the ring, but he would not take it.

"I have your word," he said; "that is sufficient."

Then the Egyptian gave him the first look that he could think of afterwards without misgivings.

"So be it," said the doctor. "Get the money, and I will say nothing about it, unless I have reason to think that it has been dishonestly come by. Don't look so frightened at me, Nanny. I hope for your sake that her stocking-foot is full of gold."

"Surely it's worth risking," Nanny said, not very brightly, "when the minister's on her side."

"Ay, but on whose side, Nanny?" asked the doctor. "Lassie, I bear you no grudge; will you not tell me who you are?"

"Only a puir gypsy, your honour," said the girl, becoming mischievous now that she had gained her point; "only a wandering hallen-shaker, and will I tell you your fortune, my pretty gentleman?"

"No, you shan't," replied the doctor, plunging his hands so hastily into his pockets that Gavin laughed.

"I don't need to look at your hand," said the gypsy, "I can read your fortune in your face."

She looked at him fixedly, so that he fidgeted.

"I see you," said the Egyptian in a sepulchral voice, and speaking slowly, "become very frail. Your eyesight has almost gone. You are sitting alone in a cauld room, cooking your ain dinner ower a feeble fire. The soot is falling down the lum. Your bearish manners towards women have driven the servant lassie frae your house, and your wife beats you."

"Ay, you spoil your prophecy there," the doctor said, considerably relieved, "for I'm not married; my pipe's the only wife I ever had."

"You will be married by that time," continued the Egyptian, frowning at this interruption, "for I see your wife. She is a shrew. She marries you in your dotage. She lauchs at you in company. She doesna allow you to smoke."

"Away with you, you jade," cried the doctor in a fury, and feeling nervously for his pipe, "Mr. Dishart, you had better stay and arrange this matter as you choose, but I want a word with you outside."

"And you're no angry wi' me, doctor, are you?" asked Nanny wistfully. "You've been richt good to me, but I canna thole the thocht o' that place. And, oh, doctor, you winna tell naebody that I was so near taen to it?"

In the garden McQueen said to Gavin:--

"You may be right, Mr. Dishart, in this matter, for there is this in our favour, that the woman can gain nothing by tricking us. She did seem to feel for Nanny. But who can she be? You saw she could put on and off the Scotch tongue as easily as if it were a cap."

"She is as much a mystery to me as to you," Gavin answered, "but she will give me the money, and that is all I ask of her."

"Ay, that remains to be seen. But take care of yourself; a man's second childhood begins when a woman gets hold of him."

"Don't alarm yourself about me, doctor. I daresay she is only one of those gypsies from the South. They are said to be wealthy, many of them, and even, when they like, to have a grand manner. The Thrums people had no doubt but that she was what she seemed to be."

"Ay, but what does she seem to be? Even that puzzles me. And then there is this mystery about her which she admits herself, though perhaps only to play with us."

"Perhaps," said Gavin, "she is only taking precautions against her discovery by the police. You must remember her part in the riots."

"Yes, but we never learned how she was able to play that part. Besides, there is no fear in her, or she would not have ventured back to Thrums. However, good luck attend you. But be wary. You saw how she kept her feet among her shalls and wills? Never trust a Scotch man or woman who does not come to grief among them."

The doctor took his seat in the dog-cart.

"And, Mr. Dishart," he called out, "that was all nonsense about the locket."