CHAPTER XIV. - THE MINISTER DANCES TO THE WOMAN'S PIPING.

Gavin let the doctor's warnings fall in the grass. In his joy over Nanny's deliverance he jumped the garden gate, whose hinges were of yarn, and cleverly caught his hat as it was leaving his head in protest. He then re-entered the mud house staidly. Pleasant was the change. Nanny's home was as a clock that had been run out, and is set going again. Already the old woman was unpacking her box, to increase the distance between herself and the poorhouse. But Gavin only saw her in the background, for the Egyptian, singing at her work, had become the heart of the house. She had flung her shawl over Nanny's shoulders, and was at the fireplace breaking peats with the leg of a stool. She turned merrily to the minister to ask him to chop up his staff for firewood, and he would have answered wittily but could not. Then, as often, the beauty of the Egyptian surprised him into silence. I could never get used to her face myself in the after-days. It has always held me wondering, like my own Glen Quharity on a summer day, when the sun is lingering and the clouds are on the march, and the glen is never the same for two minutes, but always so beautiful as to make me sad. Never will I attempt to picture the Egyptian as she seemed to Gavin while she bent over Nanny's fire, never will I describe my glen. Yet a hundred times have I hankered after trying to picture both.

An older minister, believing that Nanny's anguish was ended, might have gone on his knees and finished the interrupted prayer, but now Gavin was only doing this girl's bidding.

"Nanny and I are to have a dish of tea, as soon as we have set things to rights," she told him, "Do you think we should invite the minister, Nanny?"

"We couldna dare," Nanny answered quickly,

"You'll excuse her, Mr. Dishart, for the presumption?"

"Presumption!" said the Egyptian, making a face.

"Lassie," Nanny said, fearful to offend her new friend, yet horrified at this affront to the minister, "I ken you mean weel, but Mr. Dishart'll think you're putting yoursel' on an equality wi' him." She added in a whisper, "Dinna be so free; he's the Auld Licht minister."

The gypsy bowed with mock awe, but Gavin let it pass. He had, indeed, forgotten that he was anybody in particular, and was anxious to stay to tea.

"But there is no water," he remembered, "and is there any tea?"

"I am going out for them and for some other things," the Egyptian explained. "But no," she continued, reflectively, "if I go for the tea, you must go for thewater."

"Lassie," cried Nanny, "mind wha you're speaking to. To send a minister to the well!"

"I will go," said Gavin, recklessly lifting the pitcher. "The well is in the wood, I think?"

"Gie me the pitcher, Mr. Dishart," said Nanny, in distress. "What a town there would be if you was seen wi't!"

"Then he must remain here and keep the house till we come back," said the Egyptian, and thereupon departed, with a friendly wave of her hand to the minister.

"She's an awfu' lassie," Nanny said, apologetically, "but it'll just be the way she has been brought up."

"She has been very good to you, Nanny."

"She has; leastwise, she promises to be. Mr. Dishart, she's awa'; what if she doesna come back?"

Nanny spoke nervously, and Gavin drew a long face.

"I think she will," he said faintly. "I am confident of it," he added in the same voice.

"And has she the siller?"

"I believe in her," said Gavin, so doggedly that his own words reassured him. "She has an excellent heart."

"Ay," said Nanny, to whom the minister's faith was more than the Egyptian's promise, "and that's hardly natural in a gaen-aboot body. Yet a gypsy she maun be, for naebody would pretend to be ane that wasna. Tod, she proved she was an Egyptian by dauring to send you to the well."

This conclusive argument brought her prospective dower so close to Nanny's eyes that it hid the poorhouse.

"I suppose she'll gie you the money," she said, "and syne you'll gie me the seven shillings a week?"

"That seems the best plan," Gavin answered.

"And what will you gie it me in?" Nanny asked, with something on her mind. "I would be terrible obliged if you gae it to me in saxpences."

"Do the smaller coins go farther?" Gavin asked, curiously.

"Na, it's no that. But I've heard tell o' folk giving away half- crowns by mistake for twa-shilling bits; ay, and there's something dizzying in ha'en fower-and-twenty pennies In one piece; it has sic terrible little bulk. Sanders had aince a gold sovereign, and he looked at it so often that it seemed to grow smaller and smaller in his hand till he was feared it micht just be a half after all."

Her mind relieved on this matter, the old woman set off for the well. A minute afterwards Gavin went to the door to look for the gypsy, and, behold, Nanny was no further than the gate. Have you who read ever been sick near to death, and then so far recovered that you could once again stand at your window? If so, you have not forgotten how the beauty of the world struck you afresh, so that you looked long and said many times, "How fair a world it is!" like one who had made a discovery. It was such a look that Nanny gave to the hill and Caddam while she stood at her garden gate.

Gavin returned to the fire and watched a girl in it in an officer's cloak playing at hide and seek with soldiers. After a time he sighed, then looked round sharply to see who had sighed, then, absent-mindedly, lifted the empty kettle and placed it on the glowing peats. He was standing glaring at the kettle, his arms folded, when Nanny returned from the well.

"I've been thinking," she said, "o' something that proves the lassie to be just an Egyptian. Ay, I noticed she wasna nane awed when I said you was the Auld Licht minister. Weel, I'se uphaud that came frae her living ower muckle in the open air. Is there no' a smell o' burning in the house?"

"I have noticed it," Gavin answered, sniffing, "since you came in. I was busy until then, putting on the kettle. The smell is becoming worse."

Nanny had seen the empty kettle on the fire as he began to speak, and so solved the mystery. Her first thought was to snatch the kettle out of the blaze, but remembering who had put it there, she dared not. She sidled toward the hearth instead, and saying craftily, "Ay, here it is; it's a clout among the peats," softly laid the kettle on the earthen floor. It was still red with sparks, however, when the gypsy reappeared.

"Who burned the kettle?" she asked, ignoring Nanny's signs.

"Lassie," Nanny said, "it was me;" but Gavin, flushing, confessed his guilt.

"Oh, you stupid!" exclaimed the Egyptian, shaking her two ounces of tea (which then cost six shillings the pound) in his face.

At this Nanny wrung her hands, crying, "That's waur than swearing."

"If men," said the gypsy, severely, "would keep their hands in their pockets all day, the world's affairs would be more easily managed."

"Wheesht!" cried Nanny, "if Mr. Dishart cared to set his mind to it, he could make the kettle boil quicker than you or me. But his thochts is on higher things."

"No higher than this," retorted the gypsy, holding her hand level with her brow. "Confess, Mr. Dishart, that this is the exact height of what you were thinking about. See, Nanny, he is blushing as if I meant that he had been thinking about me. He cannot answer, Nanny: we have found him out."

"And kindly of him it is no to answer," said Nanny, who had been examining the gypsy's various purchases; "for what could he answer, except that he would need to be sure o' living a thousand years afore he could spare five minutes on you or me? Of course it would be different if we sat under him."

"And yet," said the Egyptian, with great solemnity, "he is to drink tea at that very table. I hope you are sensible of the honour, Nanny."

"Am I no?" said Nanny, whose education had not included sarcasm. "I'm trying to keep frae thinking o't till he's gone, in case I should let the teapot fall."

"You have nothing to thank me for, Nanny," said Gavin, "but much for which to thank this--this--"

"This haggarty-taggarty Egyptian," suggested the girl. Then, looking at Gavin curiously, she said, "But my name is Babbie."

"That's short for Barbara," said Nanny; "but Babbie what?"

"Yes, Babbie Watt," replied the gypsy, as if one name were as good as another.

"Weel, men, lift the lid off the kettle, Babbie," said Nanny, "for it's boiling ower."

Gavin looked at Nanny with admiration and envy, for she had said Babbie as coolly as if it was the name of a pepper-box.

Babbie tucked up her sleeves to wash Nanny's cups and saucers, which even in the most prosperous days of the mud house had only been in use once a week, and Gavin was so eager to help that he bumped his head on the plate-rack.

"Sit there," said Babbie, authoritatively, pointing, with a cup in her hand, to a stool, "and don't rise till I give you permission. "

To Nanny's amazement, he did as he was bid.

"I got the things in the little shop you told me of," the Egyptian continued, addressing the mistress of the house, "but the horrid man would not give them to me until he had seen my money."

"Enoch would be suspicious o' you," Nanny explained, "you being an Egyptian."

"Ah," said Babbie, with a side-glance at the minister, "I am only an Egyptian. Is that why you dislike me, Mr. Dishart?" Gavin hesitated foolishly over his answer, and the Egyptian, with a towel round her waist, made a pretty gesture of despair.

"He neither likes you nor dislikes you," Nanny explained; "you forget he's a minister."

"That is what I cannot endure," said Babbie, putting the towel to her eyes, "to be neither liked nor disliked. Please hate me, Mr. Dishart, if you cannot lo--ove me."

Her face was behind the towel, and Gavin could not decide whether it was the face or the towel that shook with agitation. He gave Nanny a look that asked, "Is she really crying?" and Nanny telegraphed back, "I question it."

"Come, come," said the minister, gallantly, "I did not say that I disliked you."

Even this desperate compliment had not the desired effect, for the gypsy continued to sob behind her screen.

"I can honestly say," went on Gavin, as solemnly as if he were making a statement in a court of justice, "that I like you."

Then the Egyptian let drop her towel, and replied with equal solemnity:

"Oh, tank oo! Nanny, the minister says me is a dood 'ittle dirl."

"He didna gang that length," said Nanny, sharply, to cover Gavin's confusion. "Set the things, Babbie, and I'll make the tea."

The Egyptian obeyed demurely, pretending to wipe her eyes every time Gavin looked at her. He frowned at this, and then she affected to be too overcome to go on with her work.

"Tell me, Nanny," she asked presently, "what sort of man this Enoch is, from whom I bought the things?"

"He is not very regular, I fear," answered Gavin, who felt that he had sat silent and self-conscious on his stool too long.

"Do you mean that he drinks?" asked Babbie.

"No, I mean regular in his attendance."

The Egyptian's face showed no enlightenment.

"His attendance at church," Gavin explained.

"He's far frae it," said Nanny, "and as a body kens, Joe Cruickshanks, the atheist, has the wite o' that. The scoundrel telled Enoch that the great ministers in Edinbury and London believed in no hell except sic as your ain conscience made for you, and ever since syne Enoch has been careless about the future state."

"Ah," said Babbie, waving the Church aside, "what I want to know is whether he is a single man."

"He is not," Gavin replied; "but why do you want to know that?"

"Because single men are such gossips. I am sorry he is not single, as I want him to repeat to everybody what I told him."

"Trust him to tell Susy," said Nanny, "and Susy to tell the town."

"His wife is a gossip?"

"Ay, she's aye tonguing, especially about her teeth. They're folk wi' siller, and she has a set o' false teeth. It's fair scumfishing to hear her blawing about thae teeth, she's so fleid we dinna ken that they're false."

Nanny had spoken jealously, but suddenly she trembled with apprehension.

"Babbie," she cried, "you didna speak about the poorhouse to Enoch?"

The Egyptian shook her head, though of the poorhouse she had been forced to speak, for Enoch, having seen the doctor going home alone, insisted on knowing why.

"But I knew," the gypsy said, "that the Thrums people would be very unhappy until they discovered where you get the money I am to give you, and as that is a secret, I hinted to Enoch that your benefactor is Mr. Dishart."

"You should not have said that," interposed Gavin. "I cannot foster such a deception."

"They will foster it without your help," the Egyptian said. "Besides, if you choose, you can say you get the money from a friend."

"Ay, you can say that," Nanny entreated with such eagerness that Babbie remarked a little bitterly:

"There is no fear of Nanny's telling any one that the friend is a gypsy girl."

"Na, na," agreed Nanny, again losing Babbie's sarcasm. "I winna let on. It's so queer to be befriended by an Egyptian."

"It is scarcely respectable," Babbie said.

"It's no," answered simple Nanny.

I suppose Nanny's unintentional cruelty did hurt Babbie as much as Gavin thought. She winced, and her face had two expressions, the one cynical, the other pained. Her mouth curled as if to tell the minister that gratitude was nothing to her, but her eyes had to struggle to keep back a tear. Gavin was touched, and she saw it, and for a moment they were two people who understood each other.

"I, at least," Gavin said in a low voice, "will know who is the benefactress, and think none the worse of her because she is a gypsy."

At this Babbie smiled gratefully to him, and then both laughed, for they had heard Nanny remarking to the kettle, "But I wouldna hae been nane angry if she had telled Enoch that the minister was to take his tea here. Susy'll no believe't though I tell her, as tell her I will."

To Nanny the table now presented a rich appearance, for besides the teapot there were butter and loaf-bread and cheesies: a biscuit of which only Thrums knows the secret.

"Draw in your chair, Mr. Dishart," she said, in suppressed excitement.

"Yes," said Babbie, "you take this chair, Mr. Dishart, and Nanny will have that one, and I can sit humbly on the stool."

But Nanny held up her hands in horror.

"Keep us a'!" she exclaimed; "the lassie thinks her and me is to sit down wi' the minister! We're no to gang that length, Babbie; we're just to stand and serve him, and syne we'll sit down when he has risen."

"Delightful!" said Babbie, clapping her hands. "Nanny, you kneel on that side of him, and I will kneel on this. You will hold the butter and I the biscuits."

But Gavin, as this girl was always forgetting, was a lord of creation.

"Sit down both of you at once!" he thundered, "I command you."

Then the two women fell into their seats; Nanny in terror, Babbie affecting it.