

## **CHAPTER XV. - THE MINISTER BEWITCHED--SECOND SERMON AGAINST WOMEN.**

To Nanny it was a dizzying experience to sit at the head of her own table, and, with assumed calmness, invite the minister not to spare the loaf-bread. Babbie's prattle, and even Gavin's answers, were but an indistinct noise to her, to be as little regarded, in the excitement of watching whether Mr. Dishart noticed that there was a knife for the butter, as the music of the river by a man who is catching trout. Every time Gavin's cup went to his lips Nanny calculated (correctly) how much he had drunk, and yet, when the right moment arrived, she asked in the English voice that is fashionable at ceremonies, "if his cup was toom."

Perhaps it was well that Nanny had these matters to engross her, for though Gavin spoke freely, he was saying nothing of lasting value, and some of his remarks to the Egyptian, if preserved for the calmer contemplation of the morrow, might have seemed frivolous to himself. Usually his observations were scrambled for, like ha'pence at a wedding, but to-day they were only for one person. Infected by the Egyptian's high spirits, Gavin had laid aside the minister with his hat, and what was left was only a young man. He who had stamped his feet at thought of a soldier's cloak now wanted to be reminded of it. The little minister, who used to address himself in terms of scorn every time he wasted an hour, was at present dallying with a teaspoon. He even laughed boisterously, flinging back his head, and little knew that behind Nanny's smiling face was a terrible dread, because his chair had once given way before.

Even though our thoughts are not with our company, the mention of our name is a bell to which we usually answer. Hearing hers Nanny started.

"You can tell me, Nanny," the Egyptian had said, with an arch look at the minister. "Oh, Nanny, for shame! How can you expect to follow our conversation when you only listen to Mr. Dishart?"

"She is saying, Nanny," Gavin broke in, almost gaily for a minister, "that she saw me recently wearing a cloak. You know I have no such thing."

"Na," Nanny answered artlessly, "you have just the thin brown coat wi' the braid round it, forby the ane you have on the now."

"You see," Gavin said to Babbie, "I could not have a new neckcloth, not to speak of a cloak, without everybody in Thrums knowing about it. I dare say Nanny knows all about the braid, and even what it cost."

"Three bawbees the yard at Kyowowy's shop," replied Nanny, promptly, "and your mother sewed it on. Sam'l Fairweather has the marrows o't on his top coat. No that it has the same look on him."

"Nevertheless," Babbie persisted, "I am sure the minister has a cloak; but perhaps he is ashamed of it. No doubt it is hidden away in the garret."

"Na, we would hae kent o't if it was there," said Nanny.

"But it may be in a chest, and the chest may be locked," the Egyptian suggested.

"Ay, but the kist in the garret isna locked," Nanny answered.

"How do you get to know all these things, Nanny?" asked Gavin, sighing.

"Your congregation tells me. Naebody would lay by news about a minister."

"But how do they know?"

"I dinna ken. They just find out, because they're so fond o' you."

"I hope they will never become so fond of me as that," said Babbie. "Still, Nanny, the minister's cloak is hidden somewhere."

"Losh, what would make him hod it?" demanded the old woman. "Folk that has cloaks doesna bury them in boxes."

At the word "bury" Gavin's hand fell on the table, and he returned to Nanny apprehensively.

"That would depend on how the cloak was got," said the cruel Egyptian. "If it was not his own--"

"Lassie," cried Nanny, "behave yoursel'."

"Or if he found it in his possession against his will?" suggested Gavin, slyly. "He might have got it from some one who picked it up cheap."

"From his wife, for instance," said Babbie, whereupon Gavin suddenly became interested in the floor.

"Ay, ay, the minister was hitting at you there, Babbie," Nanny explained, "for the way you made off wi' the captain's cloak. The Thrums folk wondered less at your taking it than at your no keeping it. It's said to be michty grand."

"It was rather like the one the minister's wife gave him," said Babbie.

"The minister has neither a wife nor a cloak," retorted Nanny.

"He isn't married?" asked Babbie, the picture of incredulity.

Nanny gathered from the minister's face that he deputed to her the task of enlightening this ignorant girl, so she replied with emphasis, "Na, they hinna got him yet, and I'm cheated if it doesna tak them all their time."

Thus do the best of women sell their sex for nothing.

"I did wonder," said the Egyptian, gravely, "at any mere woman's daring to marry such a minister."

"Ay," replied Nanny, spiritedly, "but there's dauring limmers wherever there's a single man."

"So I have often suspected," said Babbie, duly shocked. "But, Nanny, I was told the minister had a wife, by one who said he saw her."

"He lied, then," answered Nanny turning to Gavin for further instructions.

"But, see, the minister does not deny the horrid charge himself."

"No, and for the reason he didna deny the cloak: because it's no worth his while. I'll tell you wha your friend had seen. It would be somebody that would like to be Mrs. Dishart. There's a hantle o' that kind. Ay, lassie, but wishing winna land a woman in a manse."

"It was one of the soldiers," Babbie said, "who told me about her. He said Mr. Dishart introduced her to him."

"Sojers!" cried Nanny. "I could never thole the name o' them. Sanders in his young days hankered after joining them, and so he would, if it hadna been for the fechtin'. Ay, and now they've ta'en him awa to the gaol, and sworn lies about him. Dinna put any faith in sojers, lassie."

"I was told," Babbie went on, "that the minister's wife was rather like me."

"Heaven forbid!" ejaculated Nanny, so fervently that all three suddenly sat back from the table.

"I'm no meaning," Nanny continued hurriedly, fearing to offend her benefactress, "but what you're the bonniest tid I ever saw out o' an almanack. But you would ken Mr. Dishart's contempt for bonny faces if you had heard his sermon against them. I didna hear it mysel', for I'm no Auld Licht, but it did the work o' the town for an aucht days."

If Nanny had not taken her eyes off Gavin for the moment she would have known that he was now anxious to change the topic. Babbie saw it, and became suspicious.

"When did he preach against the wiles of women, Nanny?"

"It was long ago," said Gavin, hastily.

"No so very lang syne," corrected Nanny. "It was the Sabbath after the sojers was in Thrums; the day you changed your text so hurriedly. Some thocht you wasna weel, but Lang Tammass--"

"Thomas Whamond is too officious," Gavin said with dignity. "I forbid you, Nanny, to repeat his story."

"But what made you change your text?" asked Babbie.

"You see he winna tell," Nanny said, wistfully. "Ay, I dinna deny but what I would like richt to ken. But the session's as puzzled as yoursel', Babbie."

"Perhaps more puzzled," answered the Egyptian, with a smile that challenged Gavin's frowns to combat and overthrow them. "What surprises me, Mr. Dishart, is that such a great man can stoop to see whether women are pretty or not. It was very good of you to remember me to-day. I suppose you recognized me by my frock?"

"By your face," he replied, boldly; "by your eyes."

"Nanny," exclaimed the Egyptian, "did you hear what the minister said?"

"Woe is me," answered Nanny, "I missed it."

"He says he would know me anywhere by my eyes."

"So would I mysel'," said Nanny.

"Then what colour are they, Mr. Dishart?" demanded Babbie. "Don't speak, Nanny, for I want to expose him."

She closed her eyes tightly. Gavin was in a quandary. I suppose he had looked at her eyes too long to know much about them.

"Blue," he guessed at last.

"Na, they're black," said Nanny, who had doubtless known this for an hour. I am always marvelling over the cleverness of women, as every one must see who reads this story.

"No but what they might be blue in some lights," Nanny added, out of respect to the minister.

"Oh, don't defend him, Nanny," said Babbie, looking reproachfully at Gavin. "I don't see that any minister has a right to denounce women when he is so ignorant of his subject. I will say it, Nanny, and you need not kick me beneath the table."

Was not all this intoxicating to the little minister, who had never till now met a girl on equal terms? At twenty-one a man is a musical instrument given to the other sex, but it is not as instruments learned at school, for when she sits down to it she cannot tell what tune she is about to play. That is because she has no notion of what the instrument is capable. Babbie's kind-heartedness, her gaiety, her coquetry, her moments of sadness, had been a witch's fingers, and Gavin was still trembling under their touch. Even in being taken to task by her there was a charm, for every pout of her mouth, every shake of her head, said, "You like me, and therefore you have given me the right to tease you." Men sign these agreements without reading them. But, indeed, man is a stupid animal at the best, and thinks all his life that he did not propose until he blurted out, "I love you."

It was later than it should have been when the minister left the mud house, and even then he only put on his hat because Babbie said that she must go.

"But not your way," she added. "I go into the wood and vanish. You know, Nanny, I live up a tree."

"Dinna say that," said Nanny, anxiously, "or I'll be fleid about the siller."

"Don't fear about it. Mr. Dishart will get some of it to-morrow at the Kaims. I would bring it here, but I cannot come so far to-morrow."

"Then I'll hae peace to the end o' my days," said the old woman, "and, Babbie, I wish the same to you wi' all my heart."

"Ah," Babbie replied, mournfully, "I have read my fortune, Nanny, and there is not much happiness in it."

"I hope that is not true," Gavin said, simply.

They were standing at the door, and she was looking toward the hill, perhaps without seeing it. All at once it came to Gavin that this fragile girl might have a history far sadder and more turbulent than his.

"Do you really care?" she asked, without looking at him.

"Yes," he said stoutly, "I care."

"Because you do not know me," she said.

"Because I do know you," he answered.

Now she did look at him.

"I believe," she said, making a discovery, "that you misunderstand me less than those who have known me longer."

This was a perilous confidence, for it at once made Gavin say "Babbie."

"Ah," she answered, frankly, "I am glad to hear that. I thought you did not really like me, because you never called me by my name."

Gavin drew a great breath.

"That was not the reason," he said.

The reason was now unmistakable.

"I was wrong," said the Egyptian, a little alarmed; "you do not understand me at all."

She returned to Nanny, and Gavin set off, holding his head high, his brain in a whirl. Five minutes afterwards, when Nanny was at the fire, the diamond ring on her little finger, he came back, looking like one who had just seen sudden death.

"I had forgotten," he said, with a fierceness aimed at himself, "that tomorrow is the Sabbath."

"Need that make any difference?" asked the gypsy.

"At this hour on Monday," said Gavin, hoarsely, "I will be at the Kaims."

He went away without another word, and Babbie watched him from the window. Nanny had not looked up from the ring.

"What a pity he is a minister!" the girl said, reflectively. "Nanny, you are not listening."

The old woman was making the ring flash by the light of the fire.

"Nanny, do you hear me? Did you see Mr. Dishart come back?"

"I heard the door open," Nanny answered, without taking her greedy eyes off the ring. "Was it him? Whaur did you get this, lassie?"

"Give it me back, Nanny, I am going now."

But Nanny did not give it back; she put her other hand over it to guard it, and there she crouched, warming herself not at the fire, but at the ring.

"Give it me, Nanny."

"It winna come off my finger." She gloated over it, nursed it, kissed it.

"I must have it, Nanny."

The Egyptian put her hand lightly on the old woman's shoulder, and Nanny jumped up, pressing the ring to her bosom. Her face had become cunning and ugly; she retreated into a corner.

"Nanny, give me back my ring or I will take it from you."

The cruel light of the diamond was in Nanny's eyes for a moment, and then, shuddering, she said, "Tak your ring awa, tak it out o' my sicht."

In the meantime Gavin was trudging home gloomily composing his second sermon against women. I have already given the entry in my own diary for that day: this is his:--"Notes on Jonah. Exchanged vol. xliii., 'European Magazine,' for Owen's 'Justification' (per flying stationer). Began Second Samuel. Visited Nanny Webster." There is no mention of the Egyptian.