CHAPTER XVI. - CONTINUED MISBEHAVIOUR OF THE EGYPTIAN WOMAN.

BY the following Monday it was known at many looms that something sat heavily on the Auld Licht minister's mind. On the previous day he had preached his second sermon of warning to susceptible young men, and his first mention of the word "woman" had blown even the sleepy heads upright. Now he had salt fish for breakfast, and on clearing the table Jean noticed that his knife and fork were uncrossed. He was observed walking into a gooseberry bush by Susy Linn, who possessed the pioneer spring-bed of Thrums, and always knew when her man jumped into it by suddenly finding herself shot to the ceiling. Lunan, the tinsmith, and two women, who had the luck to be in the street at the time, saw him stopping at Dr. McQueen's door, as if about to knock, and then turning smartly away. His hat blew off in the school wynd, where a wind wanders ever, looking for hats, and he chased it so passionately that Lang Tammas went into Allardyce's smiddy to say--

"I dinna like it. Of course he couldna afford to lose his hat, but he should hae run after it mair reverently."

Gavin, indeed, was troubled. He had avoided speaking of the Egyptian to his mother. He had gone to McQueen's house to ask the doctor to accompany him to the Kaims, but with the knocker in his hand he changed his mind, and now he was at the place of meeting alone. It was a day of thaw, nothing to be heard from a distance but the swish of curling-stones through water on Rashie-bog, where the match for the eldership was going on. Around him. Gavin saw only dejected firs with drops of water falling listlessly from them, clods of snow, and grass that rustled as if animals were crawling through it. All the roads were slack.

I suppose no young man to whom society has not become a cheap thing can be in Gavin's position, awaiting the coming of an attractive girl, without giving thought to what he should say to her. When in the pulpit or visiting the sick, words came in a rush to the little minister, but he had to set his teeth to determine what to say to the Egyptian.

This was because he had not yet decided which of two women she was. Hardly had he started on one line of thought when she crossed his vision in a new light, and drew him after her.

Her "Need that make any difference?" sang in his ear like another divit, cast this time at religion itself, and now he spoke aloud, pointing his finger at a fir: "I said at the mud house that I believed you because I knew you. To my shame be it said that I spoke falsely. How dared you bewitch me? In your presence I flung away the precious hours in frivolity; I even forgot the Sabbath. For this I have myself to blame. I am an unworthy preacher of the Word. I sinned far more than you who have been brought up godlessly from your cradle. Nevertheless, whoever you are, I call upon you, before we part never to meet again, to repent of your--"

And then it was no mocker of the Sabbath he was addressing, but a woman with a child's face, and there were tears in her eyes. "Do you care?" she was saying, and again he answered, "Yes, I care." This girl's name was not Woman, but Babbie.

Now Gavin made an heroic attempt to look upon both these women at once. "Yes, I believe in you," he said to them, "but henceforth you must send your money to Nanny by another messenger. You are a gypsy and I am a minister; and that must part us. I refuse to see you again. I am not angry with you, but as a minister--"

It was not the disappearance of one of the women that clipped this argument short; it was Babbie singing--

"It fell on a day, on a bonny summer day, When the corn grew green and yellow, That there fell out a great dispute Between Argyle and Airly.

"The Duke of Montrose has written to Argyle To come in the morning early, An' lead in his men by the back o' Dunkeld To plunder the bonny house o' Airly."

"Where are you?" cried Gavin in bewilderment.

"I am watching you from my window so high," answered the Egyptian; and then the minister, looking up, saw her peering at him from a fir.

"How did you get up there?" he asked in amazement.

"On my broomstick," Babbie replied, and sang on--

"The lady looked o'er her window sae high, And oh! but she looked weary, And there she espied the great Argyle Come to plunder the bonny house o' Airly."

"What are you doing there?" Gavin said, wrathfully.

"This is my home," she answered. "I told you I lived in a tree."

"Come down at once," ordered Gavin. To which the singer responded- -

"'Come down, come down, Lady Margaret,' he says; 'Come down and kiss me fairly Or before the morning clear day light I'll no leave a standing stane in Airly.'"

"If you do not come down this instant," Gavin said in a rage, "and give me what I was so foolish as to come for, I--"

The Egyptian broke in--

"'I wouldna kiss thee, great Argyle, I wouldna kiss thee fairly; I wouldna kiss thee, great Argyle, Gin you shouldna leave a standing stane in Airly.'"

"You have deceived Nanny," Gavin cried, hotly, "and you have brought me here to deride me. I will have no more to do with you."

He walked away quickly, but she called after him, "I am coming down. I have the money," and next moment a snowball hit his hat.

"That is for being cross," she explained, appearing so unexpectedly at his elbow that he was taken aback. "I had to come close up to you before I flung it, or it would have fallen over my shoulder. Why are you so nasty to-day? and, oh, do you know you were speaking to yourself?"

"You are mistaken," said Gavin, severely. "I was speaking to you."

"You didn't see me till I began to sing, did you?"

"Nevertheless I was speaking to you, or rather, I was saying to myself what--"

"What you had decided to say to me?" said the delighted gypsy. "Do you prepare your talk like sermons? I hope you have prepared something nice for me. If it is very nice I may give you this bunch of holly."

She was dressed as he had seen her previously, but for a cluster of holly berries at her breast.

"I don't know that you will think it nice," the minister answered, slowly, "but my duty--" "If it is about duty," entreated Babbie, "don't say it. Don't, and I will give you the berries."

She took the berries from her dress, smiling triumphantly the while like one who had discovered a cure for duty; and instead of pointing the finger of wrath at her, Gavin stood expectant.

"But no," he said, remembering who he was, and pushing the gift from him, "I will not be bribed. I must tell you--"

"Now," said the Egyptian, sadly, "I see you are angry with me. Is it because I said I lived in a tree? Do forgive me for that dreadful lie."

She had gone on her knees before he could stop her, and was gazing imploringly at him, with her hands clasped.

"You are mocking me again," said Gavin, "but I am not angry with you. Only you must understand--"

She jumped up and put her fingers to her ears.

"You see I can hear nothing," she said.

"Listen while I tell you--"

"I don't hear a word. Why do you scold me when I have kept my promise? If I dared to take my fingers from my ears I would give you the money for Nanny. And, Mr. Dishart, I must be gone in five minutes."

"In five minutes!" echoed Gavin, with such a dismal face that Babbie heard the words with her eyes, and dropped her hands.

"Why are you in such haste?" he asked, taking the five pounds mechanically, and forgetting all that he had meant to say.

"Because they require me at home," she answered, with a sly glance at her fir. "And, remember, when I run away you must not follow me."

"I won't," said Gavin, so promptly that she was piqued.

"Why not?" she asked. "But of course you only came here for the money. Well, you have got it. Good-bye."

"You know that was not what I meant," said Gavin, stepping after her. "I have told you already that whatever other people say, I trust you. I believe in you, Babbie."

"Was that what you were saying to the tree?" asked the Egyptian, demurely. Then, perhaps thinking it wisest not to press this point, she continued irrelevantly, "It seems such a pity that you are a minister."

"A pity to be a minister!" exclaimed Gavin, indignantly. "Why, why, you--why, Babbie, how have you been brought up?"

"In a curious way," Babbie answered, shortly, "but I can't tell you about that just now. Would you like to hear all about me?" Suddenly she seemed to have become confidential.

"Do you really think me a gypsy?" she asked.

"I have tried not to ask myself that question."

"Why?"

"Because it seems like doubting your word."

"I don't see how you can think of me at all without wondering who I am."

"No, and so I try not to think of you at all."

"Oh, I don't know that you need do that."

"I have not quite succeeded."

The Egyptian's pique had vanished, but she may have thought that the conversation was becoming dangerous, for she said abruptly--

"Well, I sometimes think about you."

"Do you?" said Gavin, absurdly gratified. "What do you think about me?"

"I wonder," answered the Egyptian, pleasantly, "which of us is the taller."

Gavin's fingers twitched with mortification, and not only his fingers but his toes.

"Let us measure," she said, sweetly, putting her back to his. "You are not stretching your neck, are you?"

But the minister broke away from her.

"There is one subject," he said, with great dignity, "that I allow no one to speak of in my presence, and that is my--my height."

His face was as white as his cravat when the surprised Egyptian next looked at him, and he was panting like one who has run a mile. She was ashamed of herself, and said so.

"It is a topic I would rather not speak about," Gavin answered, dejectedly, "especially toyou."

He meant that he would rather be a tall man in her company than in any other, and possibly she knew this, though all she answered was--

"You wanted to know if I am really a gypsy. Well, I am."

"An ordinary gypsy?"

"Do you think me ordinary?"

"I wish I knew what to think of you."

"Ah, well, that is my forbidden topic. But we have a good many ideas in common after all, have we not, though you are only a minis--I mean, though I am only a gypsy?"

There fell between them a silence that gave Babbie time to remember she must go.

"I have already stayed too long," she said. "Give my love to Nanny, and say that I am coming to see her soon, perhaps on Monday. I don't suppose you will be there on Monday, Mr. Dishart?"

"I--I cannot say."

"No, you will be too busy. Are you to take the holly berries?"

"I had better not," said Gavin, dolefully.

"Oh, if you don't want them--"

"Give them to me," he said, and as he took them his hand shook.

"I know why you are looking so troubled," said the Egyptian, archly. "You think I am to ask you the colour of my eyes, and you have forgotten again."

He would have answered, but she checked him.

"Make no pretence," she said, severely; "I know you think they are blue."

She came close to him until her face almost touched his.

"Look hard at them," she said, solemnly, "and after this you may remember that they are black, black, black!"

At each repetition of the word she shook her head in his face. She was adorable. Gavin's arms--but they met on nothing. She had run away.

When the little minister had gone, a man came from behind a tree and shook his fist in the direction taken by the gypsy. It was Rob Dow, black with passion.

"It's the Egyptian!" he cried. "You limmer, wha are you that hae got haud o' the minister?"

He pursued her, but she vanished as from Gavin is Windyghoul.

"A common Egyptian!" he muttered when he had to give up the search. "But take care, you little devil," he called aloud; "take care; if I catch you playing pranks wi' that man again I'll wring your neck like a hen's!"