

**CHAPTER XVII. - INTRUSION OF HAGGART INTO THESE PAGES
AGAINST THE AUTHOR'S WISH.**

Margaret having heard the doctor say that one may catch cold in the back, had decided instantly to line Gavin's waistcoat with flannel. She was thus engaged, with pins in her mouth and the scissors hiding from her every time she wanted them, when Jean, red and flurried, abruptly entered the room.

"There! I forgot to knock at the door again," Jean exclaimed, pausing contritely.

"Never mind. Is it Rob Dow wanting the minister?" asked Margaret, who had seen Rob pass the manse dyke.

"Na, he wasna wanting to see the minister."

"Ah, then, he came to see you, Jean," said Margaret, archly.

"A widow man!" cried Jean, tossing her head. "But Rob Dow was in no condition to be friendly wi' onybody the now."

"Jean, you don't mean that he has been drinking again?"

"I canna say he was drunk."

"Then what condition was he in?"

"He was in a--a swearing condition," Jean answered, guardedly. "But what I want to speir at you is, can I gang down to the Tenements for a minute? I'll run there and back."

"Certainly you can go, Jean, but you must not run. You are always running. Did Dow bring you word that you were wanted in the Tenements?"

"No exactly, but I--I want to consult Tammas Haggart about--about something."

"About Dow, I believe, Jean?"

"Na, but about something he has done. Oh, ma'am, you surely dinna think I would take a widow man?"

It was the day after Gavin's meeting with the Egyptian at the Kaims, and here is Jean's real reason for wishing to consult Haggart. Half an hour

before she hurried to the parlour she had been at the kitchen door wondering whether she should spread out her washing in the garret or risk hanging it in the courtyard. She had just decided on the garret when she saw Rob Dow morosely regarding her from the gateway.

"Whaur is he?" growled Rob.

"He's out, but it's no for me to say whaur he is," replied Jean, whose weakness was to be considered a church official. "No that I ken," truthfulness compelled her to add, for she had an ambition to be everything she thought Gavin would like a woman to be.

Rob seized her wrists viciously and glowered into her face.

"You're ane o' them," he said.

"Let me go. Ane o' what?"

"Ane o' thae limmers called women."

"Sal," retorted Jean with spirit, "you're ane o' thae brutes called men. You're drunk, Rob Dow."

"In the legs maybe, but no higher. I haud a heap."

"Drunk again, after all your promises to the minister! And you said yoursel' that he had pulled you out o' hell by the root."

"It's himsel' that has flung me back again," Rob said, wildly. "Jean Baxter, what does it mean when a minister carries flowers in his pouch; ay, and takes them out to look at them ilka minute?"

"How do you ken about the holly?" asked Jean, off her guard.

"You limmer," said Dow, "you've been in his pouches."

"It's a lie!" cried the outraged Jean. "I just saw the holly this morning in a jug on hischimley."

"Carefully put by? Is it hod on the chimley? Does he stand looking at it? Do you tell me he's fond-like o't?"

"Mercy me!" Jean exclaimed, beginning to shake; "wha is she, Rob Dow?"

"Let me see it first in its jug," Rob answered, slyly, "and syne I may tell you." This was not the only time Jean had been asked to show the minister's belongings. Snecky Hobart, among others, had tried on Gavin's hat in the

manse kitchen, and felt queer for some time afterwards. Women had been introduced on tiptoe to examine the handle of his umbrella. But Rob had not come to admire. He snatched the holly from Jean's hands, and casting it on the ground pounded it with his heavy boots, crying, "Greet as you like, Jean. That's the end o' his flowers, and if I had the tawpie he got them frae I would serve her in the same way."

"I'll tell him what you've done," said terrified Jean, who had tried to save the berries at the expense of her fingers.

"Tell him," Dow roared; "and tell him what I said too. Ay, and tell him I was at the Kaims yestreen. Tell him I'm hunting high and low for an Egyptian woman."

He flung recklessly out of the courtyard, leaving Jean looking blankly at the mud that had been holly lately. Not his act of sacrilege was distressing her, but his news. Were these berries a love token? Had God let Rob Dow say they were a gypsy's love token, and not slain him?

That Rob spoke of the Egyptian of the riots Jean never doubted. It was known that the minister had met this woman in Nanny Webster's house, but was it not also known that he had given her such a talking-to as she could never come above? Many could repeat the words in which he had announced to Nanny that his wealthy friends in Glasgow were to give her all she needed. They could also tell how majestic he looked when he turned the Egyptian out of the house. In short, Nanny having kept her promise of secrecy, the people had been forced to construct the scene in the mud house for themselves, and it was only their story that was known to Jean.

She decided that, so far as the gypsy was concerned, Rob had talked trash. He had seen the holly in the minister's hand, and, being in drink, had mixed it up with the gossip about the Egyptian. But that Gavin had preserved the holly because of the donor was as obvious to Jean as that the vase in her hand was empty. Who could she be? No doubt all the single ladies in Thrums were in love with him, but that, Jean was sure, had not helped them a step forward.

To think was to Jean a waste of time. Discovering that she had been thinking, she was dismayed. There were the wet clothes in the basket looking reproachfully at her. She hastened back to Gavin's room with the vase, but it too had eyes, and they said, "When the minister misses his holly he will question you." Now Gavin had already smiled several times to Jean, and once he had marked passages for her in her "Pilgrim's Progress,"

with the result that she prized the marks more even than the passages. To lose his good opinion was terrible to her. In her perplexity she decided to consult wise Tammas Haggart, and hence her appeal to Margaret.

To avoid Chirsty, the humourist's wife, Jean sought Haggart at his workshop window, which was so small that an old book sufficed for its shutter. Haggart, whom she could see distinctly at his loom, soon guessed from her knocks and signs (for he was strangely quick in the uptake) that she wanted him to open the window.

"I want to speak to you confidentially," Jean said in a low voice. "If you saw a grand man gey fond o' a flower, what would you think?"

"I would think, Jean," Haggart answered, reflectively, "that he had gien siller for't; ay, I would wonder--"

"What would you wonder?"

"I would wonder how muckle he paid."

"But if he was a--a minister, and keepit the flower--say it was a common rose--fond-like on his chimley, what would you think?"

"I would think it was a black-burning disgrace for a minister to be fond o' flowers."

"I dinna haud wi' that."

"Jean," said Haggart, "I allow no one to contradict me."

"It wasna my design. But, Tammas, if a--a minister was fond o' a particular flower--say a rose--and you destroyed it by an accident, when he wasna looking, what would you do?"

"I would gie him another rose for't."

"But if you didna want him to ken you had meddled wi't on his chimley, what would you do?"

"I would put the new rose on the chimley, and he would never ken the differ."

"That's what I'll do." muttered Jean, but she said aloud--

"But it might be that particular rose he liked?"

"Havers, Jean. To a thinking man one rose is identical wi' another rose. But how are you speiring?"

"Just out o' curiosity, and I maun be stepping now. Thank you kindly, Tammas, for your humour."

"You're welcome," Haggart answered, and closed his window.

That day Rob Dow spent in misery, but so little were his fears selfish that he scarcely gave a thought to his conduct at the manse. For an hour he sat at his loom with his arms folded. Then he slouched out of the house, cursing little Micah, so that a neighbour cried "You drunken scoundrel!" after him. "He may be a wee drunk," said Micah in his father's defense, "but he's no mortal." Rob wandered to the Kaims in search of the Egyptian, and returned home no happier. He flung himself upon his bed and dared Micah to light the lamp. About gloaming he rose, unable to keep his mouth shut on his thoughts any longer, and staggered to the Tenements to consult Haggart. He found the humourist's door ajar, and Wearyworld listening at it. "Out o' the road!" cried Rob, savagely, and flung the policeman into the gutter.

"That was ill-dune, Rob Dow," Wearyworld said, picking himself up leisurely.

"I'm thinking it was weel-dune," snarled Rob.

"Ay," said Weary world, "we needna quarrel about a difference o' opeenion; but, Rob--"

Dow, however, had already entered the house and slammed the door.

"Ay, ay," muttered Wearyworld, departing, "you micht hae stood still, Rob, and argued it out wi' me."

In less than an hour after his conversation with Jean at the window it had suddenly struck Haggart that the minister she spoke of must be Mr. Dishart. In two hours he had confided his suspicions to Chirsty. In ten minutes she had filled the house with gossips. Rob arrived to find them in full cry.

"Ay, Rob," said Chirsty, genially, for gossip levels ranks, "you're just in time to hear a query about the minister."

"Rob," said the Glen Quharity post, from whom I subsequently got the story, "Mr. Dishart has fallen in--in--what do you call the thing, Chirsty?"

Birse knew well what the thing was called, but the word is a staggerer to say in company.

"In love," answered Chirsty, boldly.

"Now we ken what he was doing in the country yestreen," said Snecky Hobart, "the which has been, bothering us sair."

"The manse is fu' o' the flowers she sends him," said Tibbie Craik. "Jean's at her wits'-end to ken whaur to put them a'."

"Wha is she?"

It was Rob Dow who spoke. All saw he had been drinking, or they might have wondered at his vehemence. As it was, everybody looked at every other body, and then everybody sighed.

"Ay, wha is she?" repeated several.

"I see you ken nothing about her," said Rob, much relieved; and he then lapsed into silence.

"We ken a' about her," said Snecky, "except just wha she is. Ay, that's what we canna bottom. Maybe you could guess, Tammas?"

"Maybe I could, Sneck," Haggart replied, cautiously; "but on that point I offer no opinion."

"If she bides on the Kaims road," said Tibbie Craik, "she maun be a farmer's dochter. What say you to Bell Finlay?"

"Na; she's U. P. But it micht be Loups o' Malcolm's sister. She's promised to Muckle Haws; but no doubt she would gie him the go-by at a word frae the minister."

"It's mair likely," said Chirsty, "to be the factor at the Spittal's lassie. The factor has a grand garden, and that would account for such basketfuls o' flowers."

"Whaever she is," said Birse, "I'm thinking he could hae done better."

"I'll be fine pleased wi' ony o' them," said Tibbie, who had a magenta silk, and so was jealous of no one.

"It hasna been proved," Haggart pointed out, "that the flowers came frae thae parts. She may be sending them frae Glasgow."

"I aye understood it was a Glasgow lady," said Snecky. "He'll be like the Tilliedrum minister that got a lady to send him to the college on the promise that he would marry her as soon as he got a kirk. She made him sign a paper."

"The far-seeing limmer," exclaimed Chirsty. "But if that's what Mr. Dishart has done, how has he kept it so secret?"

"He wouldna want the women o' the congregation to ken he was promised till after they had voted for him."

"I dinna haud wi' that explanation o't," said Haggart, "but I may tell you that I ken for sure she's a Glasgow leddy. Lads, ministers is near aye bespoke afore they're licensed. There's a mighty competition for them in the big toons. Ay, the leddies just stand at the college gates, as you may say, and snap them up as they come out."

"And just as well for the ministers, I'se uphaud," said Tibbie, "for it saves them a heap o' persecution when they come to the like o' Thrums. There was Mr. Meiklejohn, the U. P. minister: he was no sooner placed than every genteel woman in the town was persecuting him. The Miss Dobies was the maist shameless; they fair hunted him."

"Ay," said Snecky; "and in the tail o' the day ane o' them snacked him up. Billies, did you ever hear o' a minister being refused?"

"Never."

"Weel, then, I have; and by a widow woman too. His name was Samson, and if it had been Tamson she would hae ta'en him. Ay, you may look, but it's true. Her name was Turnbull, and she had another gent after her, name o' Tibbets. She couldna make up her mind atween them, and for a while she just kepted them dangling on. Ay, but in the end she took Tibbets. And what, think you, was her reason? As you ken, thae grand folk has their initials on their spoons and nichtgowns. Ay, weel, she thocht it would be mair handy to take Tibbets, because if she had ta'en the minister the T's would have had to be changed to S's. It was thoctfu' o' her."

"Is Tibbets living?" asked Haggart sharply.

"No; he's dead."

"What," asked Haggart, "was the corp to trade?"

"I dinna ken."

"I thocht no," said Haggart, triumphantly. "Weel, I warrant he was a minister too. Ay, catch a woman giving up a minister, except for another minister."

All were looking on Haggart with admiration, when a voice from the door cried--

"Listen, and I'll tell you a queerer ane than that."

"Dagont," cried Birse, "it's Wearywarld, and he has been hearkening. Leave him to me."

When the post returned, the conversation was back at Mr. Dishart.

"Yes, lathies," Haggart was saying, "daftness about women comes to all, gentle and simple, common and colleged, humourists and no humourists. You say Mr. Dishart has preached ower muckle at women to stoop to marriage, but that makes no differ. Mony a humorous thing hae I said about women, and yet Chirsty has me. It's the same wi' ministers. A' at aince they see a lassie no' unlike ither lassies, away goes their learning, and they skirl out, 'You dawtie!' That's what comes to all."

"But it hasna come to Mr. Dishart," cried Rob Dow, jumping to his feet. He had sought Haggart to tell him all, but now he saw the wisdom of telling nothing. "I'm sick o' your blathers. Instead o' the minister's being sweethearting yesterday, he was just at the Kaims visiting the gamekeeper. I met him in the Wast town-end, and gaed there and back wi' him."

"That's proof it's a Glasgow leddy," said Snecky.

"I tell you there's no leddy ava!" swore Rob.

"Yea, and wha sends the baskets o' flowers, then?"

"There was only one flower," said Rob, turning to his host.

"I aye understood," said Haggart heavily, "that there was only one flower."

"But though there was just ane," persisted Chirsty, "what we want to ken is wha gae him it."

"It was me that gae him it," said Rob; "it was growing on the roadside, and I plucked it and gae it to him."

The company dwindled away shamefacedly, yet unconvinced; but Haggart had courage to say slowly--

"Yes, Rob, I had aye a notion that he got it frae you."

Meanwhile, Gavin, unaware that talk about him and a woman unknown had broken out in Thrums, was gazing, sometimes lovingly and again with scorn, at a little bunch of holly-berries which Jean had gathered from her father's garden. Once she saw him fling them out of his window, and then she rejoiced. But an hour afterwards she saw him pick them up, and then she mourned. Nevertheless, to her great delight, he preached his third sermon against Woman on the following Sabbath. It was universally acknowledged to be the best of the series. It was also the last.