

## **CHAPTER XIX. - CIRCUMSTANCES LEADING TO THE FIRST SERMON IN APPROVAL OF WOMEN.**

A young man thinks that he alone of mortals is impervious to love, and so the discovery that he is in it suddenly alters his views of his own mechanism. It is thus not unlike a rap on the funny-bone. Did Gavin make this discovery when the Egyptian left him? Apparently he only came to the brink of it and stood blind. He had driven her from him for ever, and his sense of loss was so acute that his soul cried out for the cure rather than for the name of the malady.

In time he would have realised what had happened, but time was denied him, for just as he was starting for the mud house Babbie saved his dignity by returning to him. It was not her custom to fix her eyes on the ground as she walked, but she was doing so now, and at the same time swinging the empty pans. Doubtless she had come back for more water, in the belief that Gavin had gone. He pronounced her name with a sense of guilt, and she looked up surprised, or seemingly surprised, to find him still there.

"I thought you had gone away long ago," she said stiffly.

"Otherwise," asked Gavin the dejected, "you would not have come back to the well?"

"Certainly not."

"I am very sorry. Had you waited another moment I should have been gone."

This was said in apology, but the wilful Egyptian chose to change its meaning.

"You have no right to blame me for disturbing you," she declared with warmth.

"I did not. I only--"

"You could have been a mile away by this time. Nanny wanted more water."

Babbie scrutinised the minister sharply as she made this statement. Surely her conscience troubled her, for on his not answering immediately she said, "Do you presume to disbelieve me? What could have made me return except to fill the pans again?"

"Nothing," Gavin admitted eagerly, "and I assure you--"

Babbie should have been grateful to his denseness, but it merely set her mind at rest.

"Say anything against me you choose," she told him. "Say it as brutally as you like, for I won't listen."

She stopped to hear his response to that, and she looked so cold that it almost froze on Gavin's lips.

"I had no right," he said, dolefully, "to speak to you as I did."

"You had not," answered the proud Egyptian. She was looking away from him to show that his repentance was not even interesting to her. However, she had forgotten already not to listen.

"What business is it of mine?" asked Gavin, amazed at his late presumption, "whether you are a gypsy or no?"

"None whatever."

"And as for the ring--"

Here he gave her an opportunity of allowing that his curiosity about the ring was warranted. She declined to help him, however, and so he had to go on.

"The ring is yours," he said, "and why should you not wear it?"

"Why, indeed?"

"I am afraid I have a very bad temper."

He paused for a contradiction, but she nodded her head in agreement.

"And it is no wonder," he continued, "that you think me a--a brute."

"I'm sure it is not."

"But, Babbie, I want you to know that I despise myself for my base suspicions. No sooner did I see them than I loathed them and myself for harbouring them. Despite this mystery, I look upon you as a noble-hearted girl. I shall always think of you so."

This time Babbie did not reply.

"That was all I had to say," concluded Gavin, "except that I hope you will not punish Nanny for my sins. Good-bye."

"Good-bye," said the Egyptian, who was looking at the well.

The minister's legs could not have heard him give the order to march, for they stood waiting.

"I thought," said the Egyptian, after a moment, "that you said you were going."

"I was only--brushing my hat," Gavin answered with dignity. "You want me to go?"

She bowed, and this time he did set off.

"You can go if you like," she remarked now.

He turned at this.

"But you said--" he began, diffidently.

"No, I did not," she answered, with indignation.

He could see her face at last.

"You--you are crying!" he exclaimed, in bewilderment.

"Because you are so unfeeling," sobbed Babbie.

"What have I said, what have I done?" cried Gavin, in an agony of self-contempt "Oh, that I had gone away at once!"

"That is cruel."

"What is?"

"To say that."

"What did I say?"

"That you wished you had gone away."

"But surely," the minister faltered, "you asked me to go."

"How can you say so?" asked the gypsy, reproachfully.

Gavin was distracted. "On my word," he said, earnestly, "I thought you did. And now I have made you unhappy. Babbie, I wish I were anybody but myself; I am a hopeless lout."

"Now you are unjust," said Babbie, hiding her face.

"Again? To you?"

"No, you stupid," she said, beaming on him in her most delightful manner, "to yourself!"

She gave him both her hands impetuously, and he did not let them go until she added:

"I am so glad that you are reasonable at last. Men are so much more unreasonable than women, don't you think?"

"Perhaps we are," Gavin said, diplomatically.

"Of course you are. Why, every one knows that. Well, I forgive you; only remember, you have admitted that it was all your fault?"

She was pointing her finger at him like a schoolmistress, and Gavin hastened to answer--

"You were not to blame at all."

"I like to hear you say that," explained the representative of the more reasonable sex, "because it was really all my fault."

"No, no."

"Yes, it was; but of course I could not say so until you had asked my pardon. You must understand that?"

The representative of the less reasonable sex could not understand it, but he agreed recklessly, and it seemed so plain to the woman that she continued confidentially--

"I pretended that I did not want to make it up, but I did."

"Did you?" asked Gavin, elated.

"Yes, but nothing could have induced me to make the first advance. You see why?"

"Because I was so unreasonable?" asked Gavin, doubtfully.

"Yes, and nasty. You admit you were nasty?"

"Undoubtedly, I have an evil temper. It has brought me to shame many times."

"Oh, I don't know," said the Egyptian, charitably. "I like it. I believe I admire bullies."

"Did I bully you?"

"I never knew such a bully. You quite frightened me."

Gavin began to be less displeased with himself.

"You are sure," inquired Babbie, "that you had no right to question me about the ring?"

"Certain," answered Gavin.

"Then I will tell you all about it," said Babbie, "for it is natural that you should want to know."

He looked eagerly at her, and she had become serious and sad.

"I must tell you at the same time," she said, "who I am, and then-- then we shall never see each other any more."

"Why should you tell me?" cried Gavin, his hand rising to stop her.

"Because you have a right to know," she replied, now too much in earnest to see that she was yielding a point. "I should prefer not to tell you; yet there is nothing wrong in my secret, and it may make you think of me kindly when I have gone away."

"Don't speak in that way, Babbie, after you have forgiven me."

"Did I hurt you? It was only because I know that you cannot trust me while I remain a mystery. I know you would try to trust me, but doubts would cross your mind. Yes, they would; they are the shadows that mysteries cast. Who can believe a gypsy if the odds are against her?"

"I can," said Gavin; but she shook her head, and so would he had he remembered three recent sermons of his own preaching.

"I had better tell you all," she said, with an effort.

"It is my turn now to refuse to listen to you," exclaimed Gavin, who was only a chivalrous boy. "Babbie, I should like to hear your story, but until you want to tell it to me I will not listen to it. I have faith in your honour, and that is sufficient."

It was boyish, but I am glad Gavin said it; and now Babbie admired something in him that deserved admiration. His faith, no doubt, made her a better woman.

"I admit that I would rather tell you nothing just now," she said, gratefully. "You are sure you will never say again that you don't understand me?"

"Quite sure," said Gavin, bravely. "And by-and-by you will offer to tell me of your free will?"

"Oh, don't let us think of the future," answered Babbie. "Let us be happy for the moment."

This had been the Egyptian's philosophy always, but it was ill-suited for Auld Licht ministers, as one of them was presently to discover.

"I want to make one confession, though," Babbie continued, almost reluctantly. "When you were so nasty a little while ago, I didn't go back to Nanny's. I stood watching you from behind a tree, and then, for an excuse to come back, I--I poured out the water. Yes, and I told you another lie. I really came back to admit that it was all my fault, if I could not get you to say that it was yours. I am so glad you gave in first."

She was very near him, and the tears had not yet dried on her eyes. They were laughing eyes, eyes in distress, imploring eyes. Her pale face, smiling, sad, dimpled, yet entreating forgiveness, was the one prominent thing in the world to him just then. He wanted to kiss her. He would have done it as soon as her eyes rested on his, but she continued without regarding him--

"How mean that sounds! Oh, if I were a man I should wish to be everything that I am not, and nothing that I am. I should scorn to be a liar, I should choose to be open in all things, I should try to fight the world honestly. But I am only a woman, and so--well, that is the kind of man I should like to marry."

"A minister may be all these things," said Gavin, breathlessly.

"The man I could love," Babbie went on, not heeding him, almost forgetting that he was there, "must not spend his days in idleness as the men I know do."

"I do not."

"He must be brave, no mere worker among others, but a leader of men."

"All ministers are."

"Who makes his influence felt."

"Assuredly."

"And takes the side of the weak against the strong, even though the strong be in the right."

"Always my tendency."

"A man who has a mind of his own, and having once made it up stands to it in defiance even of--"

"Of his session."

"Of the world. He must understand me."

"I do."

"And be my master."

"It is his lawful position in the house."

"He must not yield to my coaxing or tempers."

"It would be weakness."

"But compel me to do his bidding; yes, even thrash if--"

"If you won't listen to reason. Babbie," cried Gavin, "I am that man!"

Here the inventory abruptly ended, and these two people found themselves staring at each other, as if of a sudden they had heard something dreadful. I do not know how long they stood thus, motionless and horrified. I cannot tell even which stirred first. All I know is that almost simultaneously they turned from each other and hurried out of the wood in opposite directions.