

## CHAPTER XX. - END OF THE STATE OF INDECISION.

Long before I had any thought of writing this story, I had told it so often to my little maid that she now knows some of it better than I. If you saw me looking up from my paper to ask her, "What was it that Birse said to Jean about the minister's flowers?" or, "Where was Hendry Munn hidden on the night of the riots?" and heard her confident answers, you would conclude that she had been in the thick of these events, instead of born many years after them. I mention this now because I have reached a point where her memory contradicts mine. She maintains that Rob Dow was told of the meeting in the wood by the two boys whom it disturbed, while my own impression is that he was a witness of it. If she is right, Rob must have succeeded in frightening the boys into telling no other person, for certainly the scandal did not spread in Thrums. After all, however, it is only important to know that Rob did learn of the meeting. Its first effect was to send him sullenly to the drink.

Many a time since these events have I pictured what might have been their upshot had Dow confided their discovery to me. Had I suspected why Rob was grown so dour again, Gavin's future might have been very different. I was meeting Rob now and again in the glen, asking, with an affected carelessness he did not bottom, for news of the little minister, but what he told me was only the gossip of the town; and what I should have known, that Thrums might never know it, he kept to himself. I suppose he feared to speak to Gavin, who made several efforts to reclaim him, but without avail.

Yet Rob's heart opened for a moment to one man, or rather was forced open by that man. A few days after the meeting at the well, Rob was bringing the smell of whisky with him down Banker's Close when he ran against a famous staff, with which the doctor pinned him to the wall.

"Ay," said the outspoken doctor, looking contemptuously into Rob's bleary eyes, "so this is what your conversion amounts to? Faugh! Rob Dow, if you, were half a man the very thought of what Mr. Dishart has done for you would make you run past the public houses."

"It's the thocht o' him that sends me running to them," growled Rob, knocking down the staff. "Let me alane."

"What do you mean by that?" demanded McQueen, hooking him this time.

"Speir at himsel'; speir at the woman."

"What woman?"

"Take your staff out o' my neck."

"Not till you tell me why you, of all people, are speaking against the minister."

Torn by a desire for a confidant and loyalty to Gavin, Rob was already in a fury.

"Say again," he burst forth, "that I was speaking agin the minister and I'll practise on you what I'm awid to do to her."

"Who is she?"

"Wha's wha?"

"The woman whom the minister--"

"I said nothing about a woman," said poor Rob, alarmed for Gavin. "Doctor, I'm ready to swear afore a bailie that I never saw them thegither at the Kaims."

"The Kaims!" exclaimed the doctor suddenly enlightened. "Pooh! you only mean the Egyptian. Rob, make your mind easy about this. I know why he met her there."

"Do you ken that she has bewitched him; do you ken I saw him trying to put his arms round her; do you ken they have a trysting- place in Caddam wood?"

This came from Rob in a rush, and he would fain have called it all back.

"I'm drunk, doctor, roaring drunk," he said, hastily, "and it wasna the minister I saw ava; it was another man."

Nothing more could the doctor draw from Rob, but he had heard sufficient to smoke some pipes on. Like many who pride themselves on being recluses, McQueen loved the gossip that came to him uninvited; indeed, he opened his mouth to it as greedily as any man in Thrums. He respected Gavin, however, too much to find this new dish palatable, and so his researches to discover whether other Auld Lichts shared Rob's fears were conducted with caution. "Is there no word of your minister's getting a wife yet?" he asked several, but only got for answers, "There's word o' a Glasgow leddy's sending him baskets o' flowers," or "He has his een open, but he's taking his time; ay, he's looking for the blade o' corn in the stack o' chaff."

This convinced McQueen that the congregation knew nothing of the Egyptian, but it did not satisfy him, and he made an opportunity of inviting Gavin into the surgery. It was, to the doctor, the cosiest nook in his house, but to me and many others a room that smelled of hearses. On the top of the pipes and tobacco tins that littered the table there usually lay a death certificate, placed there deliberately by the doctor to scare his sister, who had a passion for putting the surgery to rights.

"By the way," McQueen said, after he and Gavin had talked a little while, "did I ever advise you to smoke?"

"It is your usual form of salutation," Gavin answered, laughing. "But I don't think you ever supplied me with a reason."

"I daresay not. I am too experienced a doctor to cheapen my prescriptions in that way. However, here is one good reason. I have noticed, sir, that at your age a man is either a slave to a pipe or to a woman. Do you want me to lend you a pipe now?"

"Then I am to understand," asked Gavin, slyly, "that your locket came into your possession in your pre-smoking days, and that you merely wear it from habit?"

"Tuts!" answered the doctor, buttoning his coat. "I told you there was nothing in the locket. If there is, I have forgotten what it is."

"You are a hopeless old bachelor, I see," said Gavin, unaware that the doctor was probing him. He was surprised next moment to find McQueen in the ecstasies of one who has won a rubber.

"Now, then," cried the jubilant doctor, "as you have confessed so much, tell me all about her. Name and address, please."

"Confess! What have I confessed?"

"It won't do, Mr. Dishart, for even your face betrays you. No, no, I am an old bird, but I have not forgotten the ways of the fledgelings. 'Hopeless bachelor,' sir, is a sweetmeat in every young man's mouth until of a sudden he finds it sour, and that means the banns. When is it to be?"

"We must find the lady first," said the minister, uncomfortably.

"You tell me, in spite of that face, that you have not fixed on her?"

"The difficulty, I suppose, would be to persuade her to fix on me."

"Not a bit of it. But you admit there is some one?"

"Who would have me?"

"You are wriggling out of it. Is it the banker's daughter?"

"No," Gavin cried.

"I hear you have walked up the back wynd with her three times this week. The town is in a ferment about it."

"She is a great deal in the back wynd."

"Fiddle-de-dee! I am oftener in the back wynd than you, and I never meet her there."

"That is curious."

"No, it isn't, but never mind. Perhaps you have fallen to Miss Pennyquick's piano? Did you hear it going as we passed the house?"

"She seems always to be playing on her piano."

"Not she; but you are supposed to be musical, and so when she sees you from her window she begins to thump. If I am in the school wynd and hear the piano going, I know you will turn the corner immediately. However, I am glad to hear it is not Miss Pennyquick. Then it is the factor at the Spittal's lassie? Well done, sir. You should arrange to have the wedding at the same time as the old earl's, which comes off in summer, I believe."

"One foolish marriage is enough in a day, doctor."

"Eh? You call him a fool for marrying a young wife? Well, no doubt he is, but he would have been a bigger fool to marry an old one. However, it is not Lord Rintoul we are discussing, but Gavin Dishart. I suppose you know that the factor's lassie is an heiress?"

"And, therefore, would scorn me."

"Try her," said the doctor, drily. "Her father and mother, as I know, married on a ten-pound note. But if I am wrong again, I must adopt the popular view in Thrums. It is a Glasgow lady after all? Man, you needn't look indignant at hearing that the people are discussing your intended. You can no more stop it than a doctor's orders could keep Lang Tammis out of church. They have discovered that she sends you flowers twice every week."

"They never reach me," answered Gavin, then remembered the holly and winced.

"Some," persisted the relentless doctor, "even speak of your having been seen together; but of course, if she is a Glasgow lady, that is a mistake."

"Where did they see us?" asked Gavin, with a sudden trouble in his throat.

"You are shaking," said the doctor, keenly, "like a medical student at his first operation. But as for the story that you and the lady have been seen together, I can guess how it arose. Do you remember that gypsy girl?"

The doctor had begun by addressing the fire, but he suddenly wheeled round and fired his question in the minister's face. Gavin, however, did not even blink.

"Why should I have forgotten her?" he replied, coolly.

"Oh, in the stress of other occupations. But it was your getting the money from her at the Kaims for Nanny that I was to speak of. Absurd though it seems, I think some dotard must have seen you and her at the Kaims, and mistaken her for the lady."

McQueen flung himself back in his chair to enjoy this joke.

"Fancy mistaking that woman for a lady!" he said to Gavin, who had not laughed with him.

"I think Nanny has some justification for considering her a lady," the minister said, firmly.

"Well, I grant that. But what made me guffaw was a vision of the harum-scarum, devil-may-care little Egyptian mistress of an Auld Licht manse!"

"She is neither harum-scarum nor devil-may-care," Gavin answered, without heat, for he was no longer a distracted minister. "You don't understand her as I do."

"No, I seem to understand her differently.

"What do you know of her?"

"That is just it," said the doctor, irritated by Gavin's coolness. "I know she saved Nanny from the poor-house, but I don't know where she got the money. I know she can talk fine English when she chooses, but I don't know where she learned it. I know she heard that the soldiers were coming

to Thrums before they knew of their destination themselves, but I don't know who told her. You who understand her can doubtless explain these matters?"

"She offered to explain them to me," Gavin answered, still unmoved, "but I forbade her."

"Why?"

"It is no business of yours, doctor. Forgive me for saying so."

"In Thrums," replied McQueen, "a minister's business is everybody's business. I have often wondered who helped her to escape from the soldiers that night. Did she offer to explain that to you?"

"She did not."

"Perhaps," said the doctor, sharply, "because it was unnecessary?"

"That was the reason."

"You helped her to escape?"

"I did."

"And you are not ashamed of it?"

"I am not."

"Why were you so anxious to screen her?"

"She saved some of my people from gaol."

"Which was more than they deserved."

"I have always understood that you concealed two of them in your own stable."

"Maybe I did," the doctor had to allow. "But I took my stick to them next morning. Besides, they were Thrums folk, while you had never set eyes on that imp of mischief before."

"I cannot sit here, doctor, and hear her called names," Gavin said, rising, but McQueen gripped him by the shoulder.

"For pity's sake, sir, don't let us wrangle like a pair of women. I brought you here to speak my mind to you, and speak it I will. I warn you, Mr. Dishart,

that you are being watched. You have been seen meeting this lassie in Caddam as well as at the Kaims."

"Let the whole town watch, doctor. I have met her openly."

"And why? Oh, don't make Nanny your excuse."

"I won't. I met her because I love her."

"Are you mad?" cried McQueen. "You speak as if you would marry her."

"Yes," replied Gavin, determinedly, "and I mean to do it."

The doctor flung up his hands.

"I give you up," he said, raging. "I give you up. Think of your congregation, man."

"I have been thinking of them, and as soon as I have a right to do so I shall tell them what I have told you."

"And until you tell them I will keep your madness to myself, for I warn you that, as soon as they do know, there will be a vacancy in the Auld Licht kirk of Thrums."

"She is a woman," said Gavin, hesitating, though preparing to go, "of whom any minister might be proud."

"She is a woman," the doctor roared, "that no congregation would stand. Oh, if you will go, there is your hat."

Perhaps Gavin's face was whiter as he left the house than when he entered it, but there was no other change. Those who were watching him decided that he was looking much as usual, except that his mouth was shut very firm, from which they concluded that he had been taking the doctor to task for smoking. They also noted that he returned to McQueen's house within half a hour after leaving it, but remained no time.

Some explained this second visit by saying that the minister had forgotten his cravat, and had gone back for it. What really sent him back, however, was his conscience. He had said to McQueen that he helped Babbie to escape from the soldiers because of her kindness to his people, and he returned to own that it was a lie.

Gavin knocked at the door of the surgery, but entered without waiting for a response. McQueen was no longer stamping through the room, red and

furious. He had even laid aside his pipe. He was sitting back in his chair, looking half-mournfully, half- contemptuously, at something in his palm. His hand closed instinctively when he heard the door open, but Gavin had seen that the object was an open locket.

"It was only your reference to the thing," the detected doctor said, with a grim laugh, "that made me open it. Forty fears ago, sir, I--Phew! it is forty-two years, and I have not got over it yet." He closed the locket with a snap. "I hope you have come back, Dishart, to speak more rationally?"

Gavin told him why he had come back, and the doctor said he was a fool for his pains.

"Is it useless, Dishart, to make another appeal to you?"

"Quite useless, doctor," Gavin answered, promptly. "My mind is made up at last."