CHAPTER XXI. - NIGHT--MARGARET--FLASHING OF A LANTERN.

That evening the little minister sat silently in his parlour. Darkness came, and with it weavers rose heavy-eyed from their looms, sleepy children sought their mothers, and the gate of the field above the manse fell forward to let cows pass to their byre; the great Bible was produced in many homes, and the ten o'clock bell clanged its last word to the night. Margaret had allowed the lamp to burn low. Thinking that her boy slept, she moved softly to his side and spread her shawl over his knees. He had forgotten her. The doctor's warnings scarcely troubled him. He was Babbie's lover. The mystery of her was only a veil hiding her from other men, and he was looking through it upon the face of his beloved.

It was a night of long ago, but can you not see my dear Margaret still as she bends over her son? Not twice in many days dared the minister snatch a moment's sleep from grey morning to midnight, and, when this did happen, he jumped up by-and-by in shame, to revile himself for an idler and ask his mother wrathfully why she had not tumbled him out of his chair? Tonight Margaret was divided between a desire to let him sleep and a fear of his self-reproach when he awoke; and so, perhaps, the tear fell that roused him.

"I did not like to waken you," Margaret said, apprehensively. "You must have been very tired, Gavin?"

"I was not sleeping, mother," he said, slowly. "I was only thinking."

"Ah, Gavin, you never rise from your loom. It is hardly fair that your hands should be so full of other people's troubles."

"They only fill one hand, mother; I carry the people's joys in the other hand, and that keeps me erect, like a woman between her pan and pitcher. I think the joys have outweighed the sorrows since we came here."

"It has been all joy to me, Gavin, for you never tell me of the sorrows. An old woman has no right to be so happy."

"Old woman, mother!" said Gavin. But his indignation was vain. Margaret was an old woman. I made her old before her time.

"As for these terrible troubles," he went on, "I forget them the moment I enter the garden and see you at your window. And, maybe, I keep some of the joys from you as well as the troubles."

Words about Babbie leaped to his mouth, but with an effort he restrained them. He must not tell his mother of her until Babbie of her free will had told him all there was to tell.

"I have been a selfish woman, Gavin."

"You selfish, mother!" Gavin said, smiling. "Tell me when you did not think of others before yourself?"

"Always, Gavin. Has it not been selfishness to hope that you would never want to bring another mistress to the manse? Do you remember how angry you used to be in Glasgow when I said that you would marry some day?"

"I remember," Gavin said, sadly.

"Yes; you used to say, 'Don't speak of such a thing, mother, for the horrid thought of it is enough to drive all the Hebrew out of my head.' Was not that lightning just now?"

"I did not see it. What a memory you have, mother, for all the boyish things I said."

"I can't deny," Margaret admitted with a sigh, "that I liked to hear you speak in that way, though I knew you would go back on your word. You see, you have changed already."

"How, mother?" asked Gavin, surprised.

"You said just now that those were boyish speeches. Gavin, I can't understand the mothers who are glad to see their sons married; though I had a dozen I believe it would be a wrench to lose one of them. It would be different with daughters. You are laughing, Gavin!"

"Yes, at your reference to daughters. Would you not have preferred me to be a girl?"

"'Deed I would not," answered Margaret, with tremendous conviction. "Gavin, every woman on earth, be she rich or poor, good or bad, offers up one prayer about her firstborn, and that is, 'May he be a boy!'"

"I think you are wrong, mother. The banker's wife told me that there is nothing for which she thanks the Lord so much as that all her children are girls."

"May she be forgiven for that, Gavin!" exclaimed Margaret; "though she maybe did right to put the best face on her humiliation. No, no, there are

many kinds of women in the world, but there never was one yet that didn't want to begin with a laddie. You can speculate about a boy so much more than about a girl. Gavin, what is it a woman thinks about the day her son is born? yes, and the day before too? She is picturing him a grown man, and a slip of a lassie taking him from her. Ay, that is where the lassies have their revenge on the mothers. I remember as if it were this morning a Harvie fishwife patting your head and asking who was your sweetheart, and I could never thole the woman again. We were at the door of the cottage, and I mind I gripped you up in my arms. You had on a tartan frock with a sash and diamond socks. When I look back, Gavin, it seems to me that you have shot up from that frock to manhood in a single hour."

"There are not many mothers like you," Gavin said, laying his hand fondly on Margaret's shoulder.

"There are many better mothers, but few such sons. It is easily seen why God could not afford me another. Gavin, I am sure that was lightning."

"I think it was; but don't be alarmed, mother."

"I am never frightened when you are with me."

"And I always will be with you."

"Ah, if you were married--"

"Do you think," asked Gavin, indignantly, "that it would make any difference toyou?"

Margaret did not answer. She knew what a difference it would make.

"Except," continued Gavin, with a man's obtuseness, "that you would have a daughter as well as a son to love you and take care of you."

Margaret could have told him that men give themselves away needlessly who marry for the sake of their mother, but all she said was--

"Gavin, I see you can speak more composedly of marrying now than you spoke a year ago. If I did not know better, I should think a Thrums young lady had got hold of you."

It was a moment before Gavin replied: then he said, gaily--

"Really, mother, the way the best of women speak of each other is lamentable. You say I should be better married, and then you take for

granted that every marriageable woman in the neighbourhood is trying to kidnap me. I am sure you did not take my father by force in that way."

He did not see that Margaret trembled at the mention of his father. He never knew that she was many times pining to lay her head upon his breast and tell him of me. Yet I cannot but believe that she always shook when Adam Dishart was spoken of between them. I cannot think that the long-cherishing of the secret which was hers and mine kept her face steady when that horror suddenly confronted her as now. Gavin would have suspected much had, he ever suspected anything.

"I know," Margaret said, courageously, "that you would be better married; but when it comes to selecting the woman I grow fearful. O Gavin!" she said, earnestly, "it is an awful thing to marry the wrong man!"

Here in a moment had she revealed much, though far from all, and there must have been many such moments between them. But Gavin was thinking of his own affairs.

"You mean the wrong woman, don't you, mother?" he said, and she hastened to agree. But it was the wrong man she meant.

"The difficulty, I suppose, is to hit upon the right one?" Gavin said, blithely.

"To know which is the right one in time," answered Margaret, solemnly. "But I am saying nothing against the young ladies of Thrums, Gavin. Though I have scarcely seen them, I know there are good women among them. Jean says---"

"I believe, mother," Gavin interposed, reproachfully, "that you have been questioning Jean about them?"

"Just because I was afraid--I mean because I fancied--you might be taking a liking to one of them."

"And what is Jean's verdict?"

"She says every one of them would jump at you, like a bird at a berry."

"But the berry cannot be divided. How would Miss Pennycuick please you, mother?"

"Gavin!" cried Margaret, in consternation, "you don't mean to--But you are laughing at me again."

"Then there is the banker's daughter?"

"I can't thole her."

"Why, I question if you ever set eyes on her, mother."

"Perhaps not, Gavin; but I have suspected her ever since she offered to become one of your tract distributors."

"The doctor," said Gavin, not ill-pleased, "was saying that either of these ladies would suit me."

"What business has he," asked Margaret, vindictively, "to put such thoughts into your head?"

"But he only did as you are doing. Mother, I see you will never be satisfied without selecting the woman for me yourself."

"Ay, Gavin," said Margaret, earnestly; "and I question if I should be satisfied even then. But I am sure I should be a better guide to you than Dr. McQueen is."

"I am convinced of that. But I wonder what sort of woman would content you?"

"Whoever pleased you, Gavin, would content me," Margaret ventured to maintain. "You would only take to a clever woman."

"She must be nearly as clever as you, mother."

"Hoots, Gavin," said Margaret, smiling, "I'm not to be caught with chaff. I am a stupid, ignorant woman."

"Then I must look out for a stupid, ignorant woman, for that seems to be the kind I like," answered Gavin, of whom I may confess here something that has to be told sooner or later. It is this: he never realised that Babbie was a great deal cleverer than himself. Forgive him, you who read, if you have any tolerance for the creature, man.

"She will be terribly learned in languages," pursued Margaret, "so that she may follow you in your studies, as I have never been able to do."

"Your face has helped me more than Hebrew, mother," replied Gavin. "I will give her no marks for languages."

"At any rate," Margaret insisted, "she must be a grand housekeeper, and very thrifty."

"As for that," Gavin said, faltering a little, "one can't expect it of a mere girl."

"I should expect it," maintained his mother.

"No, no; but she would have you," said Gavin, happily, "to teach her housekeeping."

"It would be a pleasant occupation to me, that," Margaret admitted. "And she would soon learn; she would be so proud of her position as mistress of a manse."

"Perhaps," Gavin said, doubtfully. He had no doubt on the subject in his college days.

"And we can take for granted," continued his mother, "that she is a lassie of fine character."

"Of course," said Gavin, holding his head high, as if he thought the doctor might be watching him.

"I have thought," Margaret went on, "that there was a great deal of wisdom in what you said at that last marriage in the manse, the one where, you remember, the best man and the bridesmaid joined hands instead of the bride and bridegroom."

"What did I say?" asked the little minister, with misgivings.

"That there was great danger when people married out of their own rank of life."

"Oh--ah--well, of course, that would depend on circumstances."

"They were wise words, Gavin. There was the sermon, too, that you preached a month or two ago against marrying into other denominations. Jean told me that it greatly impressed the congregation. It is a sad sight, as you said, to see an Auld Licht lassie changing her faith because her man belongs to the U. P.'s."

"Did I say that?"

"You did, and it so struck Jean that she told me she would rather be an old maid for life, 'the which,' she said, 'is a dismal prospect,' than marry out of the Auld Licht kirk."

"It is harmless," Gavin answered, going to the window. He started back next moment, and crying, "Don't look out, mother," hastily pulled down the blind.

"Why, Gavin," Margaret said in fear, "you look as if it had struck you."

"Oh, no," Gavin answered, with a forced laugh, and he lit her lamp for her.

But it had struck him, though it was not lightning. It was the flashing of a lantern against the window to attract his attention, and the holder of the lantern was Babbie.

"Good-night, mother."

"Good-night, Gavin. Don't sit up any later." Tammas, though he is so obstinate, has a love for you passing the love of woman. These were her words. Jean is more sentimental than you might think."

"I wish he would show his love," said Gavin, "by contradicting me less frequently."

"You have Rob Dow to weigh against him."

"No; I cannot make out what has come over Rob lately. He is drinking heavily again, and avoiding me. The lightning is becoming very vivid."

"Yes, and I hear no thunder. There is another thing, Gavin. I am one of those that like to sit at home, but if you had a wife she would visit the congregation. A truly religious wife would be a great help to you."

"Religious," Gavin repeated slowly. "Yes, but some people are religious without speaking of it. If a woman is good she is religious. A good woman who has been, let us say, foolishly brought up, only needs to be shown the right way to tread it. Mother, I question if any man, minister or layman, ever yet fell in love because the woman was thrifty, or clever, or went to church twice on Sabbath."

"I believe that is true," Margaret said, "and I would not have it otherwise. But it is an awful thing, Gavin, as you said from the pulpit two weeks ago, to worship only at a beautiful face."

"You think too much about what I say in the pulpit, mother," Gavin said, with a sigh, "though of course a man who fell in love merely with a face would be a contemptible creature. Yet I see that women do not understand how beauty affects a man."

"Yes, yes, my boy--oh, indeed, they do," said Margaret, who on some matters knew far more than her son.

Twelve o'clock struck, and she rose to go to bed, alarmed lest she should not waken early in the morning. "But I am afraid I shan't sleep," she said, "if that lightning continues."

"It is harmless," Gavin answered, going to the window. He started back next moment, and crying, "Don't look out, mother," hastily pulled down the blind.

"Why, Gavin," Margaret said in fear, "you look as if it had struck you."

"Oh, no," Gavin answered, with a forced laugh, and he lit her lamp for her.

But it had struck him, though it was not lightning. It was the flashing of a lantern against the window to attract his attention, and the holder of the lantern was Babbie.

"Good-night, mother."

"Good-night, Gavin. Don't sit up any later."