CHAPTER XXII. - LOVERS.

Only something terrible, Gavin thought, could have brought Babbie to him at such an hour; yet when he left his mother's room it was to stand motionless on the stair, waiting for a silence in the manse that would not come. A house is never still in darkness to those who listen intently; there is a whispering in distant chambers, an unearthly hand presses the snib of the window, the latch rises. Ghosts were created when the first man woke in the night.

Now Margaret slept. Two hours earlier, Jean, sitting on the salt- bucket, had read the chapter with which she always sent herself to bed. In honour of the little minister she had begun her Bible afresh when he came to Thrums, and was progressing through it, a chapter at night, sighing, perhaps, on washing days at a long chapter, such as Exodus twelfth, but never making two of it. The kitchen wag-at-the-wall clock was telling every room in the house that she had neglected to shut her door. As Gavin felt his way down the dark stair, awakening it into protest at every step, he had a glimpse of the pendulum's shadow running back and forward on the hearth; he started back from another shadow on the lobby wall, and then seeing it start too, knew it for his own. He opened the door and passed out unobserved; it was as if the sounds and shadows that filled the manse were too occupied with their game to mind an interloper.

"Is that you?" he said to a bush, for the garden was in semi- darkness. Then the lantern's flash met him, and he saw the Egyptian in the summer-seat.

"At last!" she said, reproachfully. "Evidently a lantern is a poor door-bell."

"What is it?" Gavin asked, in suppressed excitement, for the least he expected to hear was that she was again being pursued for her share in the riot. The tremor in his voice surprised her into silence, and he thought she faltered because what she had to tell him was so woeful. So, in the darkness of the summer-seat, he kissed her, and she might have known that with that kiss the little minister was hers forever.

Now Babbie had been kissed before, but never thus, and she turned from Gavin, and would have liked to be alone, for she had begun to know what love was, and the flash that revealed it to her laid bare her own shame, so that her impulse was to hide herself from her lover. But of all this Gavin was unconscious, and he repeated his question. The lantern was swaying in

her hand, and when she turned fearfully to him its light fell on his face, and she saw how alarmed he was.

"I am going away back to Nanny's," she said suddenly, and rose cowed, but he took her hand and held her.

"Babbie," he said, huskily, "tell me what has happened to bring you here at this hour."

She sought to pull her hand from him, but could not.

"How you are trembling!" he whispered. "Babbie," he cried, "something terrible has happened to you, but do not fear. Tell me what it is, and then--then I will take you to my mother: yes, I will take you now."

The Egyptian would have given all she had in the world to be able to fly from him then, that he might never know her as she was, but it could not be, and so she spoke out remorselessly. If her voice had become hard, it was a new-born scorn of herself that made it so.

"You are needlessly alarmed," she said; "I am not at all the kind of person who deserves sympathy or expects it. There is nothing wrong. I am staying with Nanny over-night, and only came to Thrums to amuse myself. I chased your policeman down the Roods with my lantern, and then came here to amuse myself with you. That is all."

"It was nothing but a love of mischief that brought you here?" Gavin asked, sternly, after an unpleasant pause.

"Nothing," the Egyptian answered, recklessly.

"I could not have believed this of you," the minister said; "I am ashamed of you."

"I thought," Babbie retorted, trying to speak lightly until she could get away from him, "that you would be glad to see me. Your last words in Caddam seemed to justify that idea."

"I am very sorry to see you," he answered, reproachfully.

"Then I will go away at one," she said, stepping out of the summer-seat.

"Yes," he replied, "you must go at once."

"Then I won't," she said, turning back defiantly. "I know what you are to say: that the Thrums people would be shocked if they knew I was here; as if I cared what the Thrums people think of me."

"I care what they think of you," Gavin said, as if that were decisive, "and I tell you I will not allow you to repeat this freak."

"You 'will not allow me,'" echoed Babbie, almost enjoying herself, despite her sudden loss of self-respect,

"I will not," Gavin said, resolutely. "Henceforth you must do as I think fit."

"Since when have you taken command of me?" demanded Babbie.

"Since a minute ago," Gavin replied, "when you let me kiss you."

"Let you!" exclaimed Babbie, now justly incensed. "You did it yourself. I was very angry."

"No, you were not."

"I am not allowed to say that even?" asked the Egyptian. "Tell me something I may say, then, and I will repeat it after you."

"I have something to say to you," Gavin told her, after a moment's reflection; "yes, and there is something I should like to hear you repeat after me, but not to-night."

"I don't want to hear what it is," Babbie said, quickly, but she knew what it was, and even then, despite the new pain at her heart, her bosom swelled with pride because this man still loved her. Now she wanted to run away with his love for her before he could take it from her, and then realising that this parting must be forever, a great desire filled her to hear him put that kiss into words, and she said, faltering:

"You can tell me what it is if you like."

"Not to-night," said Gavin.

"To-night, if at all," the gypsy almost entreated.

"To-morrow, at Nanny's," answered Gavin, decisively: and this time he remembered without dismay that the morrow was the Sabbath.

In the fairy tale the beast suddenly drops his skin and is a prince, and I believed it seemed to Babbie that some such change had come over this man, her plaything.

"Your lantern is shining on my mother's window," were the words that woke her from this discovery, and then she found herself yielding the lantern to him. She became conscious vaguely that a corresponding change was taking place in herself.

"You spoke of taking me to your mother," she said, bitterly.

"Yes," he answered at once, "to-morrow"; but she shook her head, knowing that to-morrow he would be wiser.

"Give me the lantern," she said, in a low voice, "I am going back to Nanny's now."

"Yes," he said, "we must set out now, but I can carry the lantern."

"You are not coming with me!" she exclaimed, shaking herself free of his hand.

"I am coming," he replied, calmly, though he was not calm. "Take my arm, Babbie."

She made a last effort to free herself from bondage, crying passionately, "I will not let you come."

"When I say I am coming," Gavin answered between his teeth, "I mean that I am coming, and so let that be an end of this folly. Take my arm."

"I think I hate you," she said, retreating from him.

"Take my arm," he repeated, and, though her breast was rising rebelliously, she did as he ordered, and so he escorted her from the garden. At the foot of the field she stopped, and thought to frighten him by saying, "What would the people say if they saw you with me now?"

"It does not much matter what they would say," he answered, still keeping his teeth together as if doubtful of their courage. "As for what they would do, that is certain; they would put me out of my church."

"And it is dear to you?"

"Dearer than life."

"You told me long ago that your mother's heart would break if----"

"Yes, I am sure it would."

They had begun to climb the fields, but she stopped him with a jerk.

"Go back, Mr. Dishart," she implored, clutching his arm with both hands. "You make me very unhappy for no purpose. Oh, why should you risk so much for me?"

"I cannot have you wandering here alone at midnight," Gavin answered, gently.

"That is nothing to me," she said, eagerly, but no longer resenting his air of proprietorship.

"You will never do it again if I can prevent it."

"But you cannot," she said, sadly. "Oh, yes, you can, Mr. Dishart. If you will turn back now I shall promise never to do anything again without first asking myself whether it would seem right to you. I know I acted very wrongly to-night."

"Only thoughtlessly," he said.

"Then have pity on me," she besought him, "and go back. If I have only been thoughtless, how can you punish me thus? Mr. Dishart," she entreated, her voice breaking, "if you were to suffer for this folly of mine, do you think I could live?"

"We are in God's hands, dear," he answered, firmly, and he again drew her arm to him. So they climbed the first field, and were almost at the hill before either spoke again.

"Stop," Babbie whispered, crouching as she spoke; "I see some one crossing the hill."

"I have seen him for some time," Gavin answered, quietly; "but I am doing no wrong, and I will not hide."

The Egyptian had to walk on with him, and I suppose she did not think the less of him for that. Yet she said, warningly--

"If he sees you, all Thrums will be in an uproar before morning."

"I cannot help that," Gavin replied. "It is the will of God."

"To ruin you for my sins?"

"If He thinks fit."

The figure drew nearer, and with every step Babbie's distress doubled.

"We are walking straight to him," she whispered. "I implore you to wait here until he passes, if not for your own sake, for your mother's."

At that he wavered, and she heard his teeth sliding against each other, as if he could no longer clench them.

"But, no," he said moving on again, "I will not be a skulker from any man. If it be God's wish that I should suffer for this, I must suffer."

"Oh, why," cried Babbie, beating her hands together in grief, "should you suffer for me?"

"You are mine," Gavin answered. Babbie gasped.

"And if you act foolishly," he continued, "it is right that I should bear the brunt of it. No, I will not let you go on alone; you are not fit to be alone. You need some one to watch over you and care for you and love you, and, if need be, to suffer with you."

"Turn back, dear, before he sees us."

"He has seen us."

Yes, I had seen them, for the figure on the hill was no other than the dominie of Glen Quharity. The park gate clicked as it swung to, and I looked up and saw Gavin and the Egyptian. My eyes should have found them sooner, but it was to gaze upon Margaret's home, while no one saw me, that I had trudged into Thrums so late, and by that time, I suppose, my eyes were of little service for seeing through. Yet, when I knew that of these two people suddenly beside me on the hill one was the little minister and the other a strange woman, I fell back from their side with dread before I could step forward and cry "Gavin!"

"I am Mr. Dishart," he answered, with a composure that would not have served him for another sentence. He was more excited than I, for the "Gavin" fell harmlessly on him, while I had no sooner uttered it than there rushed through me the shame of being false to Margaret. It was the only time in my life that I for-got her in him, though he has ever stood next to her in my regard.

I looked from Gavin to the gypsy woman, and again from her to him, and she began to tell a lie in his interest. But she got no farther than "I met Mr. Dis-bart accid--" when she stopped, ashamed. It was reverence for Gavin that checked the lie. Not every man has had such a compliment paid him.

"It is natural," Gavin said, slowly, "that you, sir, should wonder why I am here with this woman at such an hour, and you may know me so little as to think ill of me for it."

I did not answer, and he misunderstood my silence.

"No," he continued, in a harder voice, as if I had asked him a question, "I will explain nothing to you. You are not my judge. If you would do me harm, sir, you have it in your power."

It was with these cruel words that Gavin addressed me. He did not know how cruel they were. The Egyptian, I think, must have seen that his suspicions hurt me, for she said, softly, with a look of appeal in her eyes--

"You are the schoolmaster in Glen Quharity? Then you will perhaps save Mr. Dishart the trouble of coming farther by showing me the way to old Nanny Webster's house at Windyghoul?"

"I have to pass the house at any rate," I answered eagerly, and she came quickly to my side.

I knew, though in the darkness I could see but vaguely, that Gavin was holding his head high and waiting for me to say my worst. I had not told him that I dared think no evil of him, and he still suspected me. Now I would not trust myself to speak lest I should betray Margaret, and yet I wanted him to know that base doubts about him could never find a shelter in me. I am a timid man who long ago lost the glory of my life by it, and I was again timid when I sought to let Gavin see that my faith in him was unshaken. I lifted my bonnet to the gypsy, and asked her to take my arm. It was done clumsily, I cannot doubt, but he read my meaning and held out his hand to me. I had not touched it since he was three years old, and I trembled too much to give it the grasp I owed it. He and I parted without a word, but to the Egyptian he said, "To- morrow, dear, I will see you at Nanny's," and he was to kiss her, but I pulled her a step farther from him, and she put her hands over her face, crying, "No, no!"

If I asked her some questions between the hill and Windyghoul you must not blame me, for this was my affair as well as theirs. She did not answer me; I know now that she did not hear me. But at the mud house she looked abruptly into my face, and said--

"You love him, too!"

I trudged to the school-house with these words for company, and it was less her discovery than her confession that tortured me. How much I slept that night you may guess.