CHAPTER XXIII. - CONTAINS A BIRTH, WHICH IS SUFFICIENT FOR ONE CHAPTER.

"The kirk bell will soon be ringing," Nanny said on the following morning, as she placed herself carefully on a stool, one hand holding her Bible and the other wandering complacently over her aged merino gown. "Ay, lassie, though you're only an Egyptian I would hae ta'en you wi' me to hear Mr. Duthie, but it's speiring ower muckle o' a woman to expect her to gang to the kirk in her ilka day claethes."

The Babbie of yesterday would have laughed at this, but the new Babbie sighed.

"I wonder you don't go to Mr. Dishart's church now. Nanny," she said, gently. "I am sure you prefer him."

"Babbie, Babbie," exclaimed Nanny, with spirit, "may I never be so far left to mysel' as to change my kirk just because I like another minister better! It's easy seen, lassie, that you ken little o' religious questions."

"Very little," Babbie admitted, sadly.

"But dinna ba so waeful about it," the old woman continued, kindly, "for that's no nane like you. Ay, and if you see muckle mair o' Mr. Dishart he'll soon cure your ignorance."

"I shall not see much more of him," Babbie answered, with averted head.

"The like o' you couldna expect it," Nanny said, simply, whereupon Babbie went to the window. "I had better be stepping," Nanny said, rising, "for I am aye late unless I'm on the hill by the time the bell begins. Ay, Babbie, I'm doubting my merino's no sair in the fashion?"

She looked down at her dress half despondently, and yet with some pride.

"It was fowerpence the yard, and no less," she went on, fondling the worn merino, "when we bocht it at Sam'l Curr's. Ay, but it has been turned sax times since syne."

She sighed, and Babbie came to her and put her arms round her, saying, "Nanny, you are a dear."

"I'm a gey auld-farrant-looking dear, I doubt," said Nanny, ruefully.

"Now, Nanny," rejoined Babbie, "you are just wanting me to flatter you. You know the merino looks very nice."

"It's a guid merino yet," admitted the old woman, "but, oh, Babbie, what does the material matter if the cut isna fashionable? It's fine, isn't it, to be in the fashion?"

She spoke so wistfully that, instead of smiling, Babbie kissed her.

"I am afraid to lay hand on the merino, Nanny, but give me off your bonnet and I'll make it ten years younger in as many minutes."

"Could you?" asked Nanny, eagerly, unloosening her bonnet-strings. "Mercy on me!" she had to add; "to think about altering bonnets on the Sabbath-day! Lassie, how could you propose sic a thing?"

"Forgive me, Nanny," Babbie replied, so meekly that the old woman looked at her curiously.

"I dinna understand what has come ower you," she said. "There's an unca difference in you since last nicht. I used to think you were mair like a bird than a lassie, but you've lost a' your daft capers o' singing and lauching, and I take ill wi't. Twa or three times I've catched you greeting. Babbie, what has come ower you?"

"Nothing, Nanny. I think I hear the bell."

Down in Thrums two kirk-officers had let their bells loose, waking echoes in Windyghoul as one dog in country parts sets all the others barking, but Nanny did not hurry off to church. Such a surprising notion had filled her head suddenly that she even forgot to hold her dress off the floor.

"Babbie," she cried, in consternation, "dinna tell me you've gotten ower fond o' Mr. Dishart."

"The like of me, Nanny!" the gypsy answered, with affected raillery, but there was a tear in her eye.

"It would be a wild, presumptious thing," Nanny said, "and him a grand minister, but--"

Babbie tried to look her in the face, but failed, and then all at once there came back to Nanny the days when she and her lover wandered the hill together.

"Ah, my dawtie," she cried, so tenderly, "what does it matter wha he is when you canna help it!"

Two frail arms went round the Egyptian, and Babbie rested her head on the old woman's breast. But do you think it could have happened had not Nanny loved a weaver two-score years before?

And now Nanny has set off for church and Babbie is alone in the mud house. Some will pity her not at all, this girl who was a dozen women in the hour, and all made of impulses that would scarce stand still to be photographed. To attempt to picture her at any time until now would have been like chasing a spirit that changes to something else as your arms clasp it; yet she has always seemed a pathetic little figure to me. If I understand Babbie at all, it is, I think, because I loved Margaret, the only woman I have ever known well, and one whose nature was not, like the Egyptian's, complex, but most simple, as if God had told her only to be good. Throughout my life since she came into it she has been to me a glass in which many things are revealed that I could not have learned save through her, and something of all womankind, even of bewildering Babbie, I seem to know because I knew Margaret.

No woman is so bad but we may rejoice when her heart thrills to love, for then God has her by the hand. There is no love but this. She may dream of what love is, but it is only of a sudden that she knows. Babbie, who was without a guide from her baby days, had dreamed but little of it, hearing its name given to another thing. She had been born wild and known no home; no one had touched her heart except to strike it, she had been educated, but never tamed; her life had been thrown strangely among those who were great in the world's possessions, but she was not of them. Her soul was in such darkness that she had never seen it; she would have danced away cynically from the belief that there is such a thing, and now all at once she had passed from disbelief to knowledge. Is not love God's doing? To Gavin He had given something of Himself, and the moment she saw it the flash lit her own soul.

It was but little of his Master that was in Gavin, but far smaller things have changed the current of human lives; the spider's thread that strikes our brow on a country road may do that. Yet this I will say, though I have no wish to cast the little minister on my pages larger than he was, that he had some heroic hours in Thrums, of which one was when Babbie learned to love him. Until the moment when he kissed her she had only conceived him a quaint fellow whose life was a string of Sundays, but behold what she saw

in him now. Evidently to his noble mind her mystery was only some misfortune, not of her making, and his was to be the part of leading her away from it into the happiness of the open life. He did not doubt her, for he loved, and to doubt is to dip love in the mire. She had been given to him by God, and he was so rich in her possession that the responsibility attached to the gift was not grievous. She was his, and no mortal man could part them. Those who looked askance at her were looking askance at him; in so far as she was wayward and wild, he was those things; so long as she remained strange to religion, the blame lay on him.

All this Babbie read in the Gavin of the past night, and to her it was the book of love. What things she had known, said and done in that holy name! How shamefully have we all besmirched it! She had only known it as the most selfish of the passions, a brittle image that men consulted because it could only answer in the words they gave it to say. But here was a man to whom love was something better than his own desires leering on a pedestal. Such love as Babbie had seen hitherto made strong men weak, but this was a love that made a weak man strong. All her life, strength had been her idol, and the weakness that bent to her cajolery her scorn. But only now was it revealed to her that strength, instead of being the lusty child of passions, grows by grappling with and throwing them.

So Babbie loved the little minister for the best that she had ever seen in man. I shall be told that she thought far more of him than he deserved, forgetting the mean in the worthy: but who that has had a glimpse of heaven will care to let his mind dwell henceforth on earth? Love, it is said, is blind, but love is not blind. It is an extra eye, which shows us what is most worthy of regard. To see the best is to see most clearly, and it is the lover's privilege.

Down in the Auld Licht kirk that forenoon Gavin preached a sermon in praise of Woman, and up in the mudhouse in Windyghoul Babbie sat alone. But it was the Sabbath day to her: the first Sabbath in her life. Her discovery had frozen her mind for a time, so that she could only stare at it with eyes that would not shut; but that had been in the night. Already her love seemed a thing of years, for it was as old as herself, as old as the new Babbie. It was such a dear delight that she clasped it to her, and exulted over it because it was hers, and then she cried over it because she must give it up.

For Babbie must only look at this love and then turn from it. My heart aches for the little Egyptian, but the Promised Land would have remained

invisible to her had she not realized that it was only for others. That was the condition of her seeing.