

CHAPTER XXIV. - NEW WORLD, AND THE WOMAN WHO MAY NOT DWELL THEREIN.

Up here in the glen school-house after my pupils have straggled home, there comes to me at times, and so sudden that it may be while I am infusing my tea, a hot desire to write great books. Perhaps an hour afterwards I rise, beaten, from my desk, flinging all I have written into the fire (yet rescuing some of it on second thought), and curse myself as an ingle-nook man, for I see that one can only paint what he himself has felt, and in my passion I wish to have all the vices, even to being an impious man, that I may describe them better. For this may I be pardoned. It comes to nothing in the end, save that my tea is brackish.

Yet though my solitary life in the glen is cheating me of many experiences, more helpful to a writer than to a Christian, it has not been so tame but that I can understand why Babbie cried when she went into Nanny's garden and saw the new world. Let no one who loves be called altogether unhappy. Even love unreturned has its rainbow, and Babbie knew that Gavin loved her. Yet she stood in woe among the stiff berry bushes, as one who stretches forth her hands to Love and sees him looking for her, and knows she must shrink from the arms she would lie in, and only call to him in a voice he cannot hear. This is not a love that is always bitter. It grows sweet with age. But could that dry the tears of the little Egyptian, who had only been a woman for a day?

Much was still dark to her. Of one obstacle that must keep her and Gavin ever apart she knew, and he did not; but had it been removed she would have given herself to him humbly, not in her own longing, but because he wanted her. "Behold what I am," she could have said to him then, and left the rest to him, believing that her unworthiness would not drag him down, it would lose itself so readily in his strength. That Thrums could rise against such a man if he defied it, she did not believe; but she was to learn the truth presently from a child.

To most of us, I suppose, has come some shock that was to make us different men from that hour, and yet, how many days elapsed before something of the man we had been leapt up in us? Babbie thought she had buried her old impulsiveness, and then remembering that from the top of the field she might see Gavin returning from church, she hastened to the hill to look upon him from a distance. Before she reached the gate where I had met her and him, however, she stopped, distressed at her selfishness,

and asked bitterly, "Why am I so different from other women; why should what is so easy to them be so hard to me?"

"Gavin, my beloved!" the Egyptian cried in her agony, and the wind caught her words and flung them in the air, making sport of her.

She wandered westward over the bleak hill, and by-and-by came to a great slab called the Standing Stone, on which children often sit and muse until they see gay ladies riding by on palfreys--a kind of horse--and knights in glittering armour, and goblins, and fiery dragons, and other wonders now extinct, of which bare-legged laddies dream, as well as boys in socks. The Standing Stone is in the dyke that separates the hill from a fir wood, and it is the fairy-book of Thrums. If you would be a knight yourself, you must sit on it and whisper to it your desire.

Babbie came to the Standing Stone, and there was a little boy astride it. His hair stood up through holes in his bonnet, and he was very ragged and miserable.

"Why are you crying, little boy?" Babbie asked him, gently; but he did not look up, and the tongue was strange to him.

"How are you greeting so sair?" she asked.

"I'm no greeting very sair," he answered, turning his head from her that a woman might not see his tears. "I'm no greeting so sair but what I grat sairer when my mither died."

"When did she die?" Babbie inquired.

"Lang syne," he answered, still with averted face.

"What is your name?"

"Micah is my name. Rob Dow's my father."

"And have you no brothers nor sisters?" asked Babbie, with a fellow-feeling for him.

"No, juist my father," he said.

"You should be the better laddie to him then. Did your mither no tell you to be that afore she died?"

"Ay," he answered, "she telled me ay to hide the bottle frae him when I could get haed o't. She took me into the bed to make me promise that, and syne she died."

"Does your father drina?"

"He hauds mair than any other man in Thrums," Micah replied, almost proudly.

"And he strikes you?" Babbie asked, compassionately.

"That's a lie," retorted the boy, fiercely. "Leastwise, he doesna strike me except when he's mortal, and syne I can jouk him."

"What are you doing there?"

"I'm wishing. It's a wishing stane."

"You are wishing your father wouldna drink."

"No, I'm no," answered Micah. "There was a lang time he didna drink, but the woman has sent him to it again. It's about her I'm wishing. I'm wishing she was in hell."

"What woman is it?" asked Babbie, shuddering.

"I dinna ken," Micah said, "but she's an ill ane."

"Did you never see her at your father's house?"

"Na; if he could get grip o' her he would break her ower his knee. I hearken to him saying that, when he's wild. He says she should be burned for a witch."

"But if he hates her," asked Babbie, "how can she have sic power ower him?"

"It's no him that she has haud o'," replied Micah, still looking away from her.

"Wha is it then?"

"It's Mr. Dishart."

Babbie was struck as if by an arrow from the wood. It was so unexpected that she gave a cry, and then for the first time Micah looked at her.

"How should that send your father to the drink?" she asked, with an effort.

"Because my father's mighty fond o' him," answered Micah, staring strangely at her; "and when the folk ken about the woman, they'll stane the minister out o' Thrums."

The wood faded for a moment from the Egyptian's sight. When it came back, the boy had slid off the Standing Stone and was stealing away.

"Why do you run frae me?" Babbie asked, pathetically.

"I'm fleid at you," he gasped, coming to a standstill at a safe distance: "you're the woman!"

Babbie cowered before her little judge, and he drew nearer her slowly.

"What makes you think that?" she said.

It was a curious time for Babbie's beauty to be paid its most princely compliment.

"Because you're so bonny," Micah whispered across the dyke. Her tears gave him courage. "You might gang awa," he entreated. "If you kent what a differ Mr. Dishart made in my father till you came, you would maybe gang awa. When lie's roaring fou I have to sleep in the wood, and it's awful cauld. I'm doubting he'll kill me, woman, if you dinna gang awa."

Poor Babbie put her hand to her heart, but the innocent lad continued mercilessly--

"If ony shame comes to the minister, his auld mither'll die. How have you sic an ill will at the minister?"

Babbie held up her hands like a supplicant.

"I'll gie you my rabbit." Micah said, "if you'll gang awa. I've juist the ane." She shook her head, and, misunderstanding her, he cried, with his knuckles in his eye, "I'll gie you them baith, though I'm mighty sweer to part wi' Spotty."

Then at last Babbie found her voice.

"Keep your rabbits, laddie," she said, "and greet no more. I'm gaen awa."

"And you'll never come back no more a' your life?" pleaded Micah.

"Never no more a' my life," repeated Babbie.

"And ye'll leave the minister alane for ever and ever?"

"For ever and ever."

Micah rubbed his face dry, and said, "Will you let me stand on the Standing Stone and watch you gaen awa for ever and ever?"

At that a sob broke from Babbie's heart, and looking at her doubtfully Micah said--

"Maybe you're gey ill for what you've done?"

"Ay," Babbie answered, "I'm gey ill for what I've done."

A minute passed, and in her anguish she did not know that still she was standing at the dyke. Micah's voice roused her:

"You said you would gang awa, and you're no gaen,"

Then Babbie went away. The boy watched her across the hill. He climbed the Standing Stone and gazed after her until she was but a coloured ribbon among the broom. When she disappeared into Windyghoul he ran home, joyfully, and told his father what a good day's work he had done. Rob struck him for a fool for taking a gypsy's word, and warned him against speaking of the woman in Thrums.

But though Dow believed that Gavin continued to meet the Egyptian secretly, he was wrong. A sum of money for Nanny was sent to the minister, but he could guess only from whom it came. In vain did he search for Babbie. Some months passed and he gave up the search, persuaded that he should see her no more. He went about his duties with a drawn face that made many folk uneasy when it was stern, and pained them when it tried to smile. But to Margaret, though the effort was terrible, he was as he had ever been, and so no thought of a woman crossed her loving breast.