

CHAPTER XXVII. - FIRST JOURNEY OF THE DOMINIE TO THRUMS DURING THE TWENTY-FOUR HOURS.

"How did it happen?" I asked more than once, but the Egyptian was only with me in the body, and she did not hear. I might have been talking to some one a mile away whom a telescope had drawn near my eyes.

When I put on my bonnet, however, she knew that I was going to Thrums, and she rose and walked to the door, looking behind to see that I followed.

"You must not come," I said harshly, but her hand started to her heart as if I had shot her, and I added quickly, "Come." We were already some distance on our way before I repeated my question.

"What matter how it happened?" she answered piteously, and they were words of which I felt the force. But when she said a little later, "I thought you would say it is not true," I took courage, and forced her to tell me all she knew. She sobbed while she spoke, if one may sob without tears.

"I heard of it at the Spittal," she said. "The news broke out suddenly there that the piper had quarrelled with some one in Thrums, and that in trying to separate them Mr. Dishart was stabbed. There is no doubt of its truth."

"We should have heard of it here," I said hopefully, "before the news reached the Spittal. It cannot be true."

"It was brought to the Spittal," she answered, "by the hill road."

Then my spirits sank again, for I knew that this was possible. There is a path, steep but short, across the hills between Thrums and the top of the glen, which Mr. Glendinning took frequently when he had to preach at both places on the same Sabbath. It is still called the Minister's Road.

"Yet if the earl had believed it he would have sent some one into Thrums for particulars," I said, grasping at such comfort as I could make.

"He does believe it," she answered. "He told me of it himself."

You see the Egyptian was careless of her secret now; but what was that secret to me? An hour ago it would have been much, and already it was not worth listening to. If she had begun to tell me why Lord Rintoul took a gypsy girl into his confidence I should not have heard her.

"I ran quickly," she said. "Even if a messenger was sent he might be behind me."

Was it her words or the tramp of a horse that made us turn our heads at that moment? I know not. But far back in a twist of the road we saw a horseman approaching at such a reckless pace that I thought he was on a runaway. We stopped instinctively, and waited for him, and twice he disappeared in hollows of the road, and then was suddenly tearing down upon us. I recognised in him young Mr. McKenzie, a relative of Rintoul, and I stretched out my arms to compel him to draw up. He misunderstood my motive, and was raising his whip threateningly, when he saw the Egyptian. It is not too much to say that he swayed in the saddle. The horse galloped on, though he had lost hold of the reins. He looked behind until he rounded a corner, and I never saw such amazement mixed with incredulity on a human face. For some minutes I expected to see him coming back, but when he did not I said wonderingly to the Egyptian--

"He knew you."

"Did he?" she answered indifferently, and I think we spoke no more until we were in Windyghoul. Soon we were barely conscious of each other's presence. Never since have I walked between the school-house and Thrums in so short a time, nor seen so little on the way.

In the Egyptian's eyes, I suppose, was a picture of Gavin lying dead; but if her grief had killed her thinking faculties, mine, that was only less keen because I had been struck down once before, had set all the wheels of my brain in action. For it seemed to me that the hour had come when I must disclose myself to Margaret.

I had realised always that if such a necessity did arise it could only be caused by Gavin's premature death, or by his proving a bad son to her. Some may wonder that I could have looked calmly thus far into the possible, but I reply that the night of Adam Dishart's home-coming had made of me a man whom the future could not surprise again. Though I saw Gavin and his mother happy in our Auld Licht manse, that did not prevent my considering the contingencies which might leave her without a son. In the school-house I had brooded over them as one may think over moves on a draught-board. It may have been idle, but it was done that I might know how to act best for Margaret if any thing untoward occurred. The time for such action had come. Gavin's death had struck me hard, but it did not crush me. I was not unprepared. I was going to Margaret now.

What did I see as I walked quickly along the glen road, with Babbie silent by my side, and I doubt not pods of the broom cracking all around us? I saw myself entering the Auld Licht manse, where Margaret sat weeping over the body of Gavin, and there was none to break my coming to her, for none but she and I knew what had been.

I saw my Margaret again, so fragile now, so thin the wrists, her hair turned grey. No nearer could I go, but stopped at the door, grieving for her, and at last saying her name aloud.

I saw her raise her face, and look upon me for the first time for eighteen years. She did not scream at sight of me, for the body of her son lay between us, and bridged the gulf that Adam Dishart had made.

I saw myself draw near her reverently and say, "Margaret, he is dead, and that is why I have come back," and I saw her put her arms around my neck as she often did long ago.

But it was not to be. Never since that night at Harvie have I spoken to Margaret.

The Egyptian and I were to come to Windyghoul before I heard her speak. She was not addressing me. Here Gavin and she had met first, and she was talking of that meeting to herself.

"It was there," I heard her say softly, as she gazed at the bush beneath which she had seen him shaking his fist at her on the night of the riots. A little farther on she stopped where a path from Windyghoul sets off for the well in the wood. She looked up it wistfully, and there I left her behind, and pressed on to the mud-house to ask Nanny Webster if the minister was dead. Nanny's gate was swinging in the wind, but her door was shut, and for a moment I stood at it like a coward, afraid to enter and hear the worst.

The house was empty. I turned from it relieved, as if I had got a respite, and while I stood in the garden the Egyptian came to me shuddering, her twitching face asking the question that would not leave her lips.

"There is no one in the house," I said. "Nanny is perhaps at the well."

But the gypsy went inside, and pointing to the fire said, "It has been out for hours. Do you not see? The murder has drawn every one into Thrums."

So I feared. A dreadful night was to pass before I knew that this was the day of the release of Sanders Webster, and that frail Nanny had walked into Tilliedrum to meet him at the prison gate.

Babbie sank upon a stool, so weak that I doubt whether she heard me tell her to wait there until my return. I hurried into Thrums, not by the hill, though it is the shorter way, but by the Roods, for I must hear all before I ventured to approach the manse. From Windyghoul to the top of the Roods it is a climb and then a steep descent. The road has no sooner reached its highest point than it begins to fall in the straight line of houses called the Roods, and thus I came upon a full view of the street at once. A cart was laboring up it. There were women sitting on stones at their doors, and girls playing at palaulays, and out of the house nearest me came a black figure. My eyes failed me; I was asking so much from them. They made him tall and short, and spare and stout, so that I knew it was Gavin, and yet, looking again, feared, but all the time, I think, I knew it was he.