

## **CHAPTER XXXII. - LEADING SWIFTLY TO THE APPALLING MARRIAGE.**

The little minister bowed his head in assent when Babbie's cry, "Oh, Gavin, do you?" leapt in front of her unselfish wish that he should care for her no more.

"But that matters very little now," he said.

She was his to do with as he willed; and, perhaps, the joy of knowing herself loved still, begot a wild hope that he would refuse to give her up. If so, these words laid it low, but even the sentence they passed upon her could not kill the self-respect that would be hers henceforth. "That matters very little now," the man said, but to the woman it seemed to matter more than anything else in the world.

Throughout the remainder of this interview until the end came, Gavin never faltered. His duty and hers lay so plainly before him that there could be no straying from it. Did Babbie think him strangely calm? At the Glen Quharity gathering I once saw Rob Angus lift a boulder with such apparent ease that its weight was discredited, until the cry arose that the effort had dislocated his arm. Perhaps Gavin's quietness deceived the Egyptian similarly. Had he stamped, she might have understood better what he suffered, standing there on the hot embers of his passion.

"We must try to make amends now," he said gravely, "for the wrong we have done."

"The wrong I have done," she said, correcting him. "You will make it harder for me if you blame yourself. How vile I was in those days!"

"Those days," she called them, they seemed so far away.

"Do not cry, Babbie," Gavin replied, gently. "He knew what you were, and why, and He pities you. 'For His anger endureth but a moment: in His favor is life: weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning.'"

"Not to me."

"Yes, to you," he answered. "Babbie, you will return to the Spittal now, and tell Lord Rintoul everything."

"If you wish it."

"Not because I wish it, but because it is right. He must be told that you do not love him."

"I never pretended to him that I did," Babbie said, looking up. "Oh," she added, with emphasis, "he knows that. He thinks me incapable of caring for any one."

"And that is why he must be told of me," Gavin replied. "You are no longer the woman you were, Babbie, and you know it, and I know it, but he does not know it. He shall know it before he decides whether he is to marry you."

Babbie looked at Gavin, and wondered he did not see that this decision lay with him.

"Nevertheless," she said, "the wedding will take place to-morrow: if it did not, Lord Rintoul would be the scorn of his friends."

"If it does," the minister answered, "he will be the scorn of himself. Babbie, there is a chance."

"There is no chance," she told him. "I shall be back at the Spittal without any one's knowing of my absence, and when I begin to tell him of you, he will tremble, lest it means my refusal to marry him; when he knows it does not, he will wonder only why I told him anything."

"He will ask you to take time--"

"No, he will ask me to put on my wedding-dress. You must not think anything else possible."

"So be it, then," Gavin said firmly.

"Yes, it will be better so," Babbie answered, and then, seeing him misunderstand her meaning, exclaimed reproachfully, "I was not thinking of myself. In the time to come, whatever be my lot, I shall have the one consolation, that this is best for you. Think of your mother."

"She will love you," Gavin said, "when I tell her of you."

"Yes," said Babbie, wringing her hands; "she will almost love me, but for what? For not marrying you. That is the only reason any one in Thrums will have for wishing me well."

"No others," Gavin answered, "will ever know why I remained unmarried."

"Will you never marry?" Babbie asked, exultingly. "Ah!" she cried, ashamed, "but you must."

"Never."

Well, many a man and many a woman has made that vow in similar circumstances, and not all have kept it. But shall we who are old smile cynically at the brief and burning passion of the young? "The day," you say, "will come when--" Good sir, hold your peace. Their agony was great and now is dead, and, maybe, they have forgotten where it lies buried; but dare you answer lightly when I ask you which of these things is saddest?

Babbie believed his "Never," and, doubtless, thought no worse of him for it; but she saw no way of comforting him save by disparagement of herself.

"You must think of your congregation," she said. "A minister with a gypsy wife--"

"Would have knocked them about with a flail," Gavin interposed, showing his teeth at the thought of the precentor, "until they did her reverence."

She shook her head, and told him of her meeting with Micah Dow. It silenced him; not, however, on account of its pathos, as she thought, but because it interpreted the riddle of Rob's behavior.

"Nevertheless," he said ultimately, "my duty is not to do what is right in my people's eyes, but what seems right in my own."

Babbie had not heard him.

"I saw a face at the window just now," she whispered, drawing closer to him.

"There was no face there; the very thought of Rob Dow raises him before you," Gavin answered reassuringly, though Rob was nearer at that moment than either of them thought.

"I must go away at once," she said, still with her eyes in the window. "No, no, you shall not come or stay with me; it is you who are in danger."

"Do not fear for me."

"I must, if you will not. Before you came in, did I not hear you speak of a meeting you had to attend to--night?"

"My pray--" His teeth met on the word; so abruptly did it conjure up the forgotten prayer-meeting that before the shock could reach his mind he stood motionless, listening for the bell. For one instant all that had taken place since he last heard it might have happened between two of its tinkles; Babbie passed from before him like a figure in a panorama, and he saw, instead, a congregation in their pews.

"What do you see?" Babbie cried in alarm, for he seemed to be gazing at the window.

"Only you," he replied, himself again; "I am coming with you."

"You must let me go alone," she entreated; "if not for your own safety"--but it was only him she considered--"then for the sake of Lord Rintoul. Were you and I to be seen together now, his name and mine might suffer."

It was an argument the minister could not answer save by putting his hands over his face; his distress made Babbie strong; she moved to the door, trying to smile.

"Go, Babbie!" Gavin said, controlling his voice, though it had been a smile more pitiful than her tears. "God has you in His keeping; it is not His will to give me this to bear for you."

They were now in the garden.

"Do not think of me as unhappy," she said; "it will be happiness to me to try to be all you would have me be."

He ought to have corrected her. "All that God would have me be," is what she should have said. But he only replied, "You will be a good woman, and none such can be altogether unhappy; God sees to that."

He might have kissed her, and perhaps she thought so.

"I am--I am going now, dear," she said, and came back a step because he did not answer; then she went on, and was out of his sight at three yards' distance. Neither of them heard the approaching dogcart.

"You see, I am bearing it quite cheerfully," she said. "I shall have everything a woman loves; do not grieve for me so much."

Gavin dared not speak nor move. Never had he found life so hard; but he was fighting with the ignoble in himself, and winning. She opened the gate, and it might have been a signal to the dogcart to stop. They both heard a dog barking, and then the voice of Lord Rintoul:

"That is a light in the window. Jump down, McKenzie, and inquire."

Gavin took one step nearer Babbie and stopped. He did not see how all her courage went from her, so that her knees yielded, and she held out her arms to him, but he heard a great sob and then his name.

"Gavin, I am afraid."

Gavin understood now, and I say he would have been no man to leave her after that; only a moment was allowed him, and it was their last chance on earth. He took it. His arm went round his beloved, and he drew her away from Nanny's.

McKenzie found both house and garden empty.

"And yet," he said, "I swear some one passed the window as we sighted it."

"Waste no more time," cried the impatient earl. "We must be very near the hill now. You will have to lead the horse, McKenzie, in this darkness; the dog may find the way through the broom for us."

"The dog has run on," McKenzie replied, now in an evil temper. "Who knows, it may be with her now? So we must feel our way cautiously; there is no call for capsizing the trap in our haste." But there was call for haste if they were to reach the gypsy encampment before Gavin and Babbie were made man and wife over the tongs.

The Spittal dogcart rocked as it dragged its way through the broom. Rob Dow followed. The ten o'clock bell began to ring.