

**CHAPTER XL. - BABBIE AND MARGARET--DEFENCE OF THE MANSE CONTINUED.**

The Egyptian was mournful in Windyghoul, up which she had once danced and sung; but you must not think that she still feared Dow. I felt McKenzie's clutch on any arm for hours after he left me, but she was far braver than I; indeed, dangers at which I should have shut my eyes only made hers gleam, and I suppose it was sheer love of them that first made her play the coquette with Gavin. If she cried now, it was not for herself; it was because she thought she had destroyed him. Could I have gone to her then and said that Gavin wanted to blot out the gypsy wedding, that throbbing little breast would have frozen at once, and the drooping head would have been proud again, and she would have gone away forever without another tear.

What do I say? I am doing a wrong to the love these two bore each other. Babbie would not have taken so base a message from my lips. He would have had to say the words to her himself before she believed them his. What would he want her to do now? was the only question she asked herself. To follow him was useless, for in that rain and darkness two people might have searched for each other all night in a single field. That he would go to the Spittal, thinking her in Rintoul's dogcart, she did not doubt; and his distress was painful to her to think of. But not knowing that the burns were in flood, she underestimated his danger.

Remembering that the mudhouse was near, she groped her way to it, meaning to pass the night there; but at the gate she turned away hastily, hearing from the door the voice of a man she did not know to be Nanny's brother. She wandered recklessly a short distance, until the rain began to threaten again, and then, falling on her knees in the broom, she prayed to God for guidance. When she rose she set off for the manse.

The rain that followed the flash of lightning had brought Margaret to the kitchen.

"Jean, did you ever hear such a rain? It is trying to break into the manse."

"I canna hear you, ma'am; is it the rain you're feared at?"

"What else could it be?"

Jean did not answer.

"I hope the minister won't leave the church, Jean, till this is over?"

"Nobody would daur, ma'am. The rain'll turn the key on them all."

Jean forced out these words with difficulty, for she knew that the church had been empty and the door locked for over an hour.

"This rain has come as if in answer to the minister's prayer, Jean."

"It wasna rain like this they wanted."

"Jean, you would not attempt to guide the Lord's hand. The minister will have to reprove the people for thinking too much of him again, for they will say that he induced God to send the rain. To-night's meeting will be remembered long in Thrums."

Jean shuddered, and said, "It's mair like an ordinary rain now, ma'am."

"But it has put out your fire, and I wanted another heater. Perhaps the one I have is hot enough, though."

Margaret returned to the parlor, and from the kitchen Jean could hear the heater tilted backward and forward in the box-iron--a pleasant, homely sound when there is happiness in the house. Soon she heard a step outside, however, and it was followed by a rough shaking of the barred door.

"Is it you, Mr. Dishart?" Jean asked nervously.

"It's me, Tammas Whamond," the precentor answered. "Unbar the door."

"What do you want? Speak low."

"I winna speak low. Let me in. I hae news for the minister's mother."

"What news?" demanded Jean.

"Jean Proctor, as chief elder of the kirk I order you to let me do my duty."

"Whaur's the minister?"

"He's a minister no longer. He's married a gypsy woman and run awa wi' her."

"You lie, Tammas Whamond. I believe--"

"Your belief's of no consequence. Open the door, and let me in to tell your mistress what I hae seen."

"She'll hear it first frae his ain lips if she hears it ava. I winna open the door."

"Then I'll burst it open,"

Whamond flung himself at the door, and Jean, her fingers rigid with fear, stood waiting for its fall. But the rain came to her rescue by lashing the precentor until even he was forced to run from it.

"I'll be back again," he cried. "Woe to you, Jean Proctor, that hae denied your God this nicht."

"Who was that speaking to you, Jean?" asked Margaret, re-entering the kitchen. Until the rain abated Jean did not attempt to answer.

"I thought it was the precentor's voice," Margaret said.

Jean was a poor hand at lying, and she stuttered in her answer.

"There is nothing wrong, is there?" cried Margaret, in sudden fright. "My son--"

"Nothing, nothing."

The words jumped from Jean to save Margaret from falling. Now she could not take them back. "I winna believe it o' him," said Jean to herself. "Let them say what they will, I'll be true to him; and when he comes back he'll find her as he left her."

"It was Lang Tammass," she answered her mistress; "but he just came to say that--"

"Quick, Jean! what?"

"Mr. Dishart has been called to a sick-bed in the country, ma'am-- to the farm o' Look-About-You; and as it's sic a rain, he's to bide there a' nicht."

"And Whamond came through that rain to tell me this? How good of him. Was there any other message?"

"Just that the minister hoped you would go straight to your bed, ma'am," said Jean, thinking to herself, "There can be no great sin in giving her one mair happy nicht; it may be her last."

The two women talked for a short time, and then read verse about in the parlor from the third chapter of Mark.

"This is the first night we have been left alone in the manse," Margaret said, as she was retiring to her bedroom," and we must not grudge the minister to those who have sore need of him. I notice that you have barred the doors."

"Ay, they're barred. Nobody can win in the nicht."

"Nobody will want in, Jean," Margaret said, smiling.

"I dinna ken about that," answered Jean below her breath. "Ay, ma'am, may you sleep for baith o' us this nicht, for I daurna gang to my bed."

Jean was both right and wrong, for two persons wanted in within the next half-hour, and she opened the door to both of them. The first to come was Babbie.

So long as women sit up of nights listening for a footstep, will they flatten their faces at the window, though all without be black. Jean had not been back in the kitchen for two minutes before she raised the blind. Her eyes were close to the glass, when she saw another face almost meet hers, as you may touch your reflection in a mirror. But this face was not her own. It was white and sad. Jean suppressed a cry, and let the blind fall, as if shutting the lid on some uncanny thing.

"Won't you let me in?" said a voice that might have been only the sob of a rain-beaten wind; "I am nearly drowned."

Jean stood like death; but her suppliant would not pass on.

"You are not afraid?" the voice continued. "Raise the blind again, and you will see that no one need fear me."

At this request Jean's hands sought each other's company behind her back.

"Wha are you?" she asked, without stirring. "Are you--the woman?"

"Yes."

"Whaur's the minister?"

The rain again became wild, but this time it only tore by the manse as if to a conflict beyond.

"Are you aye there? I daurna let you in till I'm sure the mistress is bedded. Gang round to the front, and see if there's ony licht burning in the high west window."

"There was a light," the voice said presently, "but it was turned out as I looked."

"Then I'll let you in, and God kens I mean no wrang by it."

Babbie entered shivering, and Jean rebarred the door. Then she looked long at the woman whom her master loved. Babbie was on her knees at the hearth, holding out her hands to the dead fire.

"What a pity it's a fause face."

"Do I look so false?"

"Is it true? You're no married to him?"

"Yes, it is true."

"And yet you look as if you was fond o' him. If you cared for him, how could you do it?"

"That was why I did it."

"And him could hae had wha he liked."

"I gave up Lord Rintoul for him."

"What? Na, na; you're the Egyptian."

"You judge me by my dress."

"And soaking it is. How you're shivering--what neat fingers--what bonny little feet. I could near believe what you tell me. Aff wi' these rags, an I'll gie you on my black frock, if--if you promise me no to gang awa wi't."

So Babbie put on some clothes of Jean's, including the black frock, and stockings and shoes.

"Mr. Dishart cannot be back, Jean," she said, "before morning, and I don't want his mother to see me till he comes."

"I wouldna let you near her the nicht though you gaed on your knees to me. But whaur is he?"

Babbie explained why Gavin had set off for the Spittal; but Jean shook her head incredulously, saying, "I canna believe you're that grand leddy, and yet ilka time I look at you I could near believe it."

In another minute Jean had something else to think of, for there came a loud rap upon the front door.

"It's Tammas Whamond back again," she moaned; "and if the mistress hears, she'll tell me to let him in."

"You shall open to me," cried a hoarse voice.

"That's no Tammas' word," Jean said in bewilderment.

"It is Lord Rintoul," Babbie whispered.

"What? Then it's truth you telled me."

The knocking continued; a door upstairs opened, and Margaret spoke over the banisters.

"Have you gone to bed, Jean? Some one is knocking at the door, and a minute ago I thought I heard a carriage stop close by. Perhaps the farmer has driven Mr. Dishart home."

"I'm putting on my things, ma'am," Jean answered; then whispered to Babbie, "What's to be done?"

"He won't go away," Babbie answered, "You will have to let him into the parlor, Jean. Can she see the door from up there?"

"No; but though he was in the parlor?"

"I shall go to him there."

"Make haste, Jean," Margaret called. "If it is any persons wanting shelter, we must give it them on such a night."

"A minute, ma'am," Jean answered. To Babbie she whispered, "What shall I say to her?"

"I--I don't know," answered Babbie ruefully. "Think of something, Jean. But open the door now. Stop, let me into the parlor first."

The two women stole into the parlor.

"Tell me what will be the result o' his coming here," entreated Jean.

"The result," Babbie said firmly, "will be that he shall go away and leave me here."