

Margaret heard Jean open the front door and speak to some person or persons whom she showed, into the parlor.

CHAPTER XLI. - RINTOUL AND BABBIE--BREAKDOWN OF THE DEFENCE OF THE MANSE.

"You dare to look me in the face!"

They were Rintoul's words. Yet Babbie had only ventured to look up because he was so long in speaking. His voice was low but harsh, like a wheel on which the brake is pressed sharply.

"It seems to be more than the man is capable of," he added sourly.

"Do you think," Babbie exclaimed, taking care, "that he is afraid of you?"

"So it seems; but I will drag him into the light, wherever he is skulking."

Lord Rintoul strode to the door, and the brake was off his tongue already.

"Go," said Babbie coldly, "and shout and stamp through the house; you may succeed in frightening the women, who are the only persons in it."

"Where is he?"

"He has gone to the Spittal to see you."

"He knew I was on the hill."

"He lost me in the darkness, and thought you had run away with me in your trap."

"Ha! So he is off to the Spittal to ask me to give you back to him."

"To compel you," corrected Babbie.

"Pooh!" said the earl nervously, "that was but mummery on the hill."

"It was a marriage."

"With gypsies for witnesses. Their word would count for less than nothing. Babbie, I am still in time to save you."

"I don't want to be saved. The marriage had witnesses no court could discredit."

"What witnesses?"

"Mr. McKenzie and yourself."

She heard his teeth meet. When next she looked at him, there were tears in his eyes as well as in her own. It was perhaps the first time these two had, ever been in close sympathy. Both were grieving for Rintoul.

"I am so sorry," Babbie began in a broken voice; then stopped, because they seemed such feeble words.

"If you are sorry," the earl answered eagerly, "it is not yet too late. McKenzie and I saw nothing. Come away with me, Babbie, if only in pity for yourself."

"Ah, but I don't pity myself."

"Because this man has blinded you."

"No, he has made me see."

"This mummerly on the hill--"

"Why do you call it so? I believe God approved of that marriage, as He could never have countenanced yours and mine."

"God! I never heard the word on your lips before."

"I know that."

"It is his teaching, doubtless?"

"Yes."

"And he told you that to do to me as you have done was to be pleasing in God's sight?"

"No; he knows that it was so evil in God's sight that I shall suffer for it always."

"But he has done no wrong, so there is no punishment for him?"

"It is true that he has done no wrong, but his punishment will be worse, probably, than mine."

"That," said the earl, scoffing, "is not just."

"It is just. He has accepted responsibility for my sins by marrying me."

"And what form is his punishment to take?"

"For marrying me he will be driven from his church and dishonored in all men's eyes, unless--unless God is more merciful to us than we can expect."

Her sincerity was so obvious that the earl could no longer meet it with sarcasm.

"It is you I pity now," he said, looking wonderingly at her. "Do you not see that this man has deceived you? Where was his boasted purity in meeting you by stealth, as he must have been doing, and plotting to take you from me?"

"If you knew him," Babbie answered, "you would not need to be told that he is incapable of that. He thought me an ordinary gypsy until an hour ago."

"And you had so little regard for me that you waited until the eve of what was to be our marriage, and then, laughing at my shame, ran off to marry him."

"I am not so bad as that," Babbie answered, and told him what had brought her to Thrums. "I had no thought but of returning to you, nor he of keeping me from you. We had said good-by at the mudhouse door--and then we heard your voice."

"And my voice was so horrible to you that it drove you to this?"

"I--I love him so much."

What more could Babbie answer? These words told him that, if love commands, home, the friendships of a lifetime, kindnesses incalculable, are at once as naught. Nothing is so cruel as love if a rival challenges it to combat.

"Why could you not love me, Babbie?" said the earl sadly. "I have done so much for you."

It was little he had done for her that was not selfish. Men are deceived curiously in such matters. When, they add a new wing to their house, they do not call the action virtue; but if they give to a fellow-creature for their own gratification, they demand of God a good mark for it. Babbie, however, was in no mood to make light of the earl's gifts, and at his question she shook her head sorrowfully.

"Is it because I am too--old?"

This was the only time he ever spoke of his age to her.

"Oh no, it is not that," she replied hastily, "I love Mr. Dishart- -because he loves me, I think."

"Have I not loved you always?"

"Never," Babbie answered simply. "If you had, perhaps then I should have loved you."

"Babbie," he exclaimed, "if ever man loved woman, and showed it by the sacrifices he made for her, I--"

"No," Babbie said, "you don't understand what it is. Ah! I did not mean to hurt you."

"If I don't know what it is, what is it?" he asked, almost humbly. "I scarcely know you now."

"That is it," said Babbie.

She gave him back his ring, and then he broke down pitifully. Doubtless there was good in him, but I saw him only once; and with nothing to contrast against it, I may not now attempt to breathe life into the dust of his senile passion. These were the last words that passed between him and Babbie:

"There was nothing," he said wistfully, "in this wide world that you could not have had by asking me for it. Was not that love?"

"No," she answered. "What right have I to everything I cry for?"

"You should never have had a care had you married me. That is love."

"It is not. I want to share my husband's cares, as I expect him to share mine."

"I would have humored you in everything."

"You always did: as if a woman's mind were for laughing at, like a baby's passions."

"You had your passions, too, Babbie. Yet did I ever chide you for them? That was love."

"No, it was contempt. Oh," she cried passionately, "what have not you men to answer for who talk of love to a woman when her face is all you know of her; and her passions, her aspirations, are for kissing to sleep, her very soul a plaything? I tell you, Lord Rintoul, and it is all the message I send back to the gentlemen at the Spittal who made love to me behind your back, that this is a poor folly, and well calculated to rouse the wrath of God."

Now, Jean's ear had been to the parlor keyhole for a time, but some message she had to take to Margaret, and what she risked saying was this:

"It's Lord Rintoul and a party that has been caught in the rain, and he would be obliged to you if you could gie his bride shelter for the night."

Thus the distracted servant thought to keep Margaret's mind at rest until Gavin came back.

"Lord Rintoul!" exclaimed Margaret. "What a pity Gavin has missed him. Of course she can stay here. Did you say I had gone to bed? I should not know what to say to a lord. But ask her to come up to me after he has gone--and, Jean, is the parlor looking tidy?"

Lord Rintoul having departed, Jean told Babbie how she had accounted to Margaret for his visit. "And she telled me to gie you dry claethes and her compliments, and would you gang up to the bedroom and see her?"

Very slowly Babbie climbed the stairs. I suppose she is the only person who was ever afraid of Margaret. Her first knock on the bedroom door was so soft that Margaret, who was sitting up in bed, did not hear it. When Babbie entered the room, Margaret's first thought was that there could be no other so beautiful as this, and her second was that the stranger seemed even more timid than herself. After a few minutes' talk she laid aside her primness, a weapon she had drawn in self-defence lest this fine lady should not understand the grandeur of a manse, and at a "Call me Babbie, won't you?" she smiled.

"That is what some other person calls you," said Margaret archly. "Do you know that he took twenty minutes to say good-night? My dear," she added hastily, misinterpreting Babbie's silence, "I should have been sorry had he taken one second less. Every tick of the clock was a gossip, telling me how he loves you."

In the dim light a face that begged for pity was turned to Margaret.

"He does love you, Babbie?" she asked, suddenly doubtful.

Babbie turned away her face, then shook her head.

"But you love him?"

Again Babbie shook her head.

"Oh, my dear," cried Margaret, in distress, "if this is so, are you not afraid to marry him?"

She knew now that Babbie was crying, but she did not know why Babbie could not look her in the face.

"There may be times," Babbie said, most woeful that she had not married Rintoul, "when it is best to marry a man though we do not love him."

"You are wrong, Babbie," Margaret answered gravely; "if I know anything at all, it is that."

"It may be best for others."

"Do you mean for one other?" Margaret asked, and the girl bowed her head. "Ah, Babbie, you speak like a child."

"You do not understand."

"I do not need to be told the circumstances to know this--that if two people love each other, neither has any right to give the other up."

Babbie turned impulsively to cast herself on the mercy of Gavin's mother, but no word could she say; a hot tear fell from her eyes "upon the coverlet, and then she looked at the door, as if to run away.

"But I have been too inquisitive," Margaret began; whereupon Babbie cried, "Oh no, no, no: you are very good. I have no one who cares whether I do right or wrong."

"Your parents--"

"I have had none since I was a child."

"It is the more reason why I should be your friend," Margaret said, taking the girl's hand.

"You do not know what you are saying. You cannot be my friend."

"Yes, dear, I love you already. You have a good face, Babbie, as well as a beautiful one."

Babbie could remain in the room no longer. She bade Margaret good-night and bent forward to kiss her; then drew back, like a Judas ashamed.

"Why did you not kiss me?" Margaret asked in surprise, but poor Babbie walked out of the room without answering.

Of what occurred at the manse on the following day until I reached it, I need tell little more. When Babbie was tending Sam'l Farquharson's child in the Tenements she learned of the flood in Glen Quharity, and that the greater part of the congregation had set off to the assistance of the farmers; but fearful as this made her for Gavin's safety, she kept the new anxiety from his mother. Deceived by another story of Jean's, Margaret was the one happy person in the house.

"I believe you had only a lover's quarrel with Lord Rintoul last night," she said to Babbie in the afternoon. "Ah, you see I can guess what is taking you to the window so often. You must not think him long in coming for you. I can assure you that the rain which keeps my son from me must be sufficiently severe to separate even true lovers. Take an old woman's example, Babbie. If I thought the minister's absence alarming, I should be in anguish; but as it is, my mind is so much at ease that, see, I can thread my needle."

It was in less than an hour after Margaret spoke thus tranquilly to Babbie that the precentor got into the manse.