

CHAPTER XV - THE MAN WHO NEVER CAME

"Is it true that your mother's a bonny swearer?"

Tommy wanted to find out all about the Painted Lady, and the best way was to ask.

"She does not always swear," Grizel said eagerly. "She sometimes says sweet, sweet things."

"What kind of things?"

"I won't tell you."

"Tell me one."

"Well, then, 'Beloved.'"

"Word We have no Concern with," murmured Tommy. He was shocked, but still curious. "Does she say 'Beloved' to you?" he inquired.

"No, she says it to him."

"Him! Wha is he?" Tommy thought he was at the beginning of a discovery, but she answered, uncomfortably,

"I don't know."

"But you've seen him?"

"No, he--he is not there."

"Not there! How can she speak to him if he's no there?"

"She thinks he is there. He--he comes on a horse."

"What is the horse like?"

"There is no horse."

"But you said--"

"She just thinks there is a horse. She hears it."

"Do you ever hear it?"

"No."

The girl was looking imploringly into Tommy's face as if begging it to say that these things need not terrify her, but what he wanted was information.

"What does the Painted Lady do," he asked, "when she thinks she hears the horse?"

"She blows kisses, and then--then she goes to the Den."

"What to do?"

"She walks up and down the Den, talking to the man."

"And him no there?" cried Tommy, scared.

"No, there is no one there."

"And syne what do you do?"

"I won't tell you."

Tommy reflected, and then he said, "She's daft."

"She is not always daft," cried Grizel. "There are whole weeks when she is just sweet."

"Then what do you make of her being so queer in the Den?"

"I am not sure, but I think--I think there was once a place like the Den at her own home in England, where she used to meet the man long ago, and sometimes she forgets that it is not long ago now."

"I wonder wha the man was?"

"I think he was my father."

"I thought you didna ken what a father was?"

"I know now. I think my father was a Scotsman."

"What makes you think that?"

"I heard a Thrums woman say it would account for my being called Grizel, and I think we came to Scotland to look for him, but it is so long, long ago."

"How long?"

"I don't know. We have lived here four years, but we were looking for him before that. It was not in this part of Scotland we looked for him. We gave up looking for him before we came here."

"What made the Painted Lady take a house here, then?"

"I think it was because the Den is so like the place she used to meet him in long ago."

"What was his name?"

"I don't know."

"Does the Painted Lady no tell you about yourself?"

"No, she is angry if I ask."

"Her name is Mary, I've heard?"

"Mary Gray is her name, but--but I don't think it is her real name."

"How, does she no use her real name?"

"Because she wants her own mamma to think she is dead."

"What makes her want that?"

"I am not sure, but I think it is because there is me. I think it was naughty of me to be born. Can you help being born?"

Tommy would have liked to tell her about Reddy, but forbore, because he still believed that he had acted criminally in that affair, and so for the time being the inquisition ended. But though he had already discovered all that Grizel knew about her mother and nearly all that curious Thrums ever ferreted out, he returned to the subject at the next meeting in the Den.

"Where does the Painted Lady get her money?"

"Oh," said Grizel, "that is easy. She just goes into that house called the bank, and asks for some, and they give her as much as she likes."

"Ay, I've heard that, but--"

The remainder of the question was never uttered. Instead,

"Hod ahint a tree!" cried Tommy, hastily, and he got behind one himself; but he was too late; Elspeth was upon them; she had caught them together at last.

Tommy showed great cunning. "Pretend you have eggs in your hand," he whispered to Grizel, and then, in a loud voice, he said: "Think shame of yoursel', lassie, for harrying birds' nests. It's a good thing I saw you, and brought you here to force you to put them back. Is that you, Elspeth? I caught this limmer wi' eggs in her hands (and the poor birds sic bonny singers, too!), and so I was forcing her to--"

But it would not do. Grizel was ablaze with indignation. "You are a horrid story-teller," she said, "and if I had known you were ashamed of being seen with me, I should never have spoken to you. Take him," she cried, giving Tommy a push toward Elspeth, "I don't want the mean little story-teller."

"He's not mean!" retorted Elspeth.

"Nor yet little!" roared Tommy.

"Yes, he is," insisted Grizel, "and I was not harrying nests. He came with me here because he wanted to."

"Just for the once," he said, hastily.

"This is the sixth time," said Grizel, and then she marched out of the Den. Tommy and Elspeth followed slowly, and not a word did either say until they were in front of Aaron's house. Then by the light in the window Tommy saw that Elspeth was crying softly, and he felt miserable.

"I was just teaching her to fight," he said humbly.

"You looked like it!" she replied, with the scorn that comes occasionally to the sweetest lady.

He tried to comfort her in various tender ways, but none of them sufficed this time, "You'll marry her as soon as you're a man," she insisted, and she would not let this tragic picture go. It was a case for his biggest efforts, and he opened his mouth to threaten instant self-destruction unless she became happy at once. But he had threatened this too frequently of late, even shown himself drawing the knife across his throat.

As usual the right idea came to him at the right moment. "If you just kent how I did it for your sake," he said, with gentle dignity, "you wouldna blame me; you would think me noble."

She would not help him with a question, and after waiting for it he proceeded. "If you just kent wha she is! And I thought she was dead! What a start it gave me when I found out it was her!"

"Wha is she?" cried Elspeth, with a sudden shiver.

"I was trying to keep it frae you," replied Tommy, sadly.

She seized his arm. "Is it Reddy?" she gasped, for the story of Reddy had been a terror to her all her days.

"She doesna ken I was the laddie that diddled her in London," he said, "and I promise you never to let on, Elspeth. I--I just went to the Den with her to say things that would put her off the scent. If I hadna done that she might have found out and ta'en your place here and tried to pack you off to the Painted Lady's."

Elspeth stared at him, the other grief already forgotten, and he thought he was getting on excellently, when she cried with passion, "I don't believe as it is Reddy!" and ran into the house.

"Dinna believe it, then!" disappointed Tommy shouted, and now he was in such a rage with himself that his heart hardened against her. He sought the company of old Blinder.

Unfortunately Elspeth had believed it, and her woe was the more pitiful because she saw at once, what had never struck Tommy, that it would be wicked to keep Grizel out of her rights. "I'll no win to Heaven now," she said, despairingly, to herself, for to offer to change places with Grizel was beyond her courage, and she tried some childish ways of getting round God, such as going on her knees and saying, "I'm so little, and I hinna no mother!" That was not a bad way.

Another way was to give Grizel everything she had, except Tommy. She collected all her treasures, the bottle with the brass top that she had got from Shovel's old girl, the "housewife" that was a present from Miss Ailie, the teetotum, the pretty buttons Tommy had won for her at the game of buttony, the witchy marble, the twopence she had already saved for the Muckley, these and some other precious trifles she made a little bundle

of and set off for Double Dykes with them, intending to leave them at the door. This was Elspeth, who in ordinary circumstances would not have ventured near that mysterious dwelling even in daylight and in Tommy's company. There was no room for vulgar fear in her bursting little heart to-night.

Tommy went home anon, meaning to be whatever kind of boy she seemed most in need of, but she was not in the house, she was not in the garden; he called her name, and it was only Birkie Fleemister, mimicking her, who answered, "Oh, Tommy, come to me!" But Birkie had news for him.

"Sure as death," he said in some awe, "I saw Elspeth ganging yont the double dykes, and I cried to her that the Painted Lady would do her a mischief, but she just ran on."

Elspeth in the double dykes--alone--and at night! Oh, how Tommy would have liked to strike himself now! She must have believed his wicked lie after all, and being so religious she had gone to--He gave himself no time to finish the thought. The vital thing was that she was in peril, he seemed to hear her calling to him, "Oh, Tommy, come quick! oh, Tommy, oh, Tommy!" and in an agony of apprehension he ran after her. But by the time he got to the beginning of the double dykes he knew that she must be at the end of them, and in the Painted Lady's maw, unless their repute by night had blown her back. He paused on the Coffin Brig, which is one long narrow stone; and along the funnel of the double dykes he sent the lonely whisper, "Elspeth, are you there?" He tried to shout it, but no boy could shout there after nightfall in the Painted Lady's time, and when the words had travelled only a little way along the double dykes, they came whining back to him, like a dog despatched on uncanny work. He heard no other sound save the burn stealing on tiptoe from an evil place, and the uneasy rustling of tree-tops, and his own breathing.

The Coffin Brig remains, but the double dykes have fallen bit by bit into the burn, and the path they made safe is again as naked as when the Kingoldrum Jacobites filed along it, and swear they were, to the support of the Pretender. It traverses a ridge and is streaked with slippery beech-roots which like to fling you off your feet, on the one side into a black burn twenty feet below, on the other down a pleasant slope. The double dykes were built by a farmer fond of his dram, to stop the tongue of a

water-kelpie which lived in a pool below and gave him a turn every night he staggered home by shouting, "Drunk again, Peewitbrae!" and announcing, with a smack of the lips, that it had a bed ready for him in the burn. So Peewitbrae built two parallel dykes two feet apart and two feet high, between which he could walk home like a straight man. His cunning took the heart out of the brute, and water-kelpies have not been seen near Thrums since about that time.

By day even girls played at palaulays here, and it was a favorite resort of boys, who knew that you were a man when you could stand on both dykes at once. They also stripped boldly to the skin and then looked doubtfully at the water. But at night! To test your nerves you walked alone between the double dykes, and the popular practice was to start off whistling, which keeps up the courage. At the point where you turned to run back (the Painted Lady after you, or so you thought) you dropped a marked stone, which told next day how far you had ventured. Corp Shiach long held the championship, and his stone was ostentatiously fixed in one of the dykes with lime. Tommy had suffered at his hands for saying that Shovel's mark was thirty yards farther on.

With head bent to the level of the dykes, though it was almost a mirk night beneath the trees, and one arm outstretched before him straight as an elvint, Tommy faced this fearful passage, sometimes stopping to touch cold iron, but on the whole hanging back little, for Elspeth was in peril. Soon he reached the paling that was not needed to keep boys out of the Painted Lady's garden, one of the prettiest and best-tended flower-gardens in Thrums, and crawling through where some spars had fallen, he approached the door as noiseless as an Indian brave after scalps. There he crouched, with a heart that was going like a shuttle on a loom, and listened for Elspeth's voice.

On a night he had come nearly as far as this before, but in the tail of big fellows with a turnip lantern. Into the wood-work of the east window they had thrust a pin, to which a button was tied, and the button was also attached to a long string. They hunkered afar off and pulled this string, and then the button tapped the death-rap on the window, and the sport was successful, for the Painted Lady screamed. But suddenly the door opened and they were put to flight by the fierce barking of a dog. One said that the brute nabbed him in the leg, another saw the vive tongue of it, a third played lick at it with the lantern; this was before they discovered that the dog had been Grizel imitating one, brave Grizel,

always ready to protect her mother, and never allowed to cherish the childish fears that were hers by birthright.

Tommy could not hear a sound from within, but he had startling proof that Elspeth was near. His foot struck against something at the door, and, stooping, he saw that it was a little bundle of the treasures she valued most. So she had indeed come to stay with the Painted Lady if Grizel proved merciless! Oh, what a black he had been!

Though originally a farm-house, the cottage was no larger than Aaron's, and of its two front windows only one showed a light, and that through a blind. Tommy sidled round the house in the hope that the small east window would be more hospitable, and just as he saw that it was blindless something that had been crouching rose between him and it.

"Let go!" he cried, feeling the Painted Lady's talons in his neck.

"Tommy!" was the answer.

"It's you, Elspeth?"

"Is it you, Tommy?"

"Of course. Whisht!"

"But say it is."

"It is."

"Oh, Tommy, I'm so fleid!"

He drew her farther from the window and told her it had all been a wicked lie, and she was so glad that she forgot to chide him, but he denounced himself, and he was better than Elspeth even at that. However, when he learned what had brought her here he dried his eyes and skulked to the door again and brought back her belongings, and then she wanted him to come away at once. But the window fascinated him; he knew he should never find courage to come here again, and he glided toward it, signing to Elspeth to accompany him. They were now too near Double Dykes for speaking to be safe, but he tapped his head as a warning to her to remove her hat, for a woman's head-gear always reaches a window in front of its wearer, and he touched his cold iron and passed it to her as if it were a snuff-mull. Thus fortified, they approached

the window fearfully, holding hands and stepping high, like a couple in a minuet.