

## CHAPTER XVI - THE PAINTED LADY

It had been the ordinary dwelling room of the unknown poor, the mean little "end"--ah, no, no, the noblest chamber in the annals of the Scottish nation. Here on a hard anvil has its character been fashioned and its history made at rush-lights and its God ever most prominent. Always within reach of hands which trembled with reverence as they turned its broad page could be found the Book that is compensation for all things, and that was never more at home than on bare dressers and worm-eaten looms. If you were brought up in that place and have forgotten it, there is no more hope for you.

But though still recalling its past, the kitchen into which Tommy and Elspeth peered was trying successfully to be something else. The plate-rack had been a fixture, and the coffin-bed and the wooden bole, or board in the wall, with its round hole through which you thrust your hand when you wanted salt, and instead of a real mantelpiece there was a quaint imitation one painted over the fireplace. There were some pieces of furniture too, such as were usual in rooms of the kind, but most of them, perhaps in ignorance, had been put to novel uses, like the plate-rack, where the Painted Lady kept her many pretty shoes instead of her crockery. Gossip said she had a looking-glass of such prodigious size that it stood on the floor, and Tommy nudged Elspeth to signify, "There it is!" Other nudges called her attention to the carpet, the spinet, a chair that rocked like a cradle, and some smaller oddities, of which the queerest was a monster velvet glove hanging on the nail that by rights belonged to the bellows. The Painted Lady always put on this glove before she would touch the coals, which diverted Tommy, who knew that common folk lift coals with their bare hands while society uses the fringe of its second petticoat.

It might have been a boudoir through which a kitchen and bedroom had wandered, spilling by the way, but though the effect was tawdry, everything had been rubbed clean by that passionate housewife, Grizel. She was on her knees at present ca'ming the hearth-stone a beautiful blue, and sometimes looking round to address her mother, who was busy among her plants and cut flowers. Surely they were know-nothings who called this woman silly, and blind who said she painted. It was a little face all of one color, dingy pale, not chubby, but retaining the soft

contours of a child's face, and the features were singularly delicate. She was clad in a soft gray, and her figure was of the smallest; there was such an air of youth about her that Tommy thought she could become a girl again by merely shortening her frock, not such a girl as gaunt Grizel, though, who would have looked a little woman had she let her frock down. In appearance indeed the Painted Lady resembled her plain daughter not at all, but in manner in a score of ways, as when she rocked her arms joyously at sight of a fresh bud or tossed her brown hair from her brows with a pretty gesture that ought, God knows, to have been for some man to love. The watchers could not hear what she and Grizel said, but evidently it was pleasant converse, and mother and child, happy in each other's company, presented a picture as sweet as it is common, though some might have complained that they were doing each other's work. But the Painted Lady's delight in flowers was a scandal in Thrums, where she would stand her ground if the roughest boy approached her with roses in his hand, and she gave money for them, which was one reason why the people thought her daft. She was tending her flowers now with experienced eye, smelling them daintily, and every time she touched them it was a caress.

The watchers retired into the field to compare impressions, and Elspeth said emphatically, "I like her, Tommy, I'm not none fleid at her."

Tommy had liked her also, but being a man he said, "You forget that she's an ill one."

"She looks as if she didna ken that hersel'," answered Elspeth, and these words of a child are the best picture we can hope to get of the Painted Lady.

On their return to the window, they saw that Grizel had finished her ca'ming and was now sitting on the floor nursing a doll. Tommy had not thought her the kind to shut her eyes to the truth about dolls, but she was hugging this one passionately. Without its clothes it was of the nine-pin formation, and the painted eyes and mouth had been incorporated long since in loving Grizel's system; but it became just sweet as she swaddled it in a long yellow frock and slipped its bullet head into a duck of a pink bonnet. These articles of attire and the others that you begin with had all been made by Grizel herself out of the colored tissue-paper that shopkeepers wrap round brandy bottles. The doll's name was

Griselda, and it was exactly six months old, and Grizel had found it, two years ago, lying near the Coffin Brig, naked and almost dead.

It was making the usual fuss at having its clothes put on, and Grizel had to tell it frequently that of all the babies--which shamed it now and again, but kept her so occupied that she forgot her mother. The Painted Lady had sunk into the rocking-chair, and for a time she amused herself with it, but by and by it ceased to rock, and as she sat looking straight before her a change came over her face. Elspeth's hand tightened its clutch on Tommy's; the Painted Lady had begun to talk to herself.

She was not speaking aloud, for evidently Grizel, whose back was toward her, heard nothing, but her lips moved and she nodded her head and smiled and beckoned, apparently to the wall, and the childish face rapidly became vacant and foolish. This mood passed, and now she was sitting very still, only her head moving, as she looked in apprehension and perplexity this way and that, like one who no longer knew where she was, nor who was the child by the fire. When at last Grizel turned and observed the change, she may have sighed, but there was no fear in her face; the fear was on the face of her mother, who shrank from her in unmistakable terror and would have screamed at a harsh word or a hasty movement. Grizel seemed to know this, for she remained where she was, and first she nodded and smiled reassuringly to her mother, and then, leaning forward, took her hand and stroked it softly and began to talk. She had laid aside her doll, and with the act become a woman again.

The Painted Lady was soothed, but her bewildered look came and went, as if she only caught at some explanation Grizel was making, to lose it in a moment. Yet she seemed most eager to be persuaded. The little watchers at this queer play saw that Grizel was saying things to her which she repeated docilely and clung to and lost hold of. Often Grizel illustrated her words by a sort of pantomime, as when she sat down on a chair and placed the doll in her lap, then sat down on her mother's lap; and when she had done this several times Tommy took Elspeth into the field to say to her:

"Do you no see? She means as she is the Painted Lady's bairn, just the same as the doll is her bairn."

If the Painted Lady needed to be told this every minute she was daft indeed, and Elspeth could peer no longer at the eerie spectacle. To leave

Tommy, however, was equally difficult, so she crouched at his feet when he returned to the window, drawn there hastily by the sound of music.

The Painted Lady could play on the spinet beautifully, but Grizel could not play, though it was she who was trying to play now. She was running her fingers over the notes, producing noises from them, while she swayed grotesquely on her seat and made comic faces. Her object was to capture her mother's mind, and she succeeded for a short time, but soon it floated away from all control, and the Painted Lady fell a-shaking violently. Then Grizel seemed to be alarmed, and her arms rocked despairingly, but she went to her mother and took loving hold of her, and the woman clung to her child in a way pitiful to see. She was on Grizel's knee now, but she still shivered as if in a deadly chill, and her feet rattled on the floor, and her arms against the sides of the chair. Grizel pinned the trembling arms with her own and twisted her legs round her mother's, and still the Painted Lady's tremors shook them both, so that to Tommy they were as two people wrestling.

The shivering slowly lessened and at last ceased, but this seemed to make Grizel no less unhappy. To her vehement attempt to draw her mother's attention she got no response; the Painted Lady was hearkening intently for some sound other than Grizel's voice, and only once did she look at her child. Then it was with cruel, ugly eyes, and at the same moment she shoved Grizel aside so viciously that it was almost a blow. Grizel sat down sorrowfully beside her doll, like one aware that she could do no more, and her mother at once forgot her. What was she listening for so eagerly? Was it for the gallop of a horse? Tommy strained his ears.

"Elsbeth--speak low--do you hear anything?"

"No; I'm ower fleid to listen."

"Whisht! do you no hear a horse?"

"No, everything's terrible still. Do you hear a horse?"

"I--I think I do, but far awa'."

His imagination was on fire. Did he hear a distant galloping or did he only make himself hear it? He had bent his head, and Elspeth, looking affrighted into his face, whispered, "I hear it too, oh, Tommy, so do I!"

And the Painted Lady had heard it. She kissed her hand toward the Den several times, and each time Tommy seemed to hear that distant galloping. All the sweetness had returned to her face now, and with it a surging joy, and she rocked her arms exultantly, but quickly controlled them lest Grizel should see. For evidently Grizel must be cheated, and so the Painted Lady became very sly. She slipped off her shoes to be able to make her preparations noiselessly, and though at all other times her face expressed the rapture of love, when she glanced at her child it was suspiciously and with a gleam of hatred. Her preparations were for going out. She was long at the famous mirror, and when she left it her hair was elaborately dressed and her face so transformed that first Tommy exclaimed "Bonny!" and then corrected himself with a scornful "Paint!" On her feet she put a foolish little pair of red shoes, on her head a hat too gay with flowers, and across her shoulders a flimsy white shawl at which the night air of Thrums would laugh. Her every movement was light and cautious and accompanied by side-glances at Grizel, who occasionally looked at her, when the Painted Lady immediately pretended to be tending her plants again. She spoke to Grizel sweetly to deceive her, and shot baleful glances at her next moment. Tommy saw that Grizel had taken up her doll once more and was squeezing it to her breast. She knew very well what was going on behind her back.

Suddenly Tommy took to his heels, Elspeth after him. He had seen the Painted Lady coming on her tip-toes to the window. They saw the window open and a figure in a white shawl creep out of it, as she had doubtless escaped long ago by another window when the door was barred. They lost sight of her at once.

"What will Grizel do now?" Tommy whispered, and he would have returned to his watching place, but Elspeth pointed to the window. Grizel was there closing it, and next moment the lamp was extinguished. They heard a key turn in the lock, and presently Grizel, carrying warm wraps, passed very near them and proceeded along the double dykes, not anxious apparently to keep her mother in view, but slowly, as if she knew where to find her. She went into the Den, where Tommy dared not follow her, but he listened at the stile and in the awful silence he fancied he heard the neighing of a horse.

The next time he met Grizel he was yearning to ask her how she spent that night, but he knew she would not answer; it would be a long time before she gave him her confidence again. He offered her his piece of cold

iron, however, and explained why he carried it, whereupon she flung it across the road, crying, "You horrid boy, do you think I am frightened at my mamma!" But when he was out of sight she came back and slipped the cold iron into her pocket.