

CHAPTER XVII - IN WHICH TOMMY SOLVES THE WOMAN PROBLEM

Pity made Elspeth want to like the Painted Lady's child now, but her own rules of life were all from a book never opened by Grizel, who made her religion for herself and thought God a swear; she also despised Elspeth for being so dependent on Tommy, and Elspeth knew it. The two great subjects being barred thus, it was not likely that either girl, despite some attempts on Elspeth's part, should find out the best that was in the other, without which friendship has no meaning, and they would have gone different ways had not Tommy given an arm to each. He, indeed, had as little in common with Grizel, for most conspicuous of his traits was the faculty of stepping into other people's shoes and remaining there until he became someone else; his individuality consisted in having none, while she could only be herself and was without tolerance for those who were different; he had at no time in his life the least desire to make other persons like himself, but if they were not like Grizel she rocked her arms and cried, "Why, why, why?" which is the mark of the "womanly" woman. But his tendency to be anyone he was interested in implied enormous sympathy (for the time being), and though Grizel spurned his overtures, this only fired his pride of conquest. We can all get whatever we want if we are quite determined to have it (though it be a king's daughter), and in the end Tommy vanquished Grizel. How? By offering to let her come into Aaron's house and wash it and dust it and ca'm it, "just as if you were our mother," an invitation she could not resist. To you this may seem an easy way, but consider the penetration he showed in thinking of it. It came to him one day when he saw her lift the smith's baby out of the gutter, and hug it with a passionate delight in babies.

"She's so awid to do it," he said basely to Elspeth, "that we needna let on how much we want it done." And he also mentioned her eagerness to Aaron as a reason why she should be allowed to do it for nothing.

For Aaron to hold out against her admittance would have been to defraud himself, for she transformed his house. When she saw the brass lining of the jelly-pan discolored, and that the stockings hanging from the string beneath the mantelpiece had given way where the wearers were hardest on them; when she found dripping adhering to a cold frying-pan instead of in a "pig," and the pitcher leaking and the carrot-grater stopped--when these and similar discoveries were made by Grizel,

was it a squeal of horror she gave that such things should be, or a cry of rapture because to her had fallen the task of setting them right?

"She just made a jump for the besom," was Tommy's graphic description of how it all began.

You should have seen Grizel on the hoddy-table knocking nails into the wall. The hoddy-table is so called because it goes beneath the larger one at night, like a chicken under its mother, and Grizel, with the nails in her mouth, used them up so quickly that you would have sworn she swallowed half of them; yet she rocked her arms because she could not be at all four walls at once. She rushed about the room until she was dizzy, and Tommy knew the moment to cry "Grip her, she'll tumble!" when he and Elspeth seized her and put her on a stool.

It is on the hoddy-table that you bake and iron. "There's not a baking-board in the house," Elspeth explained. "There is!" cried Grizel, there and then converting a drawer into one.

Between her big bannocks she made baby ones, for no better reason than that she was so fond of babies, and she kissed the baby ones and said, "Oh, the loves, they are just sweet!" and she felt for them when Tommy took a bite. She could go so quickly between the board and the girdle that she was always at one end of the course or the other, but never gave you time to say at which end, and on the limited space round the fire she could balance such a number of bannocks that they were as much a wonder as the Lord's prayer written on a sixpence. Such a vigilant eye she kept on them, too, that they dared not fall. Yet she had never been taught to bake; a good-natured neighbor had now and again allowed her to look on.

Then her ironing! Even Aaron opened his mouth on this subject, Blinder being his confidant. "I thought there was a smell o' burning," he said, "and so I went butt the house; but man, as soon as my een lighted on her I minded of my mother at the same job. The crittur was so busy with her work that she looked as if, though the last trumpet had blawn, she would just have cried, 'I canna come till my ironing's done!' Ay, I went ben without a word."

But best of all was to see Grizel "redding up" on a Saturday afternoon. Where were Tommy and Elspeth then? They were shut up in the coffin-bed to be out of the way, and could scarce have told whether they fled

thither or were wrapped into it by her energetic arms. Even Aaron dared not cross the floor until it was sanded. "I believe," he said, trying to jest, "you would like to shut me up in the bed too!" "I should just love it," she cried, eagerly; "will you go?" It is an inferior woman who has a sense of humor when there is a besom in her hand.

Thus began great days to Grizel, "sweet" she called them, for she had many of her mother's words, and a pretty way of emphasizing them with her plain face that turned them all into superlatives. But though Tommy and Elspeth were her friends now, her mouth shut obstinately the moment they mentioned the Painted Lady; she regretted ever having given Tommy her confidence on that subject, and was determined not to do so again. He did not dare tell her that he had once been at the east window of her home, but often he and Elspeth spoke to each other of that adventure, and sometimes they woke in their garret bed thinking they heard the horseman galloping by. Then they crept closer to each other, and wondered whether Grizel was cosey in her bed or stalking an eerie figure in the Den.

Aaron said little, but he was drawn to the girl, who had not the self-consciousness of Tommy and Elspeth in his presence, and sometimes he slipped a penny into her hand. The pennies were not spent, they were hoarded for the fair, or Muckle Friday, or Muckley, great day of the year in Thrums. If you would know how Tommy was making ready for this mighty festival, listen.

One of his sources of income was the Mentor, a famous London weekly paper, which seemed to visitors to be taken in by every person of position in Thrums. It was to be seen not only in parlors, but on the armchair at the Jute Bank, in the gauger's gig, in the Spittal factor's dog-cart, on a shoemaker's form, protruding from Dr. McQueen's tail pocket and from Mr. Duthie's oxters pocket, on Cathro's school-desk, in the Rev. Mr. Dishart's study, in half a dozen farms. Miss Ailie compelled her little servant, Gavinia, to read the Mentor, and stood over her while she did it; the phrase, "this week's," meant this week's Mentor. Yet the secret must be told: only one copy of the paper came to Thrums weekly; it was subscribed for by the whole reading public between them, and by Miss Ailie's influence Tommy had become the boy who carried it from house to house.

This brought him a penny a week, but so heavy were his incidental expenses that he could have saved little for the Muckley had not another organization given him a better chance. It was a society, newly started, for helping the deserving poor; they had to subscribe not less than a penny weekly to it, and at the end of the year each subscriber was to be given fuel, etc., to the value of double what he or she had put in. "The three Ps" was a nickname given to the society by Dr. McQueen, because it claimed to distribute "Peats and Potatoes with Propriety," but he was one of its heartiest supporters nevertheless. The history of this society in the first months of its existence not only shows how Tommy became a moneyed man, but gives a glimpse into the character of those it benefited.

Miss Ailie was treasurer, and the pennies were to be brought to her on Monday evenings between the hours of seven and eight. The first Monday evening found her ready in the school-room, in her hand the famous pencil that wrote red with the one end and blue with the other; by her side her assistant, Mr. T. Sandys, a pen balanced on his ear. For a whole hour did they wait, but though many of the worthiest poor had been enrolled as members, the few who appeared with their pennies were notoriously riff-raff. At eight Miss Ailie disconsolately sent Tommy home, but he was back in five minutes.

"There's a mask of them," he told her, excitedly, "hanging about, but feared to come in because the others would see them. They're ashamed to have it kent that they belong to a charity society, and Meggy Robbie is wandering round the Dovecot wi' her penny wrapped in a paper, and Watty Rattray and Ronny-On is walking up and down the brae pretending they dinna ken one another, and auld Connacher's Jeanie Ann says she has been four times round the town waiting for Kitty Elshioner to go away, and there's a one-leggit man hodding in the ditch, and Tibbie Birse is out wi' a lantern counting them."

Miss Ailie did not know what to do. "Here's Jeanie Ann's penny," Tommy continued, opening his hand, "and this is three bawbees frae Kitty Elshioner and you and me is no to tell a soul they've joined."

A furtive tapping was heard at the door. It was Ronny-On, who had skulked forward with twopence, but Gavinia answered his knock, so he just said, "Ay, Gavinia, it's yoursel'. Well, I'll be stepping," and would

have retired had not Miss Ailie caught him. Even then he said, "Three bawbees is to you to lay by, and one bawbee to Gavinia no to tell."

To next Monday evening Miss Ailie now looked with apprehension, but Tommy lay awake that night until, to use a favorite crow of his, he "found a way." He borrowed the school-mistress's blue-and-red pencil and sought the houses of the sensitive poor with the following effect. One sample will suffice; take him at the door of Meggy Robbie in the West Muir, which he flung open with the effrontery of a tax-collector.

"You're a three P," he said, with a wave of his pencil.

"I'm no sic thing!" cried the old lady.

"It winna do, woman," Tommy said sternly. "Miss Ailie telled me you paid in your first penny on the chap of ten." He wetted the pencil on his tongue to show that it was vain to trifle with him, and Meggy bowed her head.

"It'll be through the town that I've joined," she moaned, but Tommy explained that he was there to save her.

"I'm willing to come to your house," he said, "and collect the money every week, and not a soul will I tell except the committee."

"Kitty Elshioner would see you coming," said Meggy.

"No, no, I'll creep yont the hedge and climb the hen-house."

"But it would be a' found out at any rate," she remembered, "when I go for the peats and things at Hogmanay."

"It needna be," eagerly replied Tommy. "I'll bring them to you in a barrow in the dead o' night."

"Could you?" she cried passionately, and he promised he would, and it may be mentioned here that he did.

"And what for yoursel'?" she inquired.

"A bawbee," he said, "the night afore the Muckley."

The bargain was made, but before he could get away, "Tell me, laddie," said Meggy, coaxingly, "has Kitty Elshioner joined?" They were all as curious to know who had joined as they were anxious to keep their own

membership a secret; but Tommy betrayed none, at least none who agreed to his proposal. There were so many of these that on the night before the Muckley he had thirteen pence.

"And you was doing good all the time you was making the thirteen pence," Elspeth said, fondly. "I believe that was the reason you did it."

"I believe it was!" Tommy exclaimed. He had not thought of this before, but it was easy to him to believe anything.