

CHAPTER XIX - CORP IS BROUGHT TO HEEL--GRIZEL DEFIANT

Corp Shiach was a bare-footed colt of a boy, of ungainly build, with a nose so thick and turned up that it was a certificate of character, and his hands were covered with warts, which he had a trick of biting till they bled. Then he rubbed them on his trousers, which were the picturesque part of him, for he was at present "serving" to the masons (he had "earned his keep" since long before he could remember), and so wore the white or yellow ducks which the dust of the quarry stains a rarer orange color than is known elsewhere. The orange of the masons' trousers, the blue of the hearthstones, these are the most beautiful colors to be seen in Thrums, though of course Corp was unaware of it. He was really very good-natured, and only used his fists freely because of imagination he had none, and thinking made him sweat, and consequently the simplest way of proving his case was to say, "I'll fight you." What might have been the issue of a conflict between him and Shovel was a problem for Tommy to puzzle over. Shovel was as quick as Corp was deliberate, and would have danced round him, putting in unexpected ones, but if he had remained just one moment too long within Corp's reach--

They nicknamed him Corp because he took fits, when he lay like one dead. He was proud of his fits, was Corp, but they were a bother to him, too, because he could make so little of them. They interested doctors and other carriage folk, who came to his aunt's house to put their fingers into him, and gave him sixpence, and would have given him more, but when they pressed him to tell them what he remembered about his fits, he could only answer dejectedly, "Not a damned thing."

"You might as well no have them ava," his wrathful aunt, with whom he lived, would say, and she thrashed him until his size forbade it.

Soon after the Muckley came word that the Lady of the Spittal was to be brought to see Corp by Mr. Ogilvy, the school-master of Glen Quharity, and at first Corp boasted of it, but as the appointed day drew near he became uneasy.

"The worst o't," he said to anyone who would listen, "is that my auntie is to be away frae hame, and so they'll put a' their questions to me."

The Haggerty-Taggertys and Birkie were so jealous that they said they were glad they never had fits, but Tommy made no such pretence.

"Oh, Corp, if I had thae fits of yours!" he exclaimed greedily.

"If they were mine to give awa'," replied Corp sullenly, "you could have them and welcome." Grown meek in his trouble, he invited Tommy to speak freely, with the result that his eyes were partially opened to the superiority of that boy's attainments. Tommy told him a number of interesting things to say to Mr. Ogilvy and the lady about his fits, about how queer he felt just before they came on, and the visions he had while he was lying stiff. But though the admiring Corp gave attentive ear, he said hopelessly next day, "Not a dagont thing do I mind. When they question me about my fits I'll just say I'm sometimes in them and sometimes out o' them, and if they badger me more, I can aye kick."

Tommy gave him a look that meant, "Fits are just wasted on you," and Corp replied with another that meant, "I ken they are." Then they parted, one of them to reflect.

"Corp," he said excitedly, when next they met, "has Mr. Ogilvy or the lady ever come to see you afore?"

They had not, and Corp was able to swear that they did not even know him by sight.

"They dinna ken me either," said Tommy.

"What does that matter?" asked Corp, but Tommy was too full to speak. He had "found a way."

The lady and Mr. Ogilvy found Corp such a success that the one gave him a shilling and the other took down his reminiscences in a note-book. But if you would hear of the rings of blue and white and yellow Corp saw, and of the other extraordinary experiences he described himself as having when in a fit, you need not search that note-book, for the page has been torn out. Instead of making inquiries of Mr. Ogilvy, try any other dominie in the district, Mr. Cathro, for instance, who delighted to tell the tale. This of course was when it leaked out that Tommy had personated Corp, by arrangement with the real Corp, who was listening in rapture beneath the bed.

Tommy, who played his part so well that he came out of it in a daze, had Corp at heel from that hour. He told him what a rogue he had been in London, and Corp cried admiringly, "Oh, you deevil! oh, you queer little deevil!" and sometimes it was Elspeth who was narrator, and then Tommy's noble acts were the subject; but still Corp's comment was "Oh, the deevil! oh, the queer little deevil!" Elspeth was flattered by his hero-worship, but his language shocked her, and after consulting Miss Ailie she advised him to count twenty when he felt an oath coming, at the end of which exercise the desire to swear would have passed away. Good-natured Corp willingly promised to try this, but he was never hopeful, and as he explained to Tommy, after a failure, "It just made me waur than ever, for when I had counted the twenty I said a big Damn, thoughtful-like, and syne out jumpit three little damns, like as if the first ane had cleckit in my mouth."

It was fortunate that Elspeth liked Corp on the whole, for during the three years now to be rapidly passed over, Tommy took delight in his society, though he never treated him as an equal; Corp indeed did not expect that, and was humbly grateful for what he got. In summer, fishing was their great diversion. They would set off as early as four in the morning, fishing wands in hand, and scour the world for trout, plodding home in the gloaming with stones in their fishing-basket to deceive those who felt its weight. In the long winter nights they liked best to listen to Blinder's tales of the Thrums Jacobites, tales never put into writing, but handed down from father to son, and proved true in the oddest of ways, as by Blinder's trick of involuntarily holding out his hands to a fire when he found himself near one, though he might be sweating to the shirt and the time a July forenoon. "I make no doubt," he told them, "as I do that because my forbear, Buchan Osler (called Buchan wi' the Haap after the wars was ower), had to hod so lang frae the troopers, and them so greedy for him that he daredna crawl to a fire once in an eight days."

The Lord of the Spittal and handsome Captain Body (whose being "out" made all the women anxious) marched through the Den, flapping their wings at the head of a fearsome retinue, and the Thrums folk looked so glum at them that gay Captain Body said he should kiss every lass who did not cheer for Charlie, and none cheered, but at the same time none ran away. Few in Thrums cared a doit for Charlie, but some hung on behind this troop till there was no turning back for them, and one of these was Buchan. He forced his wife to give Captain Body a white rose

from her bush by the door, but a thorn in it pricked the gallant, and the blood from his fingers fell on the bush, and from that year it grew red roses.

"If you dinna believe me," Blinder said, "look if the roses is no red on the bush at Pyotdykes, which was a split frae Buchan's, and speir whether they're no named the blood rose."

"I believe you," Tommy would say breathlessly: "go on."

Captain Body was back in the Den by and by, but he had no thought of preeing lasses' mouths now. His face was scratched and haggard and his gay coat torn, and when he crawled to the Cuttle Well he caught some of the water in his bonnet and mixed meal with it, stirring the precious compound with his finger and using the loof of his hand as a spoon. Every stick of furniture Buchan and the other Thrums rebels possessed was seized by the government and roused in the market-place of Thrums, but few would bid against the late owners, for whom the things were secretly bought back very cheaply.

To these and many similar stories Tommy listened open-mouthed, seeing the scene far more vividly than the narrator, who became alarmed at his quick, loud breathing, and advised him to forget them and go back to his lessons. But his lessons never interested Tommy, and he would go into the Den instead, and repeat Blinder's legends, with embellishments which made them so real that Corp and Elspeth and Grizel were afraid to look behind them lest the spectre of Captain Body should be standing there, leaning on a ghostly sword.

At such times Elspeth kept a firm grip of Tommy's hand, but one evening as they all ran panic-stricken from some imaginary alarm, she lost him near the Cuttle Well, and then, as it seemed to her, the Den became suddenly very dark and lonely. At first she thought she had it to herself, but as she stole timidly along the pink path she heard voices, and she cried "Tommy!" joyously. But no answer came, so it could not be Tommy. Then she thought it must be a pair of lovers, but next moment she stood transfixed with fear, for it was the Painted Lady, who was coming along the path talking aloud to herself. No, not to herself--to someone she evidently thought was by her side; she called him darling and other sweet names, and waited for his replies and nodded pleased assent to them, or pouted at them, and terrified Elspeth knew that she was talking to the man who never came.

When she saw Elspeth she stopped irresolutely, and the two stood looking in fear at each other. "You are not my brat, are you?" the Painted Lady asked.

"N-no," the child gasped.

"Then why don't you call me nasty names?"

"I dinna never call you names," Elspeth replied, but the woman still looked puzzled.

"Perhaps you are naughty also?" she said doubtfully, and then, as if making up her mind that it must be so, she came closer and said, with a voice full of pity: "I am so sorry."

Elspeth did not understand half of it, but the pitying voice, which was of the rarest sweetness, drove away much of her fear, and she said: "Do you no mind me? I was wi' Tommy when he gave you the gold packet on Muckley night."

Then the Painted Lady remembered. "He took such a fancy to me," she said, with a pleased simper, and then she looked serious again.

"Do you love him?" she asked, and Elspeth nodded.

"But is he all the world to you?"

"Yes," Elspeth said.

The Painted Lady took her by the arm and said impressively, "Don't let him know."

"But he does know," said Elspeth.

"I am so sorry," the Painted Lady said again. "When they know too well, then they have no pity."

"But I want Tommy to know," Elspeth insisted.

"That is the woeful thing," the Painted Lady said, rocking her arms in a way that reminded the child of Grizel. "We want them to know, we cannot help liking them to know!"

Suddenly she became confidential. "Do you think I showed my love too openly?" she asked eagerly. "I tried to hide it, you know. I covered my

face with my hands, but he pulled them away, and then, of course, he knew."

She went on, "I kissed his horse's nose, and he said I did that because it was his horse. How could he know? When I asked him how he knew, he kissed me, and I pretended to be angry and ran away. But I was not angry, and I said to myself, 'I am glad, I am glad, I am glad!'"

"I wanted so to be good, but--It is so difficult to refuse when you love him very much, don't you think?"

The pathos of that was lost on the girl, and the Painted Lady continued sadly: "It would be so nice, would it not, if they liked us to be good? I think it would be sweet." She bent forward and whispered emphatically, "But they don't, you know--it bores them.

"Never bore them--and they are so easily bored! It bores them if you say you want to be married. I think it would be sweet to be married, but you should never ask for a wedding. They give you everything else, but if you say you want a wedding, they stamp their feet and go away. Why are you crying, girl? You should not cry; they don't like it. Put on your prettiest gown and laugh and pretend you are happy, and then they will tell you naughty stories and give you these." She felt her ears and looked at her fingers, on which there may once have been jewels, but there were none now.

"If you cry you lose your complexion, and then they don't love you any more. I had always such a beautiful skin. Some ladies when they lose their complexion paint. Horrid, isn't it? I wonder they can do such a thing."

She eyed Elspeth suspiciously. "But of course you might do it just a little," she said, pleadingly--"just to make them go on loving you, don't you think?"

"When they don't want to come any more they write you a letter, and you run with it to your room and kiss it, because you don't know what is inside. Then you open it, and that breaks your heart, you know." She nodded her head sagaciously and smiled with tears in her eyes. "Never, never, never open the letter. Keep it unopened on your breast, and then you can always think that he may come to-morrow. And if--"

Someone was approaching, and she stopped and listened. "My brat!" she cried, furiously, "she is always following me," and she poured forth a torrent of filthy abuse of Grizel, in the midst of which Tommy (for it was he) appeared and carried Elspeth off hastily. This was the only conversation either child ever had with the Painted Lady, and it bore bad fruit for Grizel. Elspeth told some of the Monypenny women about it, and they thought it their duty to point out to Aaron that the Painted Lady and her child were not desirable acquaintances for Tommy and Elspeth.

"I dinna ken," he answered sharply, "whether Tommy's a fit acquaintance for Grizel, but I'm very sure o' this, that she's more than a fit acquaintance for him. And look at what she has done for this house. I kenna what we should do if she didna come in nows and nans."

"You ken well, Aaron," they said, "that onything we could do in the way o' keeping your house in order we should do gladly."

"Thank you," he replied ungraciously, "but I would rather have her."

Nevertheless he agreed that he ought to forbid any intercourse with the Painted Lady, and unfortunately Grizel heard of this. Probably there never would have been any such intercourse; Grizel guarded against it more than anyone, for reasons she never spoke of, but she resented this veto proudly.

"Why must you not speak to my mamma?" she demanded of Tommy and Elspeth.

"Because--because she is a queer one," he said.

"She is not a queer one--she is just sweet."

He tried to evade the question by saying weakly, "We never see her to speak to at any rate, so it will make no difference. It's no as if you ever asked us to come to Double Dykes."

"But I ask you now," said Grizel, with flashing eyes.

"Oh, I darena!" cried Elspeth.

"Then I won't ever come into your house again," said Grizel, decisively.

"No to redd up?" asked Tommy, incredulously. "No to bake nor to iron? You couldna help it."

"Yes I could."

"Think what you'll miss!"

Grizel might have retorted, "Think what you will miss!" but perhaps the reply she did make had a sharper sting in it. "I shall never come again," she said loftily, "and my reason for not coming is that--that my mamma thinks your house is not respectable!" She flung this over her shoulder as she stalked away, and it may be that the tears came when there were none to see them, but hers was a resolute mind, and though she continued to be friendly with Tommy and Elspeth out of doors she never again crossed their threshold.

"The house is in a terrible state for want o' you," Tommy would say, trying to wheedle her. "We hinna sanded the floor for months, and the box-iron has fallen ahint the dresser, and my gray sark is rove up the back, and oh, you should just see the holes in Aaron's stockings!"

Then Grizel rocked her arms in agony, but no, she would not go in.