

CHAPTER XXVI - TOMMY REPENTS, AND IS NONE THE WORSE FOR IT

Mr. McLean wrote a few reassuring words to Miss Ailie, and having told Gavinia to give the note to her walked quietly out of the house; he was coming back after he had visited Miss Kitty's grave. Gavinia, however, did not know this, and having delivered the note she returned dolefully to the kitchen to say to Tommy, "His letter maun have been as thraun as himsel', for as soon as she read it, down she plumped on her knees again."

But Tommy was not in the kitchen; he was on the garden-wall watching Miss Ailie's persecutor.

"Would it no be easier to watch him frae the gate?" suggested Gavinia, who had not the true detective instinct.

Tommy disregarded her womanlike question; a great change had come over him since she went upstairs; his head now wobbled on his shoulders like a little balloon that wanted to cut its connection with earth and soar.

"What makes you look so queer?" cried the startled maid. "I thought you was converted."

"So I am," he shouted, "I'm more converted than ever, and yet I can do it just the same! Gavinia, I've found a wy!"

He was hurrying off on Mr. McLean's trail, but turned to say, "Gavinia, do you ken wha that man is?"

"Ower weel I ken," she answered, "it's Mr. McLean."

"McLean!" he echoed scornfully, "ay, I've heard that's one of the names he goes by, but hearken, and I'll tell you wha he really is. That's the scoundrel Stroke!"

No wonder Gavinia was flabbergasted. "Wha are you then?" she cried.

"I'm the Champion of Dames," he replied loftily, and before she had recovered from this he was stalking Mr. McLean in the cemetery.

Miss Kitty sleeps in a beautiful hollow called the Basin, but the stone put up to her memory hardly marks the spot now, for with a score of others it was blown on its face by the wind that uprooted so many trees in the Den, and as it fell it lies. From the Basin to the rough road that clings like a belt to the round cemetery dyke is little more than a jump, and shortly after Miss Kitty's grave had been pointed out to him. Mr. McLean was seen standing there hat in hand by a man on the road. This man was Dr. McQueen hobbling home from the Forest Muir; he did not hobble as a rule, but hobble everyone must on that misshapen brae, except Murdoch Gelatley, who, being short in one leg elsewhere, is here the only straight man. McQueen's sharp eyes, however, picked out not only the stranger but Tommy crouching behind Haggart's stone, and him did the doctor's famous crook staff catch in the neck and whisk across the dyke.

"What man is that you're watching, you mysterious loon?" McQueen demanded, curiously; but of course Tommy would not divulge so big a secret. Now the one weakness of this large-hearted old bachelor (perhaps it is a professional virtue) was a devouring inquisitiveness, and he would be troubled until he discovered who was the stranger standing in such obvious emotion by the side of an old grave. "Well, you must come back with me to the surgery, for I want you to run an errand for me," he said testily, hoping to pump the boy by the way, but Tommy dived beneath his stick and escaped. This rasped the doctor's temper, which was unfortunate for Grizel, whom he caught presently peeping in at his surgery window. A dozen times of late she had wondered whether she should ask him to visit her mamma, and though the Painted Lady had screamed in terror at the proposal, being afraid of doctors, Grizel would have ventured ere now, had it not been for her mistaken conviction that he was a hard man, who would only flout her. It had once come to her ears that he had said a woman like her mamma could demoralize a whole town, with other harsh remarks, doubtless exaggerated in the repetition, and so he was the last man she dared think of going to for help, when he should have been the first. Nevertheless she had come now, and a soft word from him, such as he gave most readily to all who were in distress, would have drawn her pitiful tale from her, but he was in a grumpy mood, and had heard none of the rumors about her mother's being ill, which indeed were only common among the Monypenny children, and his first words checked her confidences. "What are you hanging about my open window for?" he cried sharply.

"Did you think I wanted to steal anything?" replied the indignant child.

"I won't say but what I had some such thait."

She turned to leave him, but he hooked her with his staff. "As you're here," he said, "will you go an errand for me?"

"No," she told him promptly; "I don't like you."

"There's no love lost between us," he replied, "for I think you're the dourest lassie I ever clapped eyes on, but there's no other litlin handy, so you must do as you are bid, and take this bottle to Ballingall's."

"Is it a medicine bottle?" she asked, with sudden interest.

"Yes, it's medicine. Do you know Ballingall's house in the West town end?"

"Ballingall who has the little school?"

"The same, but I doubt he'll keep school no longer."

"Is he dying?"

"I'm afraid there's no doubt of it. Will you go?"

"I should love to go," she cried.

"Love!" he echoed, looking at her with displeasure. "You can't love to go, so talk no more nonsense, but go, and I'll give you a bawbee."

"I don't want a bawbee," she said. "Do you think they will let me go in to see Ballingall?"

The doctor frowned. "What makes you want to see a dying man?" he demanded.

"I should just love to see him!" she exclaimed, and she added determinedly, "I won't give up the bottle until they let me in."

He thought her an unpleasant, morbid girl, but "that is no affair of mine," he said shrugging his shoulders, and he gave her the bottle to deliver. Before taking it to Ballingall's, however, she committed a little crime. She bought an empty bottle at the 'Sosh, and poured into it some of the contents of the medicine bottle, which she then filled up with water. She dared try no other way now of getting medicine for her

mother, and was too ignorant to know that there are different drugs for different ailments.

Grizel not only contrived to get in to see Ballingan but stayed by his side for several hours, and when she came out it was night-time. On her way home she saw a light moving in the Den, where she had expected to play no more, and she could not prevent her legs from running joyously toward it. So when Corp, rising out of the darkness, deftly cut her throat, she was not so angry as she should have been.

"I'm so glad we are to play again, after all, Corp," she said; but he replied grandly, "Thou little kennest wha you're speaking to, my gentle jade."

He gave a curious hitch to his breeches, but it only puzzled her. "I wear gallowses no more," he explained, lifting his waistcoat to show that his braces now encircled him as a belt, but even then she did not understand. "Know, then," said Corp, sternly, "I am Ben the Boatswain."

"And am I not the Lady Griselda any more?" she asked.

"I'm no sure," he confessed; "but if you are, there's a price on your head."

"What is Tommy?"

"I dinna ken yet, but Gavinia says he telled her he's Champion of Damns. I kenna what Elspeth'll say to that."

Grizel was starting for the Lair, but he caught her by the skirt.

"Is he not at the Lair?" she inquired.

"We knowest it not," he answered gravely. "We're looking for't," he added with some awe; "we've been looking for't this three year." Then, in a louder voice, "If you can guide us to it, my pretty trifle, you'll be richly rewarded."

"But where is he? Don't you know?"

"Fine I knowest, but it wouldna be mous to tell you, for I kenna whether you be friend or foe. What's that you're carrying?"

"It is a--a medicine bottle."

"Gie me a sook!"

"No."

"Just one," begged Corp, "and I'll tell you where he is."

He got his way, and smacked his lips unctuously.

"Now, where is Tommy?"

"Put your face close to mine," said Corp, and then he whispered hoarsely, "He's in a spleet new Lair, writing out bills wi' a' his might, offering five hunder crowns reward for Stroke's head, dead or alive!"

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The new haunt was a deserted house, that stood, very damp, near a little waterfall to the east of the Den. Bits of it well planted in the marsh adhere doggedly together to this day, but even then the roof was off and the chimney lay in a heap on the ground, like blankets that have slipped off a bed.

This was the good ship Ailie, lying at anchor, man-of-war, thirty guns, a cart-wheel to steer it by, T. Sandys, commander.

On the following Saturday, Ben the Boatswain piped all hands, and Mr. Sandys delivered a speech, of the bluff, straightforward kind that sailors love. Here, unfortunately, it must be condensed. He reminded them that three years had passed since their gracious queen (cheers) sent them into these seas to hunt down the Pretender (hisses). Their ship had been christened the Ailie, because its object was to avenge the insults offered by the Pretender to a lady of that name for whom everyone of them would willingly die. Like all his race the Pretender, or Stroke, as he called himself, was a torment to single women; he had not only stolen all this lady's wealth, but now he wanted to make her walk the plank, a way of getting rid of enemies the mere mention of which set the blood of all honest men boiling (cheers). As yet they had not succeeded in finding Stroke's Lair, though they knew it to be in one of the adjoining islands, but they had suffered many privations, twice their gallant vessel had been burned to the water's edge, once she had been sunk, once blown into the air, but had that dismayed them?

Here the Boatswain sent round a whisper, and they all cried loyally, "Ay, ay, sir."

He had now news for them that would warm their hearts like grog. He had not discovered the Lair, but he had seen Stroke, he had spoken to him! Disguised as a boy he had tracked the Jacobite and found him skulking in the house of the unhappy Ailie. After blustering for a little Stroke had gone on his knees and offered not only to cease persecuting this lady but to return to France. Mr. Sandys had kicked him into a standing posture and then left him. But this clemency had been ill repaid. Stroke had not returned to France. He was staying at the Quharity Arms, a Thrums inn, where he called himself McLean. It had gone through the town like wildfire that he had written to someone in Redlinton to send him on another suit of clothes and four dickies. No one suspected his real character, but all noted that he went to the unhappy Ailie's house daily, and there was a town about it. Ailie was but a woman, and women could not defend themselves "(Boatswain, put Grizel in irons if she opens her mouth)," and so the poor thing had been forced to speak to him, and even to go walks with him. Her life was in danger, and before now Mr. Sandys would have taken him prisoner, but the queen had said these words, "Noble Sandys, destroy the Lair," and the best way to discover this horrid spot was to follow Stroke night and day until he went to it. Then they would burn it to the ground, put him on board the Ailie, up with the jib-boom sail, and away to the Tower of London.

At the words "Tower of London," Ben cried "Tumble up there!" which was the signal for three such ringing cheers as only British tars are capable of. Three? To be exact only two and a half, for the third stopped in the middle, as if the lid had suddenly been put on.

What so startled them was the unexpected appearance in their midst of the very man Tommy had been talking of. Taking a stroll through the Den, Mr. McLean had been drawn toward the ruin by the first cheers, and had arrived in time to learn who and what he really was.

"Stroke!" gasped one small voice.

The presumptuous man folded his arms. "So, Sandys," he said, in hollow tones, "we meet again!"

Even Grizel got behind Tommy, and perhaps it was this that gave him spunk to say tremulously, "Wh-what are you doing her?"

"I have come," replied the ruddy Pretender, "to defy you, ay, proud Sandys, to challenge thee to the deed thou pratest of. I go from here to my Lair. Follow me, if thou darest!"

He brought his hand down with a bang upon the barrel, laughed disdainfully, and springing over the vessel's side was at once lost in the darkness. Instead of following, all stood transfixed, gazing at the barrel, on which lay five shillings.

"He put them there when he slammed it!"

"Losh behears! there's a shilling to ilka ane o' us."

"I winna touch the siller," said Sandys, moodily.

"What?" cried Gavinia.

"I tell you it's a bribe."

"Do you hear him?" screamed Gavinia. "He says we're no to lay hands on't! Corp, where's your tongue?"

But even in that trying moment Corp's trust in Tommy shone out beautiful and strong. "Dinna be feared, Gavinia," he whispered, "he'll find a wy."

"Lights out and follow Stroke!" was the order, and the crew at once scattered in pursuit, Mr. Sandys remaining behind a moment to--to put something in his pocket.

Mr. McLean gave them a long chase, walking demurely when lovers were in sight, but at other times doubling, jumping, even standing on eminences and crowing insultingly, like a cock, and not until he had only breath left to chuckle did the stout man vanish from the Den. Elspeth, now a cabin-boy, was so shaken by the realism of the night's adventures that Gavinia (able seaman) took her home, and when Mr. Sandys and his Boatswain met at the Cuttle Well neither could tell where Grizel was.

"She had no business to munt without my leave," Tommy said sulkily.

"No, she hadna. Is she the Lady Griselda yet?"

"Not her, she's the Commander's wife."

Ben shook his head, for this, he felt, was the one thing Tommy could not do. "Well, then," growled Tommy, "if she winna be that, she'll have to serve before the mast, for I tell you plain I'll have no single women on board."

"And what am I, forby Ben the Boatswain?"

"Nothing. Honest men has just one name."

"What! I'm just one single man?" Corp was a little crestfallen. "It's a come down," he said, with a sigh, "mind, I dinna grumble, but it's a come down."

"And you dinna have 'Methinks' now either," Tommy announced pitilessly.

Corp had dreaded this. "I'll be gey an' lonely without it," he said, with some dignity, "and it was the usefulest swear I kent o'. 'Methinks!' I used to roar at Mason Malcolm's collie, and the crittur came in ahint in a swite o' fear. Losh, Tommy, is that you bleeding?"

There was indeed an ugly gash on Tommy's hand. "You've been hacking at yoursel' again," said the distressed Corp, who knew that in his enthusiasm Tommy had more than once drawn blood from himself. "When you take it a' so real as that," he said, uncomfortably "I near think we should give it up."

Tommy stamped his foot. "Take tent o' yoursel'!" he cried threateningly. "When I was tracking Stroke I fell in with one of his men, and we had a tussle. He pinked me in the hand, but 'tis only a scratch, bah! He was carrying treasure, and I took it from him."

Ben whistled. "Five shillings?" he asked, slapping his knee.

"How did you know?" demanded Tommy, frowning, and then they tried to stare each other down.

"I thought I saw you pouching it," Corp ventured to say.

"Boatswain!"

"I mean," explained Corp hurriedly, "I mean that I kent you would find a wy. Didest thou kill the Jacobite rebel?"

"He lies but a few paces off," replied Tommy, "and already the vultures are picking his bones."

"So perish all Victoria's enemies," said Ben the Boatswain, loyally, but a sudden fear made him add, with a complete change of voice, "You dinna chance to ken his name?"

"Ay, I had marked him before," answered Tommy, "he was called Corp of Corp."

Ben the Boatswain rose, sat down, rose again, "Tommy," he said, wiping his brow with his sleeve, "come awa' hame!"