

"Oh, how thoughtful of him!" cried Miss Ailie, the deceived, and McLean said: "How very thoughtful!" but now he saw in a flash why Mr. Cathro still had hopes that Tommy might carry a bursary.

Thus was the repentant McLean pardoned, and nothing remained for him to do save to show the crew his Lair, which they had sworn to destroy. He had behaved so splendidly that they had forgotten almost that they were the emissaries of justice, but not to destroy the Lair seemed a pity, it would be such a striking way of bringing their adventures in the Den to a close. The degenerate Stuart read this feeling in their faces, and he was ready, he said, to show them his Lair if they would first point it out to him; but here was a difficulty, for how could they do that? For a moment it seemed as if the negotiations must fall through; but Sandys, that captain of resource, invited McLean to step aside for a private conference, and when they rejoined the others McLean said, gravely, that he now remembered where the Lair was and would guide them to it.

They had only to cross a plank, invisible in the mist until they were close to it, and climb a slippery bank strewn with fallen trees. McLean, with a mock serious air, led the way, Miss Ailie on his arm. Corp and Gavinia followed, weighted and hampered by their new half-crowns, and Tommy and Elspeth, in the rear, whispered joyously of the coming life. And so, very unprepared for it, they moved toward the tragedy of the night.

CHAPTER XXXI - A LETTER TO GOD

"Do you keep a light burning in the Lair?" McLean turned to ask, forgetting for the moment that it was not their domicile, but his.

"No, there's no light," replied Corp, equally forgetful, but even as he spoke he stopped so suddenly that Elspeth struck against him. For he had seen a light. "This is queer!" he cried, and both he and Gavinia fell back in consternation. McLean pushed forward alone, and was back in a trice, with a new expression on his face. "Are you playing some trick on me?" he demanded suspiciously of Tommy. "There is some one there; I almost ran against a pair of blazing eyes."

"But there's nobody; there can be nobody there," answered Tommy, in a bewilderment that was obviously unfeigned, "unless--unless--" He looked at Corp, and the eyes of both finished the sentence. The desolate scene at Double Dykes, which the meeting with McLean and Miss Ailie had driven from their minds, again confronted them, and they seemed once more to hear the whimpering of the Painted Lady's door.

"Unless what?" asked the man, impatiently, but still the two boys only stared at each other. "The Den's no mous the night," said Corp at last, in a low voice, and his unspoken fears spread to the womankind, so that Miss Ailie shuddered and Elspeth gripped Tommy with both hands and Gavinia whispered, "Let's away hame, we can come back in the daylight."

But McLean chafed and pressed upward, and next moment a girl's voice was heard, crying: "It is no business of yours; I won't let you touch her."

"Grizel!" exclaimed Tommy and his crew, simultaneously, and they had no more fear until they were inside the Lair. What they saw had best be described very briefly. A fire was burning in a corner of the Lair, and in front of it, partly covered with a sheet, lay the Painted Lady, dead. Grizel stood beside the body guarding it, her hands clenched, her eyes very strange. "You sha'n't touch her!" she cried, passionately, and repeated it many times, as if she had lost the power to leave off, but Corp crept past her and raised the coverlet.

"She's straikit!" he shouted. "Did you do it yoursel', Grizel? God behears, she did it hersel'!"

A very long silence it seemed to be after that.

Miss Ailie would have taken the motherless girl to her arms, but first, at Corp's discovery, she had drawn back in uncontrollable repulsion, and Grizel, about to go to her, saw it, and turned from her to Tommy. Her eyes rested on him beseechingly, with a look he saw only once again in them until she was a woman, but his first thought was not for Grizel. Elspeth was clinging to him, terrified and sobbing, and he cried to her, "Shut your een," and then led her tenderly away. He was always good to Elspeth.

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There was no lack of sympathy with Grizel when the news spread through the town, and unshod men with their gallowses hanging down,

and women buttoning as they ran, hurried to the Den. But to all the questions put to her and to all the kindly offers made, as the body was carried to Double Dykes, she only rocked her arms, crying, "I don't want anything to eat. I shall stay all night beside her. I am not frightened at my mamma. I won't tell you why she was in the Den. I am not sure how long she has been dead. Oh, what do these little things matter?"

The great thing was that her mamma should be buried in the cemetery, and not in unconsecrated ground with a stake through her as the boys had predicted, and it was only after she was promised this that Grizel told her little tale. She had feared for a long time that her mamma was dying of consumption, but she told no one, because everybody was against her and her mamma. Her mamma never knew that she was dying, and sometimes she used to get so much better that Grizel hoped she would live a long time, but that hope never lasted long. The reason she sat so much with Ballingall was just to find out what doctors did to dying people to make them live a little longer, and she watched his straiiking to be able to do it to her mamma when the time came. She was sure none of the women would consent to straiik her mamma. On the previous night, she could not say at what hour, she had been awakened by a cold wind, and so she knew that the door was open. She put out her hand in the darkness and found that her mamma was not beside her. It had happened before, and she was not frightened. She had hidden the key of the door that night and nailed down the window, but her mamma had found the key. Grizel rose, lit the lamp, and, having dressed hurriedly, set off with wraps to the Den. Her mamma was generally as sensible as anybody in Thrums, but sometimes she had shaking fits, and after them she thought it was the time of long ago. Then she went to the Den to meet a man who had promised, she said, to be there, but he never came, and before daybreak Grizel could usually induce her to return home. Latterly she had persuaded her mamma to wait for him in the old Lair, because it was less cold there, and she had got her to do this last night. Her mamma did not seem very unwell, but she fell asleep, and she died sleeping, and then Grizel went back to Double Dykes for linen and straiiked her.

Some say in Thrums that a spade was found in the Lair, but that is only the growth of later years. Grizel had done all she could do, and through the long Saturday she sat by the side of the body, helpless and unable to cry. She knew that it could not remain there much longer, but every time

she rose to go and confess, fear of the indignities to which the body of her darling mamma might be subjected pulled her back. The boys had spoken idly, but hunted Grizel, who knew so much less and so much more than any of them, believed it all.

It was she who had stood so near Gavinia in the ruined house. She had only gone there to listen to human voices. When she discovered from the talk of her friends that she had left a light burning at Double Dykes and the door open, fear of the suspicions this might give rise to had sent her to the house on the heels of the two boys, and it was she who had stolen past them in the mist to put out the light and lock the door. Then she had returned to her mamma's side.

The doctor was among the listeners, almost the only dry-eyed one, but he was not dry-eyed because he felt the artless story least. Again and again he rose from his chair restlessly, and Grizel thought he scowled at her when he was really scowling at himself; as soon as she had finished he cleared the room brusquely of all intruders, and then he turned on her passionately.

"Think shame of yourself," he thundered, "for keeping me in the dark," and of course she took his words literally, though their full meaning was, "I shall scorn myself from this hour for not having won the poor child's confidence."

Oh, he was a hard man, Grizel thought, the hardest of them all. But she was used to standing up to hard men, and she answered, defiantly: "I did mean to tell you, that day you sent me with the bottle to Ballingall, I was waiting at the surgery door to tell you, but you were cruel, you said I was a thief, and then how could I tell you?"

This, too, struck home, and the doctor winced, but what he said was, "You fooled me for a whole week, and the town knows it; do you think I can forgive you for that?"

"I don't care whether you forgive me," replied Grizel at once.

"Nor do I care whether you care," he rapped out, all the time wishing he could strike himself; "but I'm the doctor of this place, and when your mother was ill you should have come straight to me. What had I done that you should be afraid of me?"

"I am not afraid of you," she replied, "I am not afraid of anyone, but mamma was afraid of you because she knew you had said cruel things about her, and I thought--I won't tell you what I thought." But with a little pressing she changed her mind and told him. "I was not sure whether you would come to see her, though I asked you, and if you came I knew you would tell her she was dying, and that would have made her scream. And that is not all, I thought you might tell her that she would be buried with a stake through her--"

"Oh, these blackguard laddies!" cried McQueen, clenching his fists.

"And so I dared not tell you," Grizel concluded calmly; "I am not frightened at you, but I was frightened you would hurt my dear darling mamma," and she went and stood defiantly between him and her mother.

The doctor moved up and down the room, crying, "How did I not know of this, why was I not told?" and he knew that the fault had been his own, and so was furious when Grizel told him so.

"Yes, it is," she insisted, "you knew mamma was an unhappy lady, and that the people shouted things against her and terrified her; and you must have known, for everybody knew, that she was sometimes silly and wandered about all night, and you are a big strong man, and so you should have been sorry for her; and if you had been sorry you would have come to see her and been kind to her, and then you would have found it all out."

"Have done, lassie!" he said, half angrily, half beseechingly, but she did not understand that he was suffering, and she went on, relentlessly: "And you knew that bad men used to come to see her at night--they have not come for a long time--but you never tried to stop their coming, and I could have stopped it if I had known they were bad; but I did not know at first, and I was only a little girl, and you should have told me."

"Have done!" It was all that he could say, for like many he had heard of men visiting the Painted Lady by stealth, and he had only wondered, with other gossips, who they were.

He crossed again to the side of the dead woman, "And Ballingall's was the only corpse you ever saw straked?" he said in wonder, she had done

her work so well. But he was not doubting her; he knew already that this girl was clothed in truthfulness.

"Was it you that kept this house so clean?" he asked, almost irritably, for he himself was the one undusted, neglected-looking thing in it, and he was suddenly conscious of his frayed wristband and of buttons hanging by a thread.

"Yes."

"What age are you?"

"I think I am thirteen."

He looked long at her, vindictively she thought, but he was only picturing the probable future of a painted lady's child, and he said mournfully to himself, "Ay, it does not even end here; and that's the crowning pity of it." But Grizel only heard him say, "Poor thing!" and she bridled immediately.

"I won't let you pity me," she cried.

"You dour brat!" he retorted. "But you need not think you are to have everything your own way still. I must get some Monypenny woman to take you till the funeral is over, and after that--"

"I won't go," said Grizel, determinedly, "I shall stay with mamma till she is buried."

He was not accustomed to contradiction, and he stamped his foot. "You shall do as you are told," he said.

"I won't!" replied Grizel, and she also stamped her foot.

"Very well, then, you thrawn tid, but at any rate I'll send in a woman to sleep with you."

"I want no one. Do you think I am afraid?"

"I think you will be afraid when you wake up in the darkness, and find yourself alone with--with it."

"I sha'n't, I shall remember at once that she is to be buried nicely in the cemetery, and that will make me happy."

"You unnatural--"

"Besides, I sha'n't sleep, I have something to do."

His curiosity again got the better of the doctor. "What can you have to do at such a time?" he demanded, and her reply surprised him:

"I am to make a dress."

"You!"

"I have made them before now," she said indignantly.

"But at such a time!"

"It is a black dress," she cried, "I don't have one, I am to make it out of mamma's."

He said nothing for some time, then "When did you think of this?"

"I thought of it weeks ago, I bought crape at the corner shop to be ready, and--"

She thought he was looking at her in horror, and stopped abruptly. "I don't care what you think," she said.

"What I do think," he retorted, taking up his hat, "is, that you are a most exasperating lassie. If I bide here another minute I believe you'll get round me."

"I don't want to get round you."

"Then what makes you say such things? I question if I'll get an hour's sleep to-night for thinking of you!"

"I don't want you to think of me!"

He groaned. "What could an untidy, hardened old single man like me do with you in his house?" he said. "Oh, you little limmer, to put such a thought into my head."

"I never did!" she exclaimed, indignantly.

"It began, I do believe it began," he sighed, "the first time I saw you easying Ballingall's pillows."

"What began?"

"You brat, you wilful brat, don't pretend ignorance. You set a trap to catch me, and--"

"Oh!" cried Grizel, and she opened the door quickly. "Go away, you horrid man," she said.

He liked her the more for this regal action, and therefore it enraged him. Sheer anxiety lest he should succumb to her on the spot was what made him bluster as he strode off, and "That brat of a Grizel," or "The Painted Lady's most unbearable lassie," or "The dour little besom" was his way of referring to her in company for days, but if any one agreed with him he roared "Don't be a fool, man, she's a wonder, she's a delight," or "You have a dozen yourself, Janet, but I wouldna neifer Grizel for the lot of them." And it was he, still denouncing her so long as he was contradicted, who persuaded the Auld Licht Minister to officiate at the funeral. Then he said to himself, "And now I wash my hands of her, I have done all that can be expected of me." He told himself this a great many times as if it were a medicine that must be taken frequently, and Grizel heard from Tommy, with whom she had some strange conversations, that he was going about denouncing her "up hill and down dale." But she did not care, she was so--so happy. For a hole was dug for the Painted Lady in the cemetery, just as if she had been a good woman, and Mr. Dishart conducted the service in Double Dykes before the removal of the body, nor did he say one word that could hurt Grizel, perhaps because his wife had drawn a promise from him. A large gathering of men followed the coffin, three of them because, as you may remember, Grizel had dared them to stay away, but all the others out of sympathy with a motherless child who, as the procession started, rocked her arms in delight because her mamma was being buried respectably.

Being a woman, she could not attend the funeral, and so the chief mourner was Tommy, as you could see by the position he took at the grave, and by the white bands Grizel had sewn on his sleeves. He was looking very important, as if he had something remarkable in prospect, but little attention was given him until the cords were dropped into the grave, and a prayer offered up, when he pulled Mr. Dishart's coat and muttered something about a paper. Those who had been making ready to depart swung round again, and the minister told him if he had anything to say to speak out.

"It's a paper," Tommy said, nervous yet elated, and addressing all, "that Grizel put in the coffin. She told me to tell you about it when the cords fell on the lid."

"What sort of a paper?" asked Mr. Dishart, frowning.

"It's--it's a letter to God," Tommy gasped.

Nothing was to be heard except the shovelling of earth into the grave. "Hold your spade, John," the minister said to the gravedigger, and then even that sound stopped. "Go on," Mr. Dishart signed to the boy.

"Grizel doesna believe her mother has much chance of getting to heaven," Tommy said, "and she wrote the letter to God, so that when he opens the coffins on the last day he will find it and read about them."

"About whom?" asked the stern minister.

"About Grizel's father, for one. She doesna know his name, but the Painted Lady wore a locket wi' a picture of him on her breast, and it's buried wi' her, and Grizel told God to look at it so as to know him. She thinks her mother will be damned for having her, and that it winna be fair unless God damns her father too."

"Go on," said Mr. Dishart.

"There was three Thrums men--I think they were gentlemen--" Tommy continued, almost blithely, "that used to visit the Painted Lady in the night time afore she took ill. They wanted Grizel to promise no to tell about their going to Double Dykes, and she promised because she was ower innocent to know what they went for--but their names are in the letter."

A movement in the crowd was checked by the minister's uplifted arm. "Go on," he cried.

"She wouldna tell me who they were, because it would have been breaking her promise," said Tommy, "but"--he looked around him inquisitively--"but they're here at the funeral."

The mourners were looking sideways at each other, some breathing hard, but none dared to speak before the minister. He stood for a long time in doubt, but at last he signed to John to proceed with the filling in of the grave. Contrary to custom all remained. Not until the grave was again

level with the sword did Mr. Dishart speak, and then it was with a gesture that appalled his hearers. "This grave," he said, raising his arm, "is locked till the day of judgment."

Leaving him standing there, a threatening figure, they broke into groups and dispersed, walking slowly at first, and then fast, to tell their wives.