

CHAPTER XXXII - AN ELOPEMENT

The solitary child remained at Double Dykes, awaiting the arrival of her father, for the Painted Lady's manner of leaving the world had made such a stir that the neighbors said he must have heard of it, even though he were in London, and if he had the heart of a stone he could not desert his bairn. They argued thus among themselves, less as people who were sure of it than to escape the perplexing question, what to do with Grizel if the man never claimed her? and before her they spoke of his coming as a certainty, because it would be so obviously the best thing for her. In the meantime they overwhelmed her with offers of everything she could need, which was kindly but not essential, for after the funeral expenses had been paid (Grizel insisted on paying them herself) she had still several gold pieces, found in her mamma's beautiful tortoise-shell purse, and there were nearly twenty pounds in the bank.

But day after day passed, and the man had not come. Perhaps he resented the Painted Lady's ostentatious death; which, if he was nicely strung, must have jarred upon his nerves. He could hardly have acknowledged Grizel now without publicity being given to his private concerns. Or he may never have heard of the Painted Lady's death, or if he read of it, he may not have known which painted lady in particular she was. Or he may have married, and told his wife all and she had forgiven him, which somehow, according to the plays and the novels, cuts the past adrift from a man and enables him to begin again at yesterday. Whatever the reason, Grizel's father was in no hurry to reveal himself, and though not to her, among themselves the people talked of the probability of his not coming at all. She could not remain alone at Double Dykes, they all admitted, but where, then, should she go? No fine lady in need of a handmaid seemed to think a painted lady's child would suit; indeed, Grizel at first sight had not the manner that attracts philanthropists. Once only did the problem approach solution; a woman in the Den-head was willing to take the child because (she expressed it) as she had seven she might as well have eight, but her man said no, he would not have his bairns fil't. Others would have taken her cordially for a few weeks or months, had they not known that at the end of this time they would be blamed, even by themselves, if they let her go. All, in short, were eager to show her kindness if one would give her a home, but where was that one to be found?

Much of this talk came to Grizel through Tommy, and she told him in the house of Double Dykes that people need not trouble themselves about her, for she had no wish to stay with them. It was only charity they brought her; no one wanted her for herself. "It is because I am a child of shame," she told him, dry-eyed.

He fidgeted on his chair, and asked, "What's that?" not very honestly.

"I don't know," she said, "no one will tell me, but it is something you can't love."

"You have a terrible wish to be loved," he said in wonder, and she nodded her head wistfully. "That is not what I wish for most of all, though," she told him, and when he asked what she wished for most of all, she said, "To love somebody; oh, it would be sweet!"

To Tommy, most sympathetic of mortals, she seemed a very pathetic little figure, and tears came to his eyes as he surveyed her; he could always cry very easily.

"If it wasna for Elspeth," he began, stammering, "I could love you, but you winna let a body do onything on the sly."

It was a vague offer, but she understood, and became the old Grizel at once. "I don't want you to love me," she said indignantly; "I don't think you know how to love."

"Neither can you know, then," retorted Tommy, huffily, "for there's nobody for you to love."

"Yes, there is," she said, "and I do love her and she loves me."

"But wha is she?"

"That girl." To his amazement she pointed to her own reflection in the famous mirror the size of which had scandalized Thrums. Tommy thought this affection for herself barely respectable, but he dared not say so lest he should be put to the door. "I love her ever so much," Grizel went on, "and she is so fond of me, she hates to see me unhappy. Don't look so sad, dearest, darlingest," she cried vehemently; "I love you, you know, oh, you sweet!" and with each epithet she kissed her reflection and looked defiantly at the boy.

"But you canna put your arms round her and hug her," he pointed out triumphantly, and so he had the last word after all. Unfortunately Grizel kept this side of her, new even to Tommy, hidden from all others, and her unresponsiveness lost her many possible friends. Even Miss Ailie, who now had a dressmaker in the blue-and-white room, sitting on a bedroom chair and sewing for her life (oh, the agony--or is it the rapture?--of having to decide whether to marry in gray with beads or brown plain to the throat), even sympathetic Miss Ailie, having met with several rebuffs, said that Grizel had a most unaffectionate nature, and, "Ay, she's hardy," agreed the town, "but it's better, maybe, for hersel'." There are none so unpopular as the silent ones.

If only Miss Ailie, or others like her, could have slipped noiselessly into Double Dykes at night, they would have found Grizel's pillow wet. But she would have heard them long before they reached the door, and jumped to the floor in terror, thinking it was her father's step at last. For, unknown to anyone, his coming, which the town so anxiously desired, was her one dread. She had told Tommy what she should say to him if he came, and Tommy had been awed and delighted, they were such scathing things; probably, had the necessity arisen, she would have found courage to say them, but they were made up in the daytime, and at night they brought less comfort. Then she listened fearfully and longed for the morning, wild ideas coursing through her head of flying before he could seize her; but when morning came it brought other thoughts, as of the strange remarks she had heard about her mamma and herself during the past few days. To brood over these was the most unhealthy occupation she could find, but it was her only birthright. Many of the remarks came unguardedly from lips that had no desire to pain her, others fell in a rage because she would not tell what were the names in her letter to God. The words that troubled her most, perhaps, were the doctor's, "She is a brave lass, but it must be in her blood." They were not intended for her ears, but she heard. "What did he mean?" she asked Miss Ailie, Mrs. Dishart, and others who came to see her, and they replied awkwardly, that it had only been a doctor's remark, of no importance to people who were well. "Then why are you crying?" she demanded, looking them full in the face with eyes there was no deceiving.

"Oh, why is everyone afraid to tell me the truth!" she would cry, beating her palms in anguish.

She walked into McQueen's surgery and said, "Could you not cut it out?" so abruptly that he wondered what she was speaking about.

"The bad thing that is in my blood," she explained. "Do cut it out, I sha'n't scream. I promise not to scream."

He sighed and answered, "If it could be cut out, lassie, I would try to do it, though it was the most dangerous of operations."

She looked in anguish at him. "There are cleverer doctors than you, aren't there?" she asked, and he was not offended.

"Ay, a hantle cleverer," he told her, "but none so clever as that. God help you, bairn, if you have to do it yourself some day."

"Can I do it myself?" she cried, brightening. "I shall do it now. Is it done with a knife?"

"With a sharper knife than a surgeon's," he answered, and then, regretting he had said so much, he tried to cheer her. But that he could not do. "You are afraid to tell me the truth too," she said, and when she went away he was very sorry for her, but not so sorry as she was for herself. "When I am grown up," she announced dolefully, to Tommy, "I shall be a bad woman, just like mamma."

"Not if you try to be good," he said.

"Yes, I shall. There is something in my blood that will make me bad, and I so wanted to be good. Oh! oh! oh!"

She told him of the things she had heard people say, but though they perplexed him almost as much as her, he was not so hopeless of learning their meaning, for here was just the kind of difficulty he liked to overcome. "I'll get it out o' Blinder," he said, with confidence in his ingenuity, "and then I'll tell you what he says." But however much he might strive to do so, Tommy could never repeat anything without giving it frills and other adornment of his own making, and Grizel knew this. "I must hear what he says myself," she insisted.

"But he winna speak plain afore you."

"Yes, he will, if he does not know I am there."

The plot succeeded, though only partially, for so quick was the blind man's sense of hearing that in the middle of the conversation he said, sharply, "Somebody's ahint the dyke!" and he caught Grizel by the shoulder. "It's the Painted Lady's lassie," he said when she screamed, and he stormed against Tommy for taking such advantage of his blindness. But to her he said, gently, "I daresay you egged him on to this, meaning well, but you maun forget most of what I've said, especially about being in the blood. I spoke in haste, it doesna apply to the like of you."

"Yes, it does," replied Grizel, and all that had been revealed to her she carried hot to the surgery, Tommy stopping at the door in as great perturbation as herself. "I know what being in the blood is now," she said, tragically, to McQueen, "there is something about it in the Bible. I am the child of evil passions, and that means that I was born with wickedness in my blood. It is lying sleeping in me just now because I am only thirteen, and if I can prevent its waking when I am grown up I shall always be good, but a very little thing will waken it; it wants so much to be wakened, and if it is once wakened it will run all through me, and soon I shall be like mamma."

It was all horribly clear to her, and she would not wait for words of comfort that could only obscure the truth. Accompanied by Tommy, who said nothing, but often glanced at her fascinated yet alarmed, as if expecting to see the ghastly change come over her at any moment--for he was as convinced as she, and had the livelier imagination--she returned to Monypenny to beg of Blinder to tell her one thing more. And he told her, not speaking lightly, but because his words contained a solemn warning to a girl who, he thought, might need it.

"What sort of thing would be likeliest to waken the wickedness?" she asked, holding her breath for the answer.

"Keeping company wi' ill men," said Blinder, gravely.

"Like the man who made mamma wicked, like my father?"

"Ay," Blinder replied, "fly from the like of him, my lass, though it should be to the other end of the world."

She stood quite still, with a most sorrowful face, and then ran away, ran so swiftly that when Tommy, who had lingered for a moment, came to the

door she was already out of sight. Scarcely less excited than she, he set off for Double Dykes, his imagination in such a blaze that he looked fearfully in the pools of the burn for a black frock. But Grizel had not drowned herself; she was standing erect in her home, like one at bay, her arms rigid, her hands clenched, and when he pushed open the door she screamed.

"Grizel," said the distressed boy, "did you think I was him come for you?"

"Yes!"

"Maybe he'll no come. The folk think he winna come."

"But if he does, if he does!"

"Maybe you needna go wi' him unless you're willing?"

"I must, he can compel me, because he is my father. Oh! oh! oh!" She lay down on the bed, and on her eyes there slowly formed the little wells of water Tommy was to know so well in time. He stood by her side in anguish; for though his own tears came at the first call, he could never face them in others.

"Grizel," he said impulsively, "there's just one thing for you to do. You have money, and you maun run away afore he comes!"

She jumped up at that. "I have thought of it," she answered "I am always thinking about it, but how can I, oh, now can I? It would not be respectable."

"To run away?"

"To go by myself," said the poor girl, "and I do want to be respectable, it would be sweet."

In some ways Tommy was as innocent as she, and her reasoning seemed to him to be sound. She was looking at him woefully, and entreaty was on her face; all at once he felt what a lonely little crittur she was, and, in a burst of manhood,--

"But, dinna prig wi' me to go with you," he said, struggling.

"I have not!" she answered, panting, and she had not in words, but the mute appeal was still on her face.

"Grizel," he cried, "I'll come!"

Then she seized his hand and pressed it to her breast, saying, "Oh, Tommy, I am so fond of you!"

It was the first time she had admitted it, and his head wagged well content, as if saying for him, "I knew you would understand me some day." But next moment the haunting shadow that so often overtook him in the act of soaring fell cold upon his mind, and "I maun take Elspeth!" he announced, as if Elspeth had him by the leg.

"You sha'n't!" said Grizel's face.

"She winna let go," said Tommy's.

Grizel quivered from top to toe. "I hate Elspeth!" she cried, with curious passion, and the more moral Tommy was ashamed of her.

"You dinna ken how fond o' her I am," he said.

"Yes, I do."

"Then you shouldna want me to leave her and go wi' you."

"That is why I want it," Grizel blurted out, and now we are all ashamed of her. But fortunately Tommy did not see how much she had admitted in that hasty cry, and as neither would give way to the other they parted stiffly, his last words being "Mind, it wouldna be respectable to go by yoursel'," and hers "I don't care, I'm going." Nevertheless it was she who slept easily that night, and he who tossed about almost until cockcrow. She had only one ugly dream, of herself wandering from door to door in a strange town, asking for lodgings, but the woman who answered her weary knocks--there were many doors but it was invariably the same woman--always asked, suspiciously, "Is Tommy with you?" and Grizel shook her head, and then the woman drove her away, perceiving that she was not respectable. This woke her, and she feared the dream would come true, but she clenched her fists in the darkness, saying, "I can't help it, I am going, and I won't have Elspeth," and after that she slept in peace. In the meantime Tommy the imaginative--but that night he was not Tommy, rather was he Grizel, for he saw her as we can only see ourselves. Now she--or he, if you will--had been caught by her father and brought back, and she turned into a painted thing like her mother. She brandished a brandy bottle and a stream of foul words ran lightly from

her mouth and suddenly stopped, because she was wailing "I wanted so to be good, it is sweet to be good!" Now a man with a beard was whipping her, and Tommy felt each lash on his own body, so that he had to strike out, and he started up in bed, and the horrible thing was that he had never been asleep. Thus it went on until early morning, when his eyes were red and his body was damp with sweat.

But now again he was Tommy, and at first even to think of leaving Elspeth was absurd. Yet it would be pleasant to leave Aaron, who disliked him so much. To disappear without a word would be a fine revenge, for the people would say that Aaron must have ill-treated him, and while they searched the pools of the burn for his body, Aaron would be looking on trembling, perhaps with a policeman's hand on his shoulder. Tommy saw the commotion as vividly as if the searchers were already out and he in a tree looking down at them; but in a second he also heard Elspeth skirling, and down he flung himself from the tree, crying, "I'm here, Elspeth, dinna greet; oh, what a brute I've been!" No, he could not leave Elspeth, how wicked of Grizel to expect it of him; she was a bad one, Grizel.

But having now decided not to go, his sympathy with the girl who was to lose him returned in a rush, and before he went to school he besought her to--it amounted to this, to be more like himself; that is, he begged her to postpone her departure indefinitely, not to make up her mind until to-morrow--or the day after--or the day after that. He produced reasons, as that she had only four pounds and some shillings now, while by and by she might get the Painted Lady's money, at present in the bank; also she ought to wait for the money that would come to her from the rroup of the furniture. But Grizel waived all argument aside; secure in her four pounds and shillings she was determined to go to-night, for her father might be here to-morrow; she was going to London because it was so big that no one could ever find her there, and she would never, never write to Tommy to tell him how she fared, lest the letter put her father on her track. He implored her to write once, so that the money owing her might be forwarded, but even this bribe did not move her, and he set off for school most gloomily.

Cathro was specially aggravating that day, nagged him, said before the whole school that he was a numskull, even fell upon him with the tawse, and for no earthly reason except that Tommy would not bother his head with the oratio obliqua. If there is any kind of dominie more maddening

than another, it is the one who will not leave you alone (ask any thoughtful boy). How wretched the lot of him whose life is cast among fools not capable of understanding him; what was that saying about entertaining angels unawares? London! Grizel had more than sufficient money to take two there, and once in London, a wonder such as himself was bound to do wondrous things. Now that he thought of it, to become a minister was abhorrent to him; to preach would be rather nice, oh, what things he should say (he began to make them up, and they were so grand that he almost wept), but to be good after the sermon was over, always to be good (even when Elspeth was out of the way), never to think queer unsayable things, never to say Stroke, never, in short, to "find a way"--he was appalled. If it had not been for Elspeth--

So even Elspeth did not need him. When he went home from school, thinking only of her, he found that she had gone to the Auld Licht manse to play with little Margaret. Very well, if such was her wish, he would go. Nobody wanted him except Grizel. Perhaps when news came from London of his greatness, they would think more of him. He would send a letter to Thrums, asking Mr. McLean to transfer his kindness to Elspeth. That would show them what a noble fellow he was. Elspeth would really benefit by his disappearance; he was running away for Elspeth's sake. And when he was great, which would be in a few years, he would come back for her.

But no, he--. The dash represents Tommy swithering once more, and he was at one or other end of the swither all day. When he acted sharply it was always on impulse, and as soon as the die was cast he was a philosopher with no regrets. But when he had time to reflect, he jumped miserably back and forward. So when Grizel was ready to start, he did not know in the least what he meant to do.

She was to pass by the Cuttle Well, on her way to Tilliedrum, where she would get the London train, he had been told coldly, and he could be there at the time--if he liked. The time was seven o'clock in the evening on a week-day, when the lovers are not in the Den, and Tommy arrived first. When he stole through the small field that separates Monypenny from the Den, his decision was--but on reaching the Cuttle Well, its nearness to the uncanny Lair chilled his courage, and now he had only come to bid her good-by. She was very late, and it suddenly struck him that she had already set off. "After getting me to promise to go wi' her!" he said to himself at once.

But Grizel came; she was only late because it had taken her such a long time to say good-by to the girl in the glass. She was wearing her black dress and lustre jacket, and carried in a bundle the few treasures she was taking with her, and though she did not ask Tommy if he was coming, she cast a quick look round to see if he had a bundle anywhere, and he had none. That told her his decision, and she would have liked to sit down for a minute and cry, but of course she had too much pride, and she bade him farewell so promptly that he thought he had a grievance. "I'm coming as far as the toll-house wi' you," he said, sulkily, and so they started together.

At the toll-house Grizel stopped. "It's a fine night," said Tommy, almost apologetically, "I'll go as far as the quarry o' Benshee."

When they came to the quarry he said, "We're no half-roads yet, I'll go wi' you as far as Padanarum." Now she began to wonder and to glance at him sideways, which made him more uncomfortable than ever. To prevent her asking him a question for which he had no answer, he said, "What makes you look so little the day?"

"I am not looking little," she replied, greatly annoyed, "I am looking taller than usual. I have let down my frock three inches so as to look taller--and older."

"You look younger than ever," he said cruelly.

"I don't! I look fifteen, and when you are fifteen you grow up very quickly. Do say I look older!" she entreated anxiously. "It would make me feel more respectable."

But he shook his head with surprising obstinacy, and then she began to remark on his clothes, which had been exercising her curiosity ever since they left the Den.

"How is it that you are looking so stout?" she asked.

"I feel cold, but you are wiping the sweat off your face every minute."

It was true, but he would have preferred not to answer. Grizel's questions, however, were all so straight in the face, that there was no dodging them. "I have on twa suits o' clothes, and a' my sarks," he had to admit, sticky and sullen.

She stopped, but he trudged on doggedly. She ran after him and gave his arm an impulsive squeeze with both hands, "Oh, you sweet!" she said.

"No, I'm not," he answered in alarm.

"Yes you are! You are coming with me."

"I'm not!"

"Then why did you put on so many clothes?"

Tommy swithered wretchedly on one foot. "I didna put them on to come wi' you," he explained, "I just put them on in case I should come wi' you."

"And are you not coming?"

"How can I ken?"

"But you must decide," Grizel almost screamed.

"I needna," he stammered, "till we're at Tilliedrum. Let's speak about some other thing."

She rocked her arms, crying, "It is so easy to make up one's mind."

"It's easy to you that has just one mind," he retorted with spirit, "but if you had as many minds as I have--!"

On they went.