

CHAPTER XXXV - THE BRANDING OF TOMMY

Grizel's secession had at least one good effect: it gave Tommy more time in which to make a scholar of himself. Would you like a picture of Tommy trying to make a scholar of himself?

They all helped him in their different ways: Grizel, by declining his company; Corp, by being far away at Look-about-you, adding to the inches of a farm-house; Aaron Latta, by saying nothing but looking "college or the herding;" Mr. McLean, who had settled down with Ailie at the Dovecot, by inquiries about his progress; Elspeth by--but did Elspeth's talks with him about how they should live in Aberdeen and afterwards (when they were in the big house) do more than send his mind a-galloping (she holding on behind) along roads that lead not to Aberdeen? What drove Tommy oftenest to the weary drudgery was, perhaps, the alarm that came over him when he seemed of a sudden to hear the names of the bursars proclaimed and no Thomas Sandys among them. Then did he shudder, for well he knew that Aaron would keep his threat, and he hastily covered the round table with books and sat for hours sorrowfully pecking at them, every little while to discover that his mind had soared to other things, when he hauled it back, as one draws in a reluctant kite. On these occasions Aaron seldom troubled him, except by glances that, nevertheless, brought the kite back more quickly than if they had been words of warning. If Elspeth was present, the warper might sit moodily by the fire, but when the man and the boy were left together, one or other of them soon retired, as if this was the only way of preserving the peace. Though determined to keep his word to Jean Myles liberally, Aaron had never liked Tommy, and Tommy's avoidance of him is easily accounted for; he knew that Aaron did not admire him, and unless you admired Tommy he was always a boor in your presence, shy and self-distrustful. Especially was this so if you were a lady (how amazingly he got on in after years with some of you, what agony others endured till he went away!), and it is the chief reason why there are such contradictory accounts of him to-day.

Sometimes Mr. Cathro had hopes of him other than those that could only be revealed in a shameful whisper with the door shut. "Not so bad," he might say to Mr. McLean; "if he keeps it up we may squeeze him through yet, without trusting to--to what I was fool enough to mention to you.

The mathematics are his weak point, there's nothing practical about him (except when it's needed to carry out his devil's designs) and he cares not a doit about the line A B, nor what it's doing in the circle K, but there's whiles he surprises me when we're at Homer. He has the spirit o't, man, even when he bogles at the sense."

But the next time Ivie called for a report--!

In his great days, so glittering, so brief (the days of the penny Life) Tommy, looking back to this year, was sure that he had never really tried to work. But he had. He did his very best, doggedly, wearily sitting at the round table till Elspeth feared that he was killing himself and gave him a melancholy comfort by saying so. An hour afterwards he might discover that he had been far away from his books, looking on at his affecting death and counting the mourners at the funeral.

Had he thought that Grizel's discovery was making her unhappy he would have melted at once, but never did she look so proud as when she scornfully passed him by, and he wagged his head complacently over her coming chagrin when she heard that he had carried the highest bursary. Then she would know what she had flung away. This should have helped him to another struggle with his lexicon, but it only provided a breeze for the kite, which flew so strong that he had to let go the string.

Aaron and the Dominie met one day in the square, and to Aaron's surprise Mr. Cathro's despondency about Tommy was more pronounced than before. "I wonder at that," the warper said, "for I assure you he has been harder 'at it than ever thae last nights. What's more, he used to look doleful as he sat at his table, but I notice now that he's as sweer to leave off as he's keen to begin, and the face of him is a' eagerness too, and he reads ower to himself what he has wrote and wags his head at it as if he thought it grand."

"Say you so?" asked Cathro, suspiciously; "does he leave what he writes lying about, Aaron?"

"No, but he takes it to you, does he no'?"

"Not him," said the Dominie, emphatically. "I may be mistaken, Aaron, but I'm doubting the young whelp is at his tricks again."

The Dominie was right, and before many days passed he discovered what was Tommy's new and delicious occupation.

For years Mr. Cathro had been in the habit of writing letters for such of the populace as could not guide a pen, and though he often told them not to come deaving him he liked the job, unexpected presents of a hen or a ham occasionally arriving as his reward, while the personal matters thus confided to him, as if he were a safe for the banking of private histories, gave him and his wife gossip for winter nights. Of late the number of his clients had decreased without his noticing it, so confident was he that they could not get on without him, but he received a shock at last from Andrew Dickie, who came one Saturday night with paper, envelope, a Queen's head, and a request for a letter for Bell Birse, now of Tilliedrum.

"You want me to speir in your name whether she'll have you, do you?" asked Cathro, with a flourish of his pen.

"It's no just so simple as that," said Andrew, and then he seemed to be rather at a loss to say what it was. "I dinna ken," he continued presently with a grave face, "whether you've noticed that I'm a gey queer deevil? Losh, I think I'm the queerest deevil I ken."

"We are all that," the Dominie assured him. "But what do you want me to write?"

"Well, it's like this," said Andrew, "I'm willing to marry her if she's agreeable, but I want to make sure that she'll take me afore I speir her. I'm a proud man, Dominie."

"You're a sly one!"

"Am I no!" said Andrew, well pleased. "Well, could you put the letter in that wy?"

"I wouldna," replied Mr. Cathro, "though I could, and I couldna though I would. It would defy the face of clay to do it, you canny lover."

Now, the Dominie had frequently declined to write as he was bidden, and had suggested alterations which were invariably accepted, but to his astonishment Andrew would not give in. "I'll be stepping, then," he said coolly, "for if you hinna the knack o't I ken somebody that has."

"Who?" demanded the irate Dominie.

"I promised no to tell you," replied Andrew, and away he went. Mr. Cathro expected him to return presently in humbler mood, but was disappointed, and a week or two afterwards he heard Andrew and Mary Jane Proctor cried in the parish church. "Did Bell Birse refuse him?" he asked the kirk officer, and was informed that Bell had never got a chance. "His letter was so cunning," said John, "that without speiring her, it drew ane frae her in which she let out that she was centred on Davit Allardyce."

"But who wrote Andrew's letter?" asked Mr. Cathro, sharply.

"I thought it had been yoursel'," said John, and the Dominie chafed, and lost much of the afternoon service by going over in his mind the names of possible rivals. He never thought of Tommy.

Then a week or two later fell a heavier blow. At least twice a year the Dominie had written for Meggy Duff to her daughter in Ireland a long letter founded on this suggestion, "Dear Kaytherine, if you dinna send ten shillings immediately, your pur auld mother will have neither house nor hame. I'm crying to you for't, Kaytherine; hearken and you'll hear my cry across the cauldrieff sea." He met Meggy in the Banker's Close one day, and asked her pleasantly if the time was not drawing nigh for another appeal.

"I have wrote," replied the old woman, giving her pocket a boastful smack, which she thus explained, "And it was the whole ten shillings this time, and you never got more for me than five."

"Who wrote the letter for you?" he asked, lowering.

She, too, it seemed, had promised not to tell.

"Did you promise to tell nobody, Meggy, or just no to tell me," he pressed her, of a sudden suspecting Tommy.

"Just no to tell you," she answered, and at that.

"Da-a-a," began the Dominie, and then saved his reputation by adding "gont." The derivation of the word dagont has puzzled many, but here we seem to have it.

It is interesting to know what Tommy wrote. The general opinion was that his letter must have been a triumph of eloquent appeal, and indeed

he had first sketched out several masterpieces, all of some length and in different styles, but on the whole not unlike the concoctions of Meggy's former secretary; that is, he had dwelt on the duties of daughters, on the hardness of the times, on the certainty that if Katherine helped this time assistance would never be needed again. This sort of thing had always satisfied the Dominie, but Tommy, despite his several attempts, had a vague consciousness that there was something second-rate about them, and he tapped on his brain till it responded. The letter he despatched to Ireland, but had the wisdom not to read aloud even to Meggy, contained nothing save her own words, "Dear Kaytherine, if you dinna send ten shillings immediately, your puir auld mother will have neither house nor hame. I'm crying to you for't, Kaytherine; hearken and you'll hear my cry across the cauld riff sea." It was a call from the heart which transported Katherine to Thrums in a second of time, she seemed to see her mother again, grown frail since last they met--and so all was well for Meggy. Tommy did not put all this to himself but he felt it, and after that he could not have written the letter differently. Happy Tommy! To be an artist is a great thing, but to be an artist and not know it is the most glorious plight in the world.

Other fickle clients put their correspondence into the boy's hands, and Cathro found it out but said nothing. Dignity kept him in check; he did not even let the tawse speak for him. So well did he dissemble that Tommy could not decide how much he knew, and dreaded his getting hold of some of the letters, yet pined to watch his face while he read them. This could not last forever. Mr. Cathro was like a haughty kettle which has choked its spout that none may know it has come a-boil, and we all know what in that event must happen sooner or later to the lid.

The three boys who had college in the tail of their eye had certain privileges not for the herd. It was taken for granted that when knowledge came their way they needed no overseer to make them stand their ground, and accordingly for great part of the day they had a back bench to themselves, with half a dozen hedges of boys and girls between them and the Dominie. From his chair Mr. Cathro could not see them, but a foot-board was nailed to it, and when he stood on this, as he had an aggravating trick of doing, softly and swiftly, they were suddenly in view. A large fire had been burning all day and the atmosphere was soporific. Mr. Cathro was so sleepy himself that the sight of a nodding head enraged him like a caricature, and he was on the foot-board frequently

for the reason that makes bearded men suck peppermints in church. Against his better judgment he took several peeps at Tommy, whom he had lately suspected of writing his letters in school or at least of gloating over them on that back bench. To-day he was sure of it. However absorbing Euclid may be, even the forty-seventh of the first book does not make you chuckle and wag your head; you can bring a substantive in Virgil back to the verb that has lost it without looking as if you would like to exhibit them together in the square. But Tommy was thus elated until he gave way to grief of the most affecting kind. Now he looked gloomily before him as if all was over, now he buried his face in his hands, next his eyes were closed as if in prayer. All this the Dominie stood from him, but when at last he began to blubber--

At the blackboard was an arithmetic class, slates in hand, each member adding up aloud in turn a row of figures. By and by it was known that Cathro had ceased to listen. "Go on," his voice rather than himself said, and he accepted Mary Dundas's trembling assertion that four and seven make ten. Such was the faith in Cathro that even boys who could add promptly turned their eleven into ten, and he did not catch them at it. So obviously was his mind as well as his gaze on, something beyond, that Sandy Riach, a wit who had been waiting his chance for years, snapped at it now, and roared "Ten and eleven, nineteen" ("Go on," said Cathro), "and four, twenty," gasped Sandy, "and eight, sixteen," he added, gaining courage. "Very good," murmured the Dominie, whereupon Sandy clenched his reputation forever by saying, in one glorious mouthful, "and six, eleven, and two, five, and one, nocht."

There was no laughing at it then (though Sandy held a levee in the evening), they were all so stricken with amazement. By one movement they swung round to see what had fascinated Cathro, and the other classes doing likewise, Tommy became suddenly the centre of observation. Big tears were slinking down his face, and falling on some sheets of paper, which emotion prevented his concealing. Anon the unusual stillness in the school made him look up, but he was dazed, like one uncertain of his whereabouts, and he blinked rapidly to clear his eyes, as a bird shakes water from its wings.

Mr. Cathro first uttered what was afterward described as a kind of throttled skirl, and then he roared "Come here!" whereupon Tommy stepped forward heavily, and tried, as commanded, to come to his senses, but it was not easy to make so long a journey in a moment, and

several times, as he seemed about to conquer his fears, a wave of feeling set them flowing again.

"Take your time," said Mr. Cathro, grimly, "I can wait," and this had such a helpful effect that Tommy was able presently to speak up for his misdeeds. They consisted of some letters written at home but brought to the school for private reading, and the Dominie got a nasty jar when he saw that they were all signed "Betsy Grieve." Miss Betsy Grieve, servant to Mr. Duthie, was about to marry, and these letters were acknowledgments of wedding presents. Now, Mr. Cathro had written similar letters for Betsy only a few days before.

"Did she ask you to write these for her?" he demanded, fuming, and Tommy replied demurely that she had. He could not help adding, though he felt the unwisdom of it, "She got some other body to do them first, but his letters didna satisfy her."

"Oh!" said Mr. Cathro, and it was such a vicious oh that Tommy squeaked tremblingly, "I dinna know who he was."

Keeping his mouth shut by gripping his underlip with his teeth, the Dominie read the letters, and Tommy gazed eagerly at him, all fear forgotten, soul conquering body. The others stood or sat waiting, perplexed as to the cause, confident of the issue. The letters were much finer productions than Cathro's, he had to admit it to himself as he read. Yet the rivals had started fair, for Betsy was a recent immigrant from Dunkeld way, and the letters were to people known neither to Tommy nor to the Dominie. Also, she had given the same details for the guidance of each. A lady had sent a teapot, which affected to be new, but was not; Betsy recognized it by a scratch on the lid, and wanted to scratch back, but politely. So Tommy wrote, "When you come to see me we shall have a cup of tea out of your beautiful present, and it will be like a meeting of three old friends." That was perhaps too polite, Betsy feared, but Tommy said authoritatively, "No, the politer the nipper."

There was a set of six cups and saucers from Peter something, who had loved Betsy in vain. She had shown the Dominie and Tommy the earrings given her long ago by Peter (they were bought with 'Sosh checks) and the poem he had written about them, and she was most anxious to gratify him in her reply. All Cathro could do, however, was to wish Peter well in some ornate sentences, while Tommy's was a letter that only a tender woman's heart could have indited, with such beautiful touches

about the days which are no more alas forever, that Betsy listened to it with heaving breast and felt so sorry for her old swain that, forgetting she had never loved him, she all but gave Andrew the go-by and returned to Peter. As for Peter, who had been getting over his trouble, he saw now for the first time what he had lost, and he carried Betsy's dear letter in his oxtter pocket and was inconsolable.

But the masterpiece went to Mrs. Dinnie, baker, in return for a flagon bun. Long ago her daughter, Janet, and Betsy had agreed to marry on the same day, and many a quip had Mrs. Dinnie cast at their romantic compact. But Janet died, and so it was a sad letter that Tommy had to write to her mother. "I'm doubting you're no auld enough for this ane," soft-hearted Betsy said, but she did not know her man. "Tell me some one thing the mother used often to say when she was taking her fun off the pair of you," he said, and "Where is she buried?" was a suggestive question, with the happy tag, "Is there a tree hanging over the grave?" Thus assisted, he composed a letter that had a tear in every sentence. Betsy rubbed her eyes red over it, and not all its sentiments were allowed to die, for Mrs. Dinnie, touched to the heart, printed the best of them in black licorice on short bread for funeral feasts, at which they gave rise to solemn reflections as they went down.

Nevertheless, this letter affected none so much as the writer of it. His first rough sketch became so damp as he wrote that he had to abandon his pen and take to pencil; while he was revising he had often to desist to dry his eyes on the coverlet of Aaron's bed, which made Elspeth weep also, though she had no notion what he was at. But when the work was finished he took her into the secret and read his letter to her, and he almost choked as he did so. Yet he smiled rapturously through his woe, and she knew no better than to be proud of him, and he woke next morning with a cold, brought on you can see how, but his triumph was worth its price.

Having read the letter in an uncanny silence, Mr. Cathro unbottled Tommy for the details, and out they came with a rush, blowing away the cork discretion. Yet was the Dominie slow to strike; he seemed to find more satisfaction in surveying his young friend with a wondering gaze that had a dash of admiration in it, which Tommy was the first to note.

"I don't mind admitting before the whole school," said Mr. Cathro, slowly, "that if these letters had been addressed to me they would have taken me in."

Tommy tried to look modest, but his chest would have its way.

"You little sacket," cried the Dominie, "how did you manage it?"

"I think I thought I was Betsy at the time," Tommy answered, with proper awe.

"She told me nothing about the weeping-willow at the grave," said the Dominie, perhaps in self-defence.

"You hadna speired if there was one," retorted Tommy, jealously.

"What made you think of it?"

"I saw it might come in neat." (He had said in the letter that the weeping-willow reminded him of the days when Janet's bonny hair hung down kissing her waist just as the willow kissed the grave.)

"Willows don't hang so low as you seem to think," said the Dominie.

"Yes, they do," replied Tommy, "I walked three miles to see one to make sure. I was near putting in another beautiful bit about weeping-willows."

"Well, why didn't you?"

Tommy looked up with an impudent snigger. "You could never guess," he said.

"Answer me at once," thundered his preceptor. "Was it because--"

"No," interrupted Tommy, so conscious of Mr. Cathro's inferiority that to let him go on seemed waste of time. "It was because, though it is a beautiful thing in itself, I felt a servant lassie wouldna have thought o't. I was sweer," he admitted, with a sigh; then firmly, "but I cut it out."

Again Cathro admired, reluctantly. The hack does feel the difference between himself and the artist. Cathro might possibly have had the idea, he could not have cut it out.

But the hack is sometimes, or usually, or nearly always the artist's master, and can make him suffer for his dem'd superiority.

"What made you snivel when you read the pathetic bits?" asked Cathro, with itching fingers.

"I was so sorry for Peter and Mrs. Dinnie," Tommy answered, a little puzzled himself now. "I saw them so clear."

"And yet until Betsy came to you, you had never heard tell of them?"

"No."

"And on reflection you don't care a doit about them?"

"N-no."

"And you care as little for Betsy?"

"No now, but at the time I a kind of thought I was to be married to Andrew."

"And even while you blubbered you were saying to yourself, 'What a clever billie I am!'"

Mr. Cathro had certainly intended to end the scene with the strap, but as he stretched out his hand for it he had another idea. "Do you know why Nether Drumgley's sheep are branded with the letters N.D.?" he asked his pupils, and a dozen replied, "So as all may ken wha they belong to."

"Precisely," said Mr. Cathro, "and similarly they used to brand a letter on a felon, so that all might know whom he belonged to." He crossed to the fireplace, and, picking up a charred stick, wrote with it on the forehead of startled Tommy the letters "S.T."

"Now," said the Dominie complacently, "we know to whom Tommy belongs."

All were so taken aback that for some seconds nothing could be heard save Tommy indignantly wiping his brow; then "Wha is he?" cried one, the mouthpiece of half a hundred.

"He is one of the two proprietors we have just been speaking of," replied Cathro, dryly, and turning again to Tommy, he said, "Wipe away, Sentimental Tommy, try hot water, try cold water, try a knife, but you will never get those letters off you; you are branded for ever and ever."