

CHAPTER XXXVII - THE END OF A BOYHOOD

Convinced of his own worthlessness, Tommy was sufficiently humble now, but Aaron Latta, nevertheless, marched to the square on the following market day and came back with the boy's sentence, Elspeth being happily absent.

"I say nothing about the disgrace you have brought on this house," the warper began without emotion, "for it has been a shamed house since afore you were born, and it's a small offence to skail on a clarty floor. But now I've done more for you than I promised Jean Myles to do, and you had your pick atween college and the herding, and the herding you've chosen twice. I call you no names, you ken best what you're fitted for, but I've seen the farmer of the Dubb of Prosen the day, and he was short-handed through the loss of Tod Lindertis, so you're fee'd to him. Dinna think you get Tod's place, it'll be years afore you rise to that, but it's right and proper that as he steps up, you should step down."

"The Dubb of Prosen!" cried Tommy in dismay. "It's fifteen miles frae here."

"It's a' that."

"But--but--but Elspeth and me never thought of my being so far away that she couldna see me. We thought of a farmer near Thrums."

"The farther you're frae her the better," said Aaron, uneasily, yet honestly believing what he said.

"It'll kill her," Tommy cried fiercely. With only his own suffering to consider he would probably have nursed it into a play through which he stalked as the noble child of misfortune, but in his anxiety for Elspeth he could still forget himself. "Fine you ken she canna do without me," he screamed.

"She maun be weaned," replied the warper, with a show of temper; he was convinced that the sooner Elspeth learned to do without Tommy the better it would be for herself in the end, but in his way of regarding the boy there was also a touch of jealousy, pathetic rather than forbidding. To him he left the task of breaking the news to Elspeth; and Tommy, terrified lest she should swoon under it, was almost offended when she

remained calm. But, alas, the reason was that she thought she was going with him.

"Will we have to walk all the way to the Dubb of Prosen?" she asked, quite brightly, and at that Tommy twisted about in misery. "You are no-- you canna--" he began, and then dodged the telling. "We--we may get a lift in a cart," he said weakly.

"And I'll sit aside you in the fields, and make chains o' the gowans, will I no? Speak, Tommy!"

"Ay--ay, will you," he groaned.

"And we'll have a wee, wee room to oursels, and--"

He broke down, "Oh, Elspeth," he cried, "it was ill-done of me no to stick to my books, and get a bursary, and it was waur o' me to bother about that word. I'm a scoundrel, I am, I'm a black, I'm a--"

But she put her hand on his mouth, saying, "I'm fonder o' you than ever, Tommy, and I'll like the Dubb o' Prosen fine, and what does it matter where we are when we're thegither?" which was poor comfort for him, but still he could not tell her the truth, and so in the end Aaron had to tell her. It struck her down, and the doctor had to be called in during the night to stop her hysterics. When at last she fell asleep Tommy's arm was beneath her, and by and by it was in agony, but he set his teeth and kept it there rather than risk waking her.

When Tommy was out of the way, Aaron did his clumsy best to soothe her, sometimes half shamefacedly pressing her cheek to his, and she did not repel him, but there was no response. "Dinna take on in that way, dawtie," he would say, "I'll be good to you."

"But you're no Tommy," Elspeth answered.

"I'm not, I'm but a stunted tree, blasted in my youth, but for a' that I would like to have somebody to care for me, and there's none to do't, Elspeth, if you winna. I'll gang walks wi' you, I'll take you to the fishing, I'll come to the garret at night to hap you up, I'll--I'll teach you the games I used to play mysel'. I'm no sure but what you might make something o' me yet, bairn, if you tried hard."

"But you're no Tommy," Elspeth wailed again, and when he advised her to put Tommy out of her mind for a little and speak of other things, she only answered innocently, "What else is there to speak about?"

Mr. McLean had sent Tommy a pound, and so was done with him, but Ailie still thought him a dear, though no longer a wonder, and Elspeth took a strange confession to her, how one night she was so angry with God that she had gone to bed without saying her prayers. She had just meant to keep Him in suspense for a little, and then say them, but she fell asleep. And that was not the worst, for when she woke in the morning, and saw that she was still living, she was glad she had not said them. But next night she said them twice.

And this, too, is another flash into her dark character. Tommy, who never missed saying his prayers and could say them with surprising quickness, told her, "God is fonder of lonely lassies than of any other kind, and every time you greet it makes Him greet, and when you're cheerful it makes Him cheerful too." This was meant to dry her eyes, but it had not that effect, for, said Elspeth, vindictively, "Well, then, I'll just make Him as miserable as I can."

When Tommy was merely concerned with his own affairs he did not think much about God, but he knew that no other could console Elspeth, and his love for her usually told him the right things to say, and while he said them, he was quite carried away by his sentiments and even wept over them, but within the hour he might be leering. They were beautiful, and were repeated of course to Mrs. McLean, who told her husband of them, declaring that this boy's love for his sister made her a better woman.

"But nevertheless," said Ivie, "Mr. Cathro assures me--"

"He is prejudiced," retorted Mrs. McLean warmly, prejudice being a failing which all women marvel at. "Just listen to what the boy said to Elspeth to-day. He said to her, 'When I am away, try for a whole day to be better than you ever were before, and think of nothing else, and then when prayer-time comes you will see that you have been happy without knowing it.' Fancy his finding out that."

"I wonder if he ever tried it himself?" said Mr. McLean.

"Ivie, think shame of yourself!"

"Well, even Cathro admits that he has a kind of cleverness, but--"

"Cleverness!" exclaimed Ailie, indignantly, "that is not cleverness, it is holiness;" and leaving the cynic she sought Elspeth, and did her good by pointing out that a girl who had such a brother should try to save him pain. "He is very miserable, dear," she said, "because you are so unhappy. If you looked brighter, think how that would help him, and it would show that you are worthy of him." So Elspeth went home trying hard to look brighter, but made a sad mess of it.

"Think of getting letters frae me every time the post comes in!" said Tommy, and then indeed her face shone.

And then Elspeth could write to him--yes, as often as ever she liked! This pleased her even more. It was such an exquisite thought that she could not wait, but wrote the first one before he started, and he answered it across the table. And Mrs. McLean made a letter bag, with two strings to it, and showed her how to carry it about with her in a safer place than a pocket.

Then a cheering thing occurred. Came Corp, with the astounding news that, in the Glenquharity dominie's opinion, Tommy should have got the Hugh Blackadder.

"He says he is glad he wasna judge, because he would have had to give you the prize, and he laughs like to split at the ministers for giving it to Lauchlan McLauchlan."

Now, great was the repute of Mr. Ogilvy, and Tommy gaped incredulous. "He had no word of that at the time," he said.

"No likely! He says if the ministers was so doited as to think his loon did best, it wasna for him to conter them."

"Man, Corp, you ca'me me aff my feet! How do you ken this?"

Corp had promised not to tell, and he thought he did not tell, but Tommy was too clever for him. Grizel, it appeared, had heard Mr. Ogilvy saying this strange thing to the doctor, and she burned to pass it on to Tommy, but she could not carry it to him herself, because--Why was it? Oh, yes, because she hated him. So she made a messenger of Corp, and warned him against telling who had sent him with the news.

Half enlightened, Tommy began to strut again. "You see there's something in me for all they say," he told Elspeth. "Listen to this. At the

bursary examinations there was some English we had to turn into Latin, and it said, 'No man ever attained supreme eminence who worked for mere lucre; such efforts must ever be bounded by base mediocrity. None shall climb high but he who climbs for love, for in truth where the heart is, there alone shall the treasure be found.' Elspeth, it came ower me in a clink how true that was, and I sat saying it to myself, though I saw Gav Dishart and Willie Simpson and the rest beginning to put it into Latin at once, as little ta'en up wi' the words as if they had been about auld Hannibal. I aye kent, Elspeth, that I could never do much at the learning, but I didna see the reason till I read that. Syne I kent that playing so real-like in the Den, and telling about my fits when it wasna me that had them but Corp, and mourning for Lewis Doig's father, and writing letters for folk so grandly, and a' my other queer ploys that ended in Cathro's calling me Sentimental Tommy, was what my heart was in, and I saw in a jiffy that if thae things were work, I should soon rise to supreme eminence."

"But they're no," said Elspeth, sadly.

"No," he admitted, his face falling, "but, Elspeth, if I was to hear some day of work I could put my heart into as if it were a game! I wouldna be laug in finding the treasure syne. Oh, the blatter I would make!"

"I doubt there's no sic work," she answered, but he told her not to be so sure. "I thought there wasna mysel'," he said, "till now, but sure as death my heart was as ta'en up wi' hunting for the right word as if it had been a game, and that was how the time slipped by so quick. Yet it was paying work, for the way I did it made Mr. Ogilvy see I should have got the prize, and a' body kens there's more cleverness in him than in a cart-load o' ministers."

"But, but there are no more Hugh Blackadders to try for, Tommy?"

"That's nothing, there maun be other work o' the same kind. Elspeth, cheer up, I tell you, I'll find a wy!"

"But you didna ken yoursel' that you should have got the Hugh Blackadder?"

He would not let this depress him. "I ken now," he said. Nevertheless, why he should have got it was a mystery which he longed to fathom. Mr. Ogilvy had returned to Glenquharity, so that an explanation could not be

drawn from him even if he were willing to supply it, which was improbable; but Tommy caught Grizel in the Banker's Close and compelled her to speak.

"I won't tell you a word of what Mr. Ogilvy said," she insisted, in her obstinate way, and, oh, how she despised Corp for breaking his promise.

"Corp didna ken he telled me," said Tommy, less to clear Corp than to exalt himself, "I wriggled it out o' him;" but even this did not bring Grizel to a proper frame of mind, so he said, to annoy her,

"At any rate you're fond o' me."

"I am not," she replied, stamping; "I think you are horrid."

"What else made you send Corp to me?"

"I did that because I heard you were calling yourself a blockhead."

"Oho," said he, "so you have been speiring about me though you winna speak to me!"

Grizel looked alarmed, and thinking to weaken his case, said, hastily, "I very nearly kept it from you, I said often to myself 'I won't tell him.'"

"So you have been thinking a lot about me!" was his prompt comment.

"If I have," she retorted, "I did not think nice things. And what is more, I was angry with myself for telling Corp to tell you."

Surely this was crushing, but apparently Tommy did not think so, for he said, "You did it against your will! That means I hare a power over you that you canna resist. Oho, oho!"

Had she become more friendly so should he, had she shed one tear he would have melted immediately; but she only looked him up and down disdainfully, and it hardened him. He said with a leer, "I ken what makes you hold your hands so tight, it's to keep your arms frae wagging;" and then her cry, "How do you know?" convicted her. He had not succeeded in his mission, but on his way home he muttered, triumphantly, "I did her, I did her!" and once he stopped to ask himself the question, "Was it because my heart was in it?" It was their last meeting till they were man and woman.

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A blazing sun had come out on top of heavy showers, and the land reeked and smelled as of the wash-tub. The smaller girls of Monypenny were sitting in passages playing at fivey, just as Sappho for instance used to play it; but they heard the Dubb of Prosen cart draw up at Aaron Latta's door, and they followed it to see the last of Tommy Sandys. Corp was already there, calling in at the door every time he heard a sob; "Dinna, Elspeth, dinna, he'll find a wy," but Grizel had refused to come, though Tommy knew that she had been asking when he started and which road the cart would take. Well, he was not giving her a thought at any rate; his box was in the cart now, and his face was streaked with tears that were all for Elspeth. She should not have come to the door, but she came, and--it was such a pitiable sight that Aaron Latta could not look on. He went hurriedly to his workshop, but not to warp, and even the carter was touched and he said to Tommy, "I tell you what, man, I have to go round by Causeway End smiddy, and you and the crittur have time, if you like, to take the short cut and meet me at the far corner o' Caddam wood."

So Tommy and Elspeth, holding each other's hands, took the short cut and they came to the far end of Caddam, and Elspeth thought they had better say it here before the cart came; but Tommy said he would walk back with her through the wood as far as the Toom Well, and they could say it there. They tried to say it at the Well, but--Elspeth was still with him when he returned to the far corner of Caddam, where the cart was now awaiting him. The carter was sitting on the shaft, and he told them he was in no hurry, and what is more, he had the delicacy to turn his back on them and struck his horse with the reins for looking round at the sorrowful pair. They should have said it now, but first Tommy walked back a little bit of the way with Elspeth, and then she came back with him, and that was to be the last time, but he could not leave her, and so, there they were in the wood, looking woefully at each other, and it was not said yet.

They had said it now, and all was over; they were several paces apart. Elspeth smiled, she had promised to smile because Tommy said it would kill him if she was greeting at the very end. But what a smile it was! Tommy whistled, he had promised to whistle to show that he was happy as long as Elspeth could smile. She stood still, but he went on, turning round every few yards to--to whistle. "Never forget, day nor night, what I

said to you," he called to her. "You're the only one I love, and I care not a hair for Grizel."

But when he disappeared, shouting to her, "I'll find a wy, I'll find a wy," she screamed and ran after him. He was already in the cart, and it had started. He stood up in it and waved his hand to her, and she stood on the dyke and waved to him, and thus they stood waving till a hollow in the road swallowed cart and man and boy. Then Elspeth put her hands to her eyes and went sobbing homeward.

When she was gone, a girl who had heard all that passed between them rose from among the broom of Caddam and took Elspeth's place on the dyke, where she stood motionless waiting for the cart to reappear as it climbed the other side of the hollow. She wore a black frock and a blue bonnet with white strings, but the cart was far away, and Tommy thought she was Elspeth, and springing to his feet again in the cart he waved and waved. At first she did not respond, for had she not heard him say, "You're the only one I love, and I care not a hair for Grizel?" And she knew he was mistaking her for Elspeth. But by and by it struck her that he would be more unhappy if he thought Elspeth was too overcome by grief to wave to him. Her arms rocked passionately; no, no, she would not lift them to wave to him, he could be as unhappy as he chose. Then in a spirit of self-abnegation that surely raised her high among the daughters of men, though she was but a painted lady's child, she waved to him to save him pain, and he, still erect in the cart, waved back until nothing could be seen by either of them save wood and fields and a long, deserted road.