

## CHAPTER VI - GHOSTS THAT HAUNT THE DEN

Looking through the Tommy papers of this period, like a conscientious biographer, I find among them manuscripts that remind me how diligently he set to work at his new book the moment he went North, and also letters which, if printed, would show you what a wise and good man Tommy was. But while I was fingering those, there floated from them to the floor a loose page, and when I saw that it was a chemist's bill for oil and liniment I remembered something I had nigh forgotten. "Eureka!" I cried. "I shall tell the story of the chemist's bill, and some other biographer may print the letters."

Well, well! but to think that this scrap of paper should flutter into view to damn him after all those years!

The date is Saturday, May 28, by which time Tommy had been a week in Thrums without doing anything very reprehensible, so far as Grizel knew. She watched for telltales as for a mouse to show at its hole, and at the worst, I think, she saw only its little head. That was when Tommy was talking beautifully to her about her dear doctor. He would have done wisely to avoid this subject; but he was so notoriously good at condolences that he had to say it. He had thought it out, you may remember, a year ago, but hesitated to post it; and since then it had lain heavily within him, as if it knew it was a good thing and pined to be up and strutting.

He said it with emotion; evidently Dr. McQueen had been very dear to him, and any other girl would have been touched; but Grizel stiffened, and when he had finished, this is what she said, quite snappily:

"He never liked you."

Tommy was taken aback, but replied, with gentle dignity, "Do you think, Grizel, I would let that make any difference in my estimate of him?"

"But you never liked him," said she; and now that he thought of it, this was true also. It was useless to say anything about the artistic instinct to her; she did not know what it was, and would have had plain words for it as soon as he told her. Please to picture Tommy picking up his beautiful

speech and ramming it back into his pocket as if it were a rejected manuscript.

"I am sorry you should think so meanly of me, Grizel," he said with manly forbearance, and when she thought it all out carefully that night she decided that she had been hasty. She could not help watching Tommy for backslidings, but oh, it was sweet to her to decide that she had not found any.

"It was I who was horrid," she announced to him frankly, and Tommy forgave her at once. She offered him a present: "When the doctor died I gave some of his things to his friends; it is the Scotch custom, you know. He had a new overcoat; it had been worn but two or three times. I should be so glad if you would let me give it to you for saying such sweet things about him. I think it will need very little alteration."

Thus very simply came into Tommy's possession the coat that was to play so odd a part in his history. "But oh, Grizel," said he, with mock reproach, "you need not think that I don't see through you! Your deep design is to cover me up. You despise my velvet jacket!"

"It does not--" Grizel began, and stopped.

"It is not in keeping with my doleful countenance," said Tommy, candidly; "that was what you were to say. Let me tell you a secret, Grizel: I wear it to spite my face. Sha'n't give up my velvet jacket for anybody, Grizel; not even for you." He was in gay spirits, because he knew she liked him again; and she saw that was the reason, and it warmed her.

She was least able to resist Tommy when he was most a boy, and it was actually watchful Grizel who proposed that he and she and Elspeth should revisit the Den together. How often since the days of their childhood had Grizel wandered it alone, thinking of those dear times, making up her mind that if ever Tommy asked her to go into the Den again with him she would not go, the place was so much sweeter to her than it could be to him. And yet it was Grizel herself who was saying now, "Let us go back to the Den."

Tommy caught fire. "We sha'n't go back," he cried defiantly, "as men and women. Let us be boy and girl again, Grizel. Let us have that Saturday we missed long ago. I missed a Saturday on purpose, Grizel, so that we should have it now."

She shook her head wistfully, but she was glad that Tommy would fain have had one of the Saturdays back. Had he waxed sentimental she would not have gone a step of the way with him into the past, but when he was so full of glee she could take his hand and run back into it.

"But we must wait until evening," Tommy said, "until Corp is unharnessed; we must not hurt the feelings of Corp by going back to the Den without him."

"How mean of me not to think of Corp!" Grizel cried; but the next moment she was glad she had not thought of him, it was so delicious to have proof that Tommy was more loyal. "But we can't turn back the clock, can we, Corp?" she said to the fourth of the conspirators, to which Corp replied, with his old sublime confidence, "He'll find a way."

And at first it really seemed as if Tommy had found a way. They did not go to the Den four in a line or two abreast--nothing so common as that. In the wild spirits that mastered him he seemed to be the boy incarnate, and it was always said of Tommy by those who knew him best that if he leaped back into boyhood they had to jump with him. Those who knew him best were with him now. He took command of them in the old way. He whispered, as if Black Cathro were still on the prowl for him. Corp of Corp had to steal upon the Den by way of the Silent Pool, Grizel by the Queen's Bower, Elspeth up the burn-side, Captain Stroke down the Reekie Brothpot. Grizel's arms rocked with delight in the dark, and she was on her way to the Cuttle Well, the trysting-place, before she came to and saw with consternation that Tommy had been ordering her about.

She was quite a sedate young lady by the time she joined them at the well, and Tommy was the first to feel the change. "Don't you think this is all rather silly?" she said, when he addressed her as the Lady Griselda, and it broke the spell. Two girls shot up into women, a beard grew on Tommy's chin, and Corp became a father. Grizel had blown Tommy's pretty project to dust just when he was most gleeful over it; yet, instead of bearing resentment, he pretended not even to know that she was the culprit.

"Corp," he said ruefully, "the game is up!" And "Listen," he said, when they had sat down, crushed, by the old Cuttle Well, "do you hear anything?"

It was a very still evening. "I hear nocht," said Corp, "but the trickle o' the burn. What did you hear?"

"I thought I heard a baby cry," replied Tommy, with a groan. "I think it was your baby, Corp. Did you hear it, Grizel?"

She understood, and nodded.

"And you, Elspeth?"

"Yes."

"My bairn!" cried the astounded Corp.

"Yours," said Tommy, reproachfully; "and he has done for us. Ladies and gentlemen, the game is up."

Yes, the game was up, and she was glad, Grizel said to herself, as they made their melancholy pilgrimage of what had once been an enchanted land. But she felt that Tommy had been very forbearing to her, and that she did not deserve it. Undoubtedly he had ordered her about, but in so doing had he not been making half-pathetic sport of his old self--and was it with him that she was annoyed for ordering, or with herself for obeying? And why should she not obey, when it was all a jest? It was as if she still had some lingering fear of Tommy. Oh, she was ashamed of herself. She must say something nice to him at once. About what? About his book, of course. How base of her not to have done so already! but how good of him to have overlooked her silence on that great topic!

It was not ignorance of its contents that had kept her silent. To confess the horrid truth, Grizel had read the book suspiciously, looking as through a microscope for something wrong--hoping not to find it, but peering minutely. The book, she knew, was beautiful; but it was the writer of the book she was peering for--the Tommy she had known so well, what had he grown into? In her heart she had exulted from the first in his success, and she should have been still more glad (should she not?) to learn that his subject was woman; but no, that had irritated her. What was perhaps even worse, she had been still more irritated on hearing that the work was rich in sublime thoughts. As a boy, he had maddened her most in his grandest moments. I can think of no other excuse for her.

She would not accept it as an excuse for herself now. What she saw with scorn was that she was always suspecting the worst of Tommy. Very probably there was not a thought in the book that had been put in with his old complacent waggle of the head. "Oh, am I not a wonder!" he used to cry, when he did anything big; but that was no reason why she should suspect him of being conceited still. Very probably he really and truly felt what he wrote--felt it not only at the time, but also next morning. In his boyhood Mr. Cathro had christened him Sentimental Tommy; but he was a man now, and surely the sentimentalities in which he had dressed himself were flung aside for ever, like old suits of clothes. So Grizel decided eagerly, and she was on the point of telling him how proud she was of his book, when Tommy, who had thus far behaved so well, of a sudden went to pieces.

He and Grizel were together. Elspeth was a little in front of them, walking with a gentleman who still wondered what they meant by saying that they had heard his baby cry. "For he's no here," Corp had said earnestly to them all; "though I'm awid for the time to come when I'll be able to bring him to the Den and let him see the Jacobites' Lair."

There was nothing startling in this remark, so far as Grizel could discover; but she saw that it had an immediate and incomprehensible effect on Tommy. First, he blundered in his talk as if he was thinking deeply of something else; then his face shone as it had been wont to light up in his boyhood when he was suddenly enraptured with himself; and lastly, down his cheek and into his beard there stole a tear of agony. Obviously, Tommy was in deep woe for somebody or something.

It was a chance for a true lady to show that womanly sympathy of which such exquisite things are said in the first work of T. Sandys: but it merely infuriated Grizel, who knew that Tommy did not feel nearly so deeply as she this return to the Den, and, therefore, what was he in such distress about? It was silly sentiment of some sort, she was sure of that. In the old days she would have asked him imperiously to tell her what was the matter with him; but she must not do that now--she dare not even rock her indignant arms; she could only walk silently by his side, longing fervently to shake him.

He had quite forgotten her presence; indeed, she was not really there, for a number of years had passed, and he was Corp Shiach, walking the Den alone. To-morrow he was to bring his boy to show him the old Lair and

other fondly remembered spots; to-night he must revisit them alone. So he set out blithely, but, to his bewilderment, he could not find the Lair. It had not been a tiny hollow where muddy water gathered; he remembered an impregnable fortress full of men whose armour rattled as they came and went; so this could not be the Lair. He had taken the wrong way to it, for the way was across a lagoon, up a deep-flowing river, then by horse till the rocky ledge terrified all four-footed things; no, up a grassy slope had never been the way. He came night after night, trying different ways; but he could not find the golden ladder, though all the time he knew that the Lair lay somewhere over there. When he stood still and listened he could hear the friends of his youth at play, and they seemed to be calling: "Are you coming, Corp? Why does not Corp come back?" but he could never see them, and when he pressed forward their voices died away. Then at last he said sadly to his boy: "I shall never be able to show you the Lair, for I cannot find the way to it." And the boy was touched, and he said: "Take my hand, father, and I will lead you to the Lair; I found the way long ago for myself."

It took Tommy about two seconds to see all this, and perhaps another half-minute was spent in sad but satisfactory contemplation of it. Then he felt that, for the best effect, Corp's home life was too comfortable; so Gavinia ran away with a soldier. He was now so sorry for Corp that the tear rolled down. But at the same moment he saw how the effect could be still further heightened by doing away with his friend's rude state of health, and he immediately jammed him between the buffers of two railway carriages, and gave him a wooden leg. It was at this point that a lady who had kept her arms still too long rocked them frantically, then said, with cutting satire: "Are you not feeling well, or have you hurt yourself? You seem to be very lame." And Tommy woke with a start, to see that he was hobbling as if one of his legs were timber to the knee.

"It is nothing," he said modestly. "Something Corp said set me thinking; that is all."

He had told the truth, and if what he imagined was twenty times more real to him than what was really there, how could Tommy help it? Indignant Grizel, however, who kept such a grip of facts, would make no such excuse for him.

"Elsbeth!" she called.

"There is no need to tell her," said Tommy. But Grizel was obdurate.

"Come here, Elspeth," she cried vindictively. "Something Corp said a moment ago has made your brother lame."

Tommy was lame; that was all Elspeth and Corp heard or could think of as they ran back to him. When did it happen? Was he in great pain? Had he fallen? Oh, why had he not told Elspeth at once?

"It is nothing," Tommy insisted, a little fiercely.

"He says so," Grizel explained, "not to alarm us. But he is suffering horribly. Just before I called to you his face was all drawn up in pain."

This made the sufferer wince. "That was another twinge," she said promptly. "What is to be done, Elspeth?"

"I think I could carry him," suggested Corp, with a forward movement that made Tommy stamp his foot--the wooden one.

"I am all right," he told them testily, and looking uneasily at Grizel.

"How brave of you to say so!" said she.

"It is just like him," Elspeth said, pleased with Grizel's remark.

"I am sure it is," Grizel said, so graciously.

It was very naughty of her. Had she given him a chance he would have explained that it was all a mistake of Grizel's. That had been his intention; but now a devil entered into Tommy and spoke for him.

"I must have slipped and sprained my ankle," he said. "It is slightly painful; but I shall be able to walk home all right, Corp, if you let me use you as a staff."

I think he was a little surprised to hear himself saying this; but, as soon as it was said, he liked it. He was Captain Stroke playing in the Den again, after all, and playing as well as ever. Nothing being so real to Tommy as pretence, I daresay he even began to feel his ankle hurting him. "Gently," he begged of Corp, with a gallant smile, and clenching his teeth so that the pain should not make him cry out before the ladies. Thus, with his lieutenant's help, did Stroke manage to reach Aaron's house, making light of his mishap, assuring them cheerily that he should be all right to-morrow, and carefully avoiding Grizel's eye, though he wanted very much to know what she thought of him (and of herself) now.

There were moments when she did not know what to think, and that always distressed Grizel, though it was a state of mind with which Tommy could keep on very friendly terms. The truth seemed too monstrous for belief. Was it possible she had misjudged him? Perhaps he really had sprained his ankle. But he had made no pretence of that at first, and besides,--yes, she could not be mistaken,--it was the other leg.

She soon let him see what she was thinking. "I am afraid it is too serious a case for me," she said, in answer to a suggestion from Corp, who had a profound faith in her medical skill, "but, if you like,"--she was addressing Tommy now,--"I shall call at Dr. Gemmell's, on my way home, and ask him to come to you."

"There is no necessity; a night's rest is all I need," he answered hastily.

"Well, you know best," she said, and there was a look on her face which Thomas Sandys could endure from no woman. "On second thoughts," he said, "I think it would be advisable to have a doctor. Thank you very much, Grizel. Corp, can you help me to lift my foot on to that chair? Softly--ah!--ugh!"

His eyes did not fall before hers. "And would you mind asking him to come at once, Grizel?" he said sweetly. She went straight to the doctor.