

## CHAPTER VII - THE BEGINNING OF THE DUEL

It was among old Dr. McQueen's sayings that when he met a man who was certified to be in no way remarkable he wanted to give three cheers. There are few of them, even in a little place like Thrums; but David Gemmell was one.

So McQueen had always said, but Grizel was not so sure. "He is very good-looking, and he does not know it," she would point out. "Oh, what a remarkable man!"

She had known him intimately for nearly six years now, ever since he became the old doctor's assistant on the day when, in the tail of some others, he came to Thrums, aged twenty-one, to apply for the post. Grizel had even helped to choose him; she had a quaint recollection of his being submitted to her by McQueen, who told her to look him over and say whether he would do--an odd position in which to place a fourteen-year-old girl, but Grizel had taken it most seriously, and, indeed, of the two men only Gemmell dared to laugh.

"You should not laugh when it is so important," she said gravely; and he stood abashed, although I believe he chuckled again when he retired to his room for the night. She was in that room next morning as soon as he had left it, to smell the curtains (he smoked), and see whether he folded his things up neatly and used both the brush and the comb, but did not use pomade, and slept with his window open, and really took a bath instead of merely pouring the water into it and laying the sponge on top (oh, she knew them!)--and her decision, after some days, was that, though far from perfect, he would do, if he loved her dear darling doctor sufficiently. By this time David was openly afraid of her, which Grizel noticed, and took to be, in the circumstances, a satisfactory sign.

She watched him narrowly for the next year, and after that she ceased to watch him at all. She was like a congregation become so sure of its minister's soundness that it can risk going to sleep. To begin with, he was quite incapable of pretending to be anything he was not. Oh, how unlike a boy she had once known! His manner, like his voice, was quiet. Being himself the son of a doctor, he did not doddle through life amazed at the splendid eminence he had climbed to, which is the weakness of Scottish students when they graduate, and often for fifty years

afterwards. How sweet he was to Dr. McQueen, never forgetting the respect due to gray hairs, never hinting that the new school of medicine knew many things that were hidden from the old, and always having the sense to support McQueen when she was scolding him for his numerous naughty ways. When the old doctor came home now on cold nights it was not with his cravat in his pocket, and Grizel knew very well who had put it round his neck. McQueen never had the humiliation, so distressing to an old doctor, of being asked by patients to send his assistant instead of coming himself. He thought they preferred him, and twitted David about it; but Grizel knew that David had sometimes to order them to prefer the old man. She knew that when he said good-night and was supposed to have gone to his lodgings, he was probably off to some poor house where, if not he, a tired woman must sit the long night through by a sufferer's bedside, and she realized with joy that his chief reason for not speaking of such things was that he took them as part of his natural work and never even knew that he was kind. He was not specially skilful, he had taken no honours either at school or college, and he considered himself to be a very ordinary young man. If you had said that on this point you disagreed with him, his manner probably would have implied that he thought you a bit of an ass.

When a new man arrives in Thrums, the women come to their doors to see whether he is good-looking. They said No of Tommy when he came back, but it had been an emphatic Yes for Dr. Gemmell. He was tall and very slight, and at twenty-seven, as at twenty-one, despite the growth of a heavy moustache, there was a boyishness about his appearance, which is, I think, what women love in a man more than anything else. They are drawn to him by it, and they love him out of pity when it goes. I suppose it brings back to them some early, beautiful stage in the world's history when men and women played together without fear. Perhaps it lay in his smile, which was so winning that wrinkled old dames spoke of it, who had never met the word before, smiles being little known in Thrums, where in a workaday world we find it sufficient either to laugh or to look thrawn. His dark curly hair was what Grizel was most suspicious of; he must be vain of that, she thought, until she discovered that he was quite sensitive to its being mentioned, having ever detested his curls as an eyesore, and in his boyhood clipped them savagely to the roots. He had such a firm chin, if there had been another such chin going a-begging, I should have liked to clap it on to Tommy Sandys.

Tommy Sandys! All this time we have been neglecting that brave sufferer, and while we talk his ankle is swelling and swelling. Well, Grizel was not so inconsiderate, for she walked very fast and with an exceedingly determined mouth to Dr. Gemmell's lodgings. He was still in lodgings, having refused to turn Grizel out of her house, though she had offered to let it to him. She left word, the doctor not being in, that he was wanted at once by Mr. Sandys, who had sprained his ankle.

Now, then, Tommy!

For an hour, perhaps until she went to bed, she remained merciless. She saw the quiet doctor with the penetrating eyes examining that ankle, asking a few questions, and looking curiously at his patient; then she saw him lift his hat and walk out of the house.

It gave her pleasure; no, it did not. While she thought of this Tommy she despised, there came in front of him a boy who had played with her long ago when no other child would play with her, and now he said, "You have grown cold to me, Grizel," and she nodded assent, and little wells of water rose to her eyes and lay there because she had nodded assent.

She had never liked Dr. Gemmell so little as when she saw him approaching her house next morning. The surgery was still attached to it, and very often he came from there, his visiting-book in his hand, to tell her of his patients, even to consult her; indeed, to talk to Grizel about his work without consulting her would have been difficult, for it was natural to her to decide what was best for everybody. These consultations were very unprofessional, but from her first coming to the old doctor's house she had taken it as a matter of course that in his practice, as in affairs relating to his boots and buttons, she should tell him what to do and he should do it. McQueen had introduced his assistant to this partnership half-shamefacedly and with a cautious wink over the little girl's head; and Gemmell fell into line at once, showing her his new stethoscope as gravely as if he must abandon it at once should not she approve, which fine behaviour, however, was quite thrown away on Grizel, who, had he conducted himself otherwise, would merely have wondered what was the matter with the man; and as she was eighteen or more before she saw that she had exceeded her duties, it was then, of course, too late to cease doing it.

She knew now how good, how forbearing, he had been to the little girl, and that it was partly because he was acquainted with her touching

history. The grave courtesy with which he had always treated her--and which had sometimes given her as a girl a secret thrill of delight, it was so sweet to Grizel to be respected--she knew now to be less his natural manner to women than something that came to him in her presence because he who knew her so well thought her worthy of deference; and it helped her more, far more, than if she had seen it turn to love. Yet as she received him in her parlor now--her too spotless parlor, for not even the ashes in the grate were visible, which is a mistake--she was not very friendly. He had discovered what Tommy was, and as she had been the medium she could not blame him for that, but how could he look as calm as ever when such a deplorable thing had happened?

"What you say is true; I knew it before I asked you to go to him, and I knew you would find it out; but please to remember that he is a man of genius, whom it is not for such as you to judge."

That was the sort of haughty remark she held ready for him while they talked of other cases; but it was never uttered, for by and by he said:

"And then, there is Mr. Sandys's ankle. A nasty accident, I am afraid."

Was he jesting? She looked at him sharply. "Have you not been to see him yet?" she asked.

He thought she had misunderstood him. He had been to see Mr. Sandys twice, both last night and this morning.

And he was sure it was a sprain?

Unfortunately it was something worse--dislocation; further mischief might show itself presently.

"Haemorrhage into the neighbouring joint on inflammation?" she asked scientifically and with scorn.

"Yes."

Grizel turned away from him. "I think not," she said.

Well, possibly not, if Mr. Sandys was careful and kept his foot from the ground for the next week. The doctor did not know that she was despising him, and he proceeded to pay Tommy a compliment. "I had to reduce the dislocation, of course," he told her, "and he bore the wrench splendidly, though there is almost no pain more acute."

"Did he ask you to tell me that?" Grizel was thirsting to inquire, but she forbore. Unwittingly, however, the doctor answered the question. "I could see," he said, "that Mr. Sandys made light of his sufferings to save his sister pain. I cannot recall ever having seen a brother and sister so attached."

That was quite true, Grizel admitted to herself. In all her recollections of Tommy she could not remember one critical moment in which Elspeth had not been foremost in his thoughts. It passed through her head, "Even now he must make sure that Elspeth is in peace of mind before he can care to triumph over me," and she would perhaps have felt less bitter had he put his triumph first.

His triumph! Oh, she would show him whether it was a triumph. He had destroyed for ever her faith in David Gemmell. The quiet, observant doctor, who had such an eye for the false, had been deceived as easily as all the others, and it made her feel very lonely. But never mind; Tommy should find out, and that within the hour, that there was one whom he could not cheat. Her first impulse, always her first impulse, was to go straight to his side and tell him what she thought of him. Her second, which was neater, was to send by messenger her compliments to Mr. and Miss Sandys, and would they, if not otherwise engaged, come and have tea with her that afternoon? Not a word in the note about the ankle, but a careful sentence to the effect that she had seen Dr. Gemmell to-day, and proposed asking him to meet them.

Maggy Ann, who had conveyed the message, came back with the reply. Elspeth regretted that they could not accept Grizel's invitation, owing to the accident to her brother being very much more serious than Grizel seemed to think. "I can't understand," Elspeth added, "why Dr. Gemmell did not tell you this when he saw you."

"Is it a polite letter?" asked inquisitive Maggy Ann, and Grizel assured her that it was most polite. "I hardly expected it," said the plain-spoken dame, "for I'm thinking by their manner it's more than can be said of yours."

"I merely invited them to come to tea."

"And him wi' his leg broke! Did you no ken he was lying on chairs?"

"I did not know it was so bad as that, Maggy Ann. So my letter seemed to annoy him, did it?" said Grizel, eagerly, and, I fear, well pleased.

"It angered her most terrible," said Maggy Ann, "but no him. He gave a sort of a laugh when he read it."

"A laugh!"

"Ay, and syne she says, 'It is most heartless of Grizel; she does not even ask how you are to-day; one would think she did not know of the accident'; and she says, 'I have a good mind to write her a very stiff letter.' And says he in a noble, melancholic voice, 'We must not hurt Grizel's feelings,' he says. And she says, 'Grizel thinks it was nothing because you bore it so cheerfully; oh, how little she knows you!' she says; and 'You are too forgiving,' she says. And says he, 'If I have anything to forgive Grizel for, I forgive her willingly.' And syne she quieted down and wrote the letter."

Forgive her! Oh, how it enraged Grizel! How like the Tommy of old to put it in that way. There never had been a boy so good at forgiving people for his own crimes, and he always looked so modest when he did it. He was reclining on his chairs at this moment, she was sure he was, forgiving her in every sentence. She could have endured it more easily had she felt sure that he was seeing himself as he was; but she remembered him too well to have any hope of that.

She put on her bonnet, and took it off again; a terrible thing, remember, for Grizel to be in a state of indecision. For the remainder of that day she was not wholly inactive. Meeting Dr. Gemmell in the street, she impressed upon him the advisability of not allowing Mr. Sandys to move for at least a week.

"He might take a drive in a day or two," the doctor thought, "with his sister."

"He would be sure to use his foot," Grizel maintained, "if you once let him rise from his chair; you know they all do." And Gemmell agreed that she was right. So she managed to give Tommy as irksome a time as possible.

But next day she called. To go through another day without letting him see how despicable she thought him was beyond her endurance. Elspeth was a little stiff at first, but Tommy received her heartily and with nothing in his manner to show that she had hurt his finer feelings. His

leg (the wrong leg, as Grizel remembered at once) was extended on a chair in front of him; but instead of nursing it ostentatiously as so many would have done, he made humorous remarks at its expense. "The fact is," he said cheerily, "that so long as I don't move I never felt better in my life. And I daresay I could walk almost as well as either of you, only my tyrant of a doctor won't let me try." "He told me you had behaved splendidly," said Grizel, "while he was reducing the dislocation. How brave you are! You could not have endured more stoically though there had been nothing the matter with it."

"It was soon over," Tommy replied lightly. "I think Elspeth suffered more than I."

Elspeth told the story of his heroism. "I could not stay in the room," she said; "it was too terrible." And Grizel despised too tender-hearted Elspeth for that; she was so courageous at facing pain herself. But Tommy had guessed that Elspeth was trembling behind the door, and he had called out, "Don't cry, Elspeth; I am all right; it is nothing at all."

"How noble!" was Grizel's comment, when she heard of this; and then Elspeth was her friend again, insisted on her staying to tea, and went into the kitchen to prepare it. Aaron was out.

The two were alone now, and in the circumstances some men would have given the lady the opportunity to apologize, if such was her desire. But Tommy's was a more generous nature; his manner was that of one less sorry to be misjudged than anxious that Grizel should not suffer too much from remorse. If she had asked his pardon then and there, I am sure he would have replied, "Right willingly, Grizel," and begged her not to give another thought to the matter. What is of more importance, Grizel was sure of this also, and it was the magnanimity of him that especially annoyed her. There seemed to be no disturbing it. Even when she said, "Which foot is it?" he answered, "The one on the chair," quite graciously, as if she had asked a natural question.

Grizel pointed out that the other foot must be tired of being a foot in waiting. It had got a little exercise, Tommy replied lightly, last night and again this morning, when it had helped to convey him to and from his bed.

Had he hopped? she asked brutally.

No, he said; he had shuffled along. Half rising, he attempted to show her humourously how he walked nowadays--tried not to wince, but had to. Ugh, that was a twinge! Grizel sarcastically offered her assistance, and he took her shoulder gratefully. They crossed the room--a tedious journey. "Now let me see if you can manage alone," she says, and suddenly deserts him.

He looked rather helplessly across the room. Few sights are so pathetic as the strong man of yesterday feeling that the chair by the fire is a distant object to-day. Tommy knew how pathetic it was, but Grizel did not seem to know.

"Try it," she said encouragingly; "it will do you good."

He got as far as the table, and clung to it, his teeth set. Grizel clapped her hands. "Excellently done!" she said, with fell meaning, and recommended him to move up and down the room for a little; he would feel ever so much the better for it afterwards.

The pain--was--considerable, he said. Oh, she saw that, but he had already proved himself so good at bearing pain, and the new school of surgeons held that it was wise to exercise an injured limb.

Even then it was not a reproachful glance that Tommy gave her, though there was some sadness in it. He moved across the room several times, a groan occasionally escaping him. "Admirable!" said his critic. "Bravo! Would you like to stop now?"

"Not until you tell me to," he said determinedly, but with a gasp.

"It must be dreadfully painful," she replied coldly, "but I should like you to go on." And he went on until suddenly he seemed to have lost the power to lift his feet. His body swayed; there was an appealing look on his face. "Don't be afraid; you won't fall," said Grizel. But she had scarcely said it when he fainted dead away, and went down at her feet.

"Oh, how dare you!" she cried in sudden flame, and she drew back from him. But after a moment she knew that he was shamming no longer--or she knew it and yet could not quite believe it; for, hurrying out of the room for water, she had no sooner passed the door than she swiftly put back her head as if to catch him unawares; but he lay motionless.



The sight of her dear brother on the floor paralyzed Elspeth, who could only weep for him, and call to him to look at her and speak to her. But in such an emergency Grizel was as useful as any doctor, and by the time Gemmell arrived in haste the invalid was being brought to. The doctor was a practical man who did not ask questions while there was something better to do. Had he asked any as he came in, Grizel would certainly have said: "He wanted to faint to make me believe he really has a bad ankle, and somehow he managed to do it." And if the doctor had replied that people can't faint by wishing, she would have said that he did not know Mr. Sandys.

But, with few words, Gemmell got his patient back to the chairs, and proceeded to undo the bandages that were round his ankle. Grizel stood by, assisting silently. She had often assisted the doctors, but never before with that scornful curl of her lip. So the bandages were removed and the ankle laid bare. It was very much swollen and discoloured, and when Grizel saw this she gave a little cry, and the ointment she was holding slipped from her hand. For the first time since he came to Thrums, she had failed Gemmell at a patient's side.

"I had not expected it to be--like this," she said in a quivering voice, when he looked at her in surprise.

"It will look much worse to-morrow," he assured them, grimly. "I can't understand, Miss Sandys, how this came about."

"Miss Sandys was not in the room," said Grizel, abjectly, "but I was, and I--"

Tommy's face was begging her to stop. He was still faint and in pain, but all thought of himself left him in his desire to screen her. "I owe you an apology, doctor," he said quickly, "for disregarding your instructions. It was entirely my own fault; I would try to walk."

"Every step must have been agony," the doctor rapped out; and Grizel shuddered.

"Not nearly so bad as that," Tommy said, for her sake.

"Agony," insisted the doctor, as if, for once, he enjoyed the word. "It was a mad thing to do, as surely you could guess, Grizel. Why did you not prevent him?"

"She certainly did her best to stop me," Tommy said hastily; "but I suppose I had some insane fit on me, for do it I would. I am very sorry, doctor."

His face was wincing with pain, and he spoke jerkily; but the doctor was still angry. He felt that there was something between these two which he did not understand, and it was strange to him, and unpleasant, to find Grizel unable to speak for herself. I think he doubted Tommy from that hour. All he said in reply, however, was: "It is unnecessary to apologize to me; you yourself are the only sufferer."

But was Tommy the only sufferer? Gemmell left, and Elspeth followed him to listen to those precious words which doctors drop, as from a vial, on the other side of a patient's door; and then Grizel, who had been standing at the window with head averted, turned slowly round and looked at the man she had wronged. Her arms, which had been hanging rigid, the fists closed, went out to him to implore forgiveness. I don't know how she held herself up and remained dry-eyed, her whole being wanted so much to sink by the side of his poor, tortured foot, and bathe it in her tears.

So, you see, he had won; nothing to do now but forgive her beautifully. Go on, Tommy; you are good at it.

But the unexpected only came out of Tommy. Never was there a softer heart. In London the old lady who sold matches at the street corner had got all his pence; had he heard her, or any other, mourning a son sentenced to the gallows, he would immediately have wondered whether he might take the condemned one's place. (What a speech Tommy could have delivered from the scaffold!) There was nothing he would not jump at doing for a woman in distress, except, perhaps, destroy his note-book. And Grizel was in anguish. She was his suppliant, his brave, lonely little playmate of the past, the noble girl of to-day, Grizel whom he liked so much. As through a magnifying-glass he saw her top-heavy with remorse for life, unable to sleep of nights, crushed and----

He was not made of the stuff that could endure it. The truth must out. "Grizel," he said impulsively, "you have nothing to be sorry for. You were quite right. I did not hurt my foot that night in the Den, but afterwards, when I was alone, before the doctor came. I wricked it here intentionally in the door. It sounds incredible; but I set my teeth and did it, Grizel, because you had challenged me to a duel, and I would not give in."

As soon as it was out he was proud of himself for having the generosity to confess it. He looked at Grizel expectantly.

Yes, it sounded incredible, and yet she saw that it was true. As Elspeth returned at that moment, Grizel could say nothing. She stood looking at him only over her high collar of fur. Tommy actually thought that she was admiring him.