

## CHAPTER XIV - ELSPETH

Ever since the beginning of the book we have been neglecting Elspeth so pointedly that were she not the most forgiving creature we should be afraid to face her now. You are not angry with us, are you, Elspeth? We have been sitting with you, talking with you, thinking of you between the chapters, and the only reason why you have so seldom got into them is that our pen insisted on running after your fascinating brother.

(That is the way to get round her.)

Tommy, it need not be said, never neglected her. The mere fact of his having an affair of his own at present is a sure sign that she is comfortable, for, unless all were well with Elspeth, no venture could have lured him from her side. "Now I am ready for you," he said to the world when Elspeth had been, figuratively speaking, put to sleep; but until she was nicely tucked up the world had to wait. He was still as in his boyhood, when he had to see her with a good book in her hand before he could set off on deeds of darkness. If this was but the story of a brother and sister, there were matter for it that would make the ladies want to kiss Tommy on the brow.

That Dr. Gemmell disliked or at least distrusted him, Tommy knew before their acquaintance was an hour old; yet that same evening he had said cordially to Elspeth:

"This young doctor has a strong face."

She was evidently glad that Tommy had noticed it. "Do you think him handsome?" she inquired.

"Decidedly so," he replied, very handsomely, for it is an indiscreet question to ask of a plain man.

There was nothing small about Tommy, was there? He spoke thus magnanimously because he had seen that the doctor liked Elspeth, and that she liked him for liking her. Elspeth never spoke to him of such things, but he was aware that an extra pleasure in life came to her when she was admired; it gave her a little of the self-confidence she so wofully lacked; the woman in her was stirred. Take such presents as these to Elspeth, and Tommy would let you cast stones at himself for the rest of

the day, and shake your hand warmly on parting. In London Elspeth had always known quickly, almost at the first clash of eyes, whether Tommy's friends were attracted by her, but she had not known sooner than he. Those acquaintanceships had seldom ripened; but perhaps this was because, though he and she avoided talking of them, he was all the time taking such terrifying care of her. She was always little Elspeth to him, for whom he had done everything since the beginning of her, a frail little female counterpart of himself that would never have dared to grow up had he not always been there to show her the way, like a stronger plant in the same pot. It was even pathetic to him that Elspeth should have to become a woman while he was a man, and he set to, undaunted, to help her in this matter also. To be admired of men is a woman's right, and he knew it gratified Elspeth; therefore he brought them in to admire her. But beyond profound respect they could not presume to go, he was watching them so vigilantly. He had done everything for her so far, and it was evident that he was now ready to do the love-making also, or at least to sift it before it reached her. Elspeth saw this, and perhaps it annoyed her once or twice, though on the whole she was deeply touched; and the young gentlemen saw it also: they saw that he would not leave them alone with her for a moment, and that behind his cordial manner sat a Tommy who had his eye on them. Subjects suitable for conversation before Elspeth seemed in presence of this strict brother to be limited. You had just begun to tell her the plot of the new novel when T. Sandys fixed you with his gleaming orb. You were in the middle of the rumour about Mrs. Golightly when he let the poker fall. If the newsboys were yelling the latest horror he quickly closed the window. He made all visitors self-conscious. If she was not in the room few of them dared to ask if she was quite well. They paled before expressing the hope that she would feel stronger to-morrow. Yet when Tommy went up to sit beside her, which was the moment the front door closed, he took care to mention, incidentally, that they had been inquiring after her. One of them ventured on her birthday to bring her flowers, but could not present them, Tommy looked so alarming. A still more daring spirit once went the length of addressing her by her Christian name. She did not start up haughtily (the most timid of women are a surprise at times), but the poker fell with a crash.

He knew Elspeth so well that he could tell exactly how these poor young men should approach her. As an artist as well as a brother, he frowned when they blundered. He would have liked to be the medium through

which they talked, so that he could give looks and words their proper force. He had thought it all out so thoroughly for Elspeth's benefit that in an hour he could have drawn out a complete guide for her admirers.

"At the first meeting look at her wistfully when she does not see you. She will see you." It might have been Rule One.

Rule Two: "Don't talk so glibly." How often that was what the poker meant!

Being herself a timid creature, Elspeth showed best among the timid, because her sympathetic heart immediately desired to put them at their ease. The more glibly they could talk, the less, she knew, were they impressed by her. Even a little boorishness was more complimentary than chatter. Sometimes when she played on the piano which Tommy had hired for her, the visitor was so shy that he could not even mutter "Thank you" to his hat; yet she might play to him again, and not to the gallant who remarked briskly: "How very charming! What is that called?"

To talk disparagingly of other women is so common a way among men of penetrating into the favour of one that, of course, some tried it with Elspeth. Tommy could not excuse such blundering, for they were making her despise them. He got them out of the house, and then he and she had a long talk, not about them, but about men and women in general, from which she gathered once again that there was nobody like Tommy.

When they bade each other good-night, she would say to him: "I think you are the one perfect gentleman in the world."

Or he might say: "You expect so much of men, Elspeth."

To which her reply: "You have taught me to do it, and now I expect others to be like you." Sometimes she would even say: "When I see you so fond of me, and taking such care of me, I am ashamed. You think me so much better than I am. You consider me so pure and good, while I know that I am often mean, and even have wicked thoughts. It makes me ashamed, but so proud of you, for I see that you are judging me by yourself."

And then this Tommy would put the gas out softly and go to his own room, and, let us hope, blush a little.

One stripling had proposed to Elspeth, and on her agitatedly declining him, had flung out of the room in a pet. It spoiled all her after-thoughts

on the subject, and so roused her brother's indignation with the fellow. If the great baby had only left all the arrangements to Tommy, he could so easily have made that final scene one which Elspeth would remember with gratification for the remainder of her days; for, of course, pride in the offer could not be great unless she retained her respect for the man who made it. From the tremulous proposal and the manly acceptance of his fate to his dignified exit ("Don't grieve for me, Miss Sandys; you never gave me the least encouragement, and to have loved you will always make me a better man"), even to a touching way of closing the door with one long, last, lingering look, Tommy could have fitted him like a tailor.

From all which it will be seen that our splendid brother thought exclusively of what was best for Elspeth, and was willing that the gentlemen, having served their purpose, should, if it pleased them, go hang. Also, though he thought out every other possible move for the suitor, it never struck him to compose a successful proposal, for the simple reason that he was quite certain Elspeth would have none of them. Their attentions pleased her; but exchange Tommy for one of them--never! He knew it from her confessions at all stages of her life; he had felt it from the days when he began to be father and mother to her as well as brother. In his heart he believed there was something of his own odd character in Elspeth which made her as incapable of loving as himself, and some of his devotion to her was due to this belief; for perhaps nothing touches us to the quick more than the feeling that another suffers under our own curse; certainly nothing draws two souls so close together in a lonely comradeship. But though Tommy had reflected about these things, he did not trouble Elspeth with his conclusions. He merely gave her to understand that he loved her and she loved him so much that neither of them had any love to give to another. It was very beautiful, Elspeth thought, and a little tragic.

"You are quite sure that you mean that," she might ask timidly, "and that you are not flinging away your life on me?"

"You are all I need," he answered cheerily, and he believed it. Or, if he was in another mood, he might reflect that perhaps he was abstaining from love for Elspeth's sake, and that made him cheery also.

And now David Gemmell was the man, and Tommy genially forgave him all else for liking Elspeth. He invited the doctor, who so obviously distrusted him, to drop in of an evening for a game at the dambrod

(which they both abominated, but it was an easy excuse); he asked him confidentially to come in and see Aaron, who had been coughing last night; he put on all the airs of a hail-fellow-well-met, though they never became him, and sat awkwardly on his face. David always seemed eager to come, and tried to rise above his suspicions of Tommy, as Tommy saw, and failed, as Tommy saw again. Elspeth dosed the doctor with stories of her brother's lovely qualities, and Tommy, the forgiving, honestly pitied the poor man for having to listen to them. He knew that if all went well Gemmell would presently propose, and find that Elspeth (tearful at having to strike a blow) could not accept him; but he did not look forward maliciously to this as his revenge on the doctor; he was thinking merely of what was good for Elspeth.

There was no open talk about David between the brother and sister. Some day, Tommy presumed, she would announce that the doctor had asked her to marry him; and oh, how sorry she was; and oh, what a good man he was; and oh, Tommy knew she had never encouraged him; and oh, she could never leave Tommy! But until that day arrived they avoided talking directly about what brought Gemmell there. That he came to see Elspeth neither of them seemed to conceive as possible. Did Tommy chuckle when he saw David's eyes following her? No; solemn as a cat blinking at the fire; noticed nothing. The most worldly chaperon, the most loving mother, could not have done more for Elspeth. Yet it was not done to find her a husband, but quite the reverse, as we have seen. On reflection Tommy must smile at what he has been doing, but not while he is working the figures. The artist never smiles at himself until afterwards.

And now he not only wondered at times how Elspeth and David were getting on, but whether she noticed how he was getting on with Grizel; for in matters relating to Tommy Elspeth was almost as sharp as he in matters that related to her, and he knew it. When he proposed to Elspeth that they should ask Gemmell to go fishing with them on the morrow ("He has been overworked of late and it would do him good") he wanted to add, in a careless voice, "We might invite Grizel also," but could not; his lips suddenly went dry. And when Elspeth said the words that were so difficult to him, he wondered, "Did she say that because she knew I wished it?" But he decided that she did not, for she was evidently looking forward to to-morrow, and he knew she would be shuddering if she thought her Tommy was slipping.

"I am so glad it was she who asked me," Grizel said to him when he told her. "Don't you see what it means? It means that she wants to get you out of the way! You are not everything to her now as you used to be. Are you glad, glad?"

"If I could believe it!" Tommy said.

"What else could make her want to be alone with him?"

Nothing else could have made Grizel want to be alone with him, and she must always judge others by herself. But Tommy knew that Elspeth was different, and that a girl with some of himself in her might want to be alone with a man who admired her without wanting to marry him.