

CHAPTER XV - BY PROSEN WATER

That day by the banks of Prosen Water was one of Grizel's beautiful memories. All the days when she thought he loved her became beautiful memories.

It was the time of reds and whites, for the glory of the broom had passed, except at great heights, and the wild roses were trooping in. When the broom is in flame there seems to be no colour but yellow; but when the wild roses come we remember that the broom was flaunting. It was not quite a lady, for it insisted on being looked at; while these light-hearted things are too innocent to know that there is anyone to look. Grizel was sitting by the side of the stream, adorning her hat fantastically with roses red and white and some that were neither. They were those that cannot decide whether they look best in white or red, and so waver for the whole of their little lives between the two colours; there are many of them, and it is the pathetic thing about wild roses. She did not pay much heed to her handiwork. What she was saying to herself was that in another minute he and she would be alone. Nothing else in the world mattered very much. Every bit of her was conscious of it as the supreme event. Her fingers pressed it upon the flowers. It was in her eyes as much as in her heart. He went on casting his line, moving from stone to stone, dropping down the bank, ascending it, as if the hooking of a trout was something to him. Was he feeling to his marrow that as soon as those other two figures rounded the bend in the stream he and she would have the world to themselves? Ah, of course he felt it, but was it quite as much to him as it was to her?

"Not quite so much," she said bravely to herself. "I don't want it to be quite so much--but nearly."

And now they were alone as no two can be except those who love; for when the third person leaves them they have a universe to themselves, and it is closed in by the heavens, and the air of it is the consciousness of each other's presence. She sat motionless now--trembling, exulting. She could no longer hear the talking of the water, but she heard his step. He was coming slowly towards her. She did not look up--she waited; and while she waited time was annihilated.

He was coming to her to treat her as if she were a fond child; that she, of all women, could permit it was still delicious to him, and a marvel. She had let him do it yesterday, but perhaps she had regained her independence in the night. As he hesitated he became another person. In a flood of feeling he had a fierce desire to tell her the truth about himself. But he did not know what it was. He put aside his rod, and sat down very miserably beside her.

"Grizel, I suppose I am a knave." His lips parted to say it, but no words came. She had given him an adorable look that stopped them as if her dear hand had been placed upon his mouth.

Was he a knave? He wanted honestly to know. He had not tried to make her love him. Had he known in time he would even have warned her against it. He would never have said he loved her had she not first, as she thought, found it out; to tell her the truth then would have been brutal. He had made believe in order that she might remain happy. Was it even make-belief? Assuredly he did love her in his own way, in the only way he was capable of. She was far more to him than any other person except Elspeth. He delighted in her, and would have fought till he dropped rather than let any human being injure her. All his feelings for her were pure. He was prepared to marry her; but if she had not made that mistake, oh, what a delight it would have been to him never to marry anyone! He felt keenly miserable.

"Grizel, I seem to be different from all other men. There seems to be some curse upon me that makes me unable to love as they do. I want to love you, dear one; you are the only woman I ever wanted to love; but apparently I can't. I have decided to go on with this thing because it seems best for you; but is it? I would tell you all and leave the decision to you, were it not that I fear you would think I wanted you to let me off."

It would have been an honest speech, and he might have said it had he begun at once, for it was in a passion to be out, so desirous was he that dear Grizel should not be deceived; but he tried its effect first upon himself, and as he went on the tragedy he saw mastered him. He forgot that she was there, except as a figure needed to complete the picture of the man who could not love. He saw himself a splendidly haggard creature with burning eyes standing aside while all the world rolled by in pursuit of the one thing needful. It was a river, and he must stand parched on the bank for ever and ever. Should he keep that sorrowful

figure a man or turn it into a woman? He tried a woman. She was on the bank now, her arms outstretched to the flood. Ah! she would be so glad to drink, though she must drown.

Grizel saw how mournful he had become as he gazed upon her. In his face she had been seeing all the glories that can be given to mortals. Thoughts had come to her that drew her nearer to her God. Her trust in him stretched to eternity. All that was given to her at that moment she thought was also given to him. She seemed to know why, with love lighting up their souls to each other, he could yet grow mournful.

"Oh," she cried, with a movement that was a passionate caress, "do you indeed love me so much as that? I never wanted you to love me quite so much as that!"

It brought him back to himself, but without a start. Those sudden returns to fact had ceased to bewilder him; they were grown so common that he passed between dreams and reality as through tissue-paper.

"I did not mean," she said at last, in a tremor, "that I wanted you to love me less, but I am almost sorry that you love me quite so much."

He dared say nothing, for he did not altogether understand. "I have those fears, too, sometimes," she went on; "I have had them when I was with you, but more often when I was alone. They come to me suddenly, and I have such eager longings to run to you and tell you of them, and ask you to drive them away. But I never did it; I kept them to myself."

"You could keep something back from me, Grizel?"

"Forgive me," she implored; "I thought they would distress you, and I had such a desire to bring you nothing but happiness. To bear them by myself seemed to be helping you, and I was glad, I was proud, to feel myself of use to you even to that little extent. I did not know you had the same fears; I thought that perhaps they came only to women; have you had them before? Fears," she continued, so wistfully, "that it is too beautiful to end happily? Oh, have you heard a voice crying, 'It is too beautiful; it can never be'?"

He saw clearly now; he saw so clearly that he was torn with emotion. "It is more than I can bear!" he said hoarsely. Surely he loved her.

"Did you see me die?" she asked, in a whisper. "I have seen you die."

"Don't, Grizel!" he cried.

But she had to go on. "Tell me," she begged; "I have told you."

"No, no, never that," he answered her. "At the worst I have had only the feeling that you could never be mine."

She smiled at that. "I am yours," she said softly; "nothing can take away that--nothing, nothing. I say it to myself a hundred times a day, it is so sweet. Nothing can separate us but death; I have thought of all the other possible things, and none of them is strong enough. But when I think of your dying, oh, when I think of my being left without you!"

She rocked her arms in a frenzy, and called him dearest, darlingest. All the sweet names that had been the child Grizel's and the old doctor's were Tommy's now. He soothed her, ah, surely as only a lover could soothe. She was his Grizel, she was his beloved. No mortal could have been more impassioned than Tommy. He must have loved her. It could not have been merely sympathy, or an exquisite delight in being the man, or the desire to make her happy again in the quickest way, or all three combined? Whatever it was, he did not know; all he knew was that he felt every word he said, or seemed to feel it.

"It is a punishment to me," Grizel said, setting her teeth, "for loving you too much. I know I love you too much. I think I love you more than God."

She felt him shudder.

"But if I feel it," she said, shuddering also, yet unable to deceive herself, "what difference do I make by saying it? He must know it is so, whether I say it or not."

There was a tremendous difference to Tommy, but not of a kind he could explain, and she went on; she must tell him everything now.

"I pray every night and morning; but that is nothing--everyone does it. I know I thank God sincerely; I thank Him again and again and again. Do you remember how, when I was a child, you used to be horrified because I prayed standing? I often say little prayers standing now; I am always thanking Him for giving me you. But all the time it is a bargain with Him. So long as you are well I love Him, but if you were to die I would never pray again. I have never said it in words until to-day, but He must know

it, for it is behind all my prayers. If He does not know, there cannot be a God."

She was watching his face, half wofully, half stubbornly, as if, whatever might be the issue of those words, she had to say them. She saw how pained he was. To admit the possible non-existence of a God when you can so easily leave the subject alone was horrible to Tommy.

"I don't doubt Him," she continued. "I have believed in Him ever since the time when I was such a lonely child that I did not know His name. I shall always believe in Him so long as He does not take you from me. But if He does, then I shall not believe in Him any more. It may be wrong, but that is what I feel.

"It makes you care less for me!" she cried in anguish.

"No, no, dear."

"I don't think it makes God care less for me," she said, very seriously. "I think He is pleased that I don't try to cheat Him."

Somehow Tommy felt uncomfortable at that.

"There are people," he said vaguely, like one who thought it best to mention no names, who would be afraid to challenge God in that way."

"He would not be worth believing in," she answered, "if He could be revengeful. He is too strong, and too loving, and too pitiful for that." But she took hold of Tommy as if to protect him. Had they been in physical danger, her first impulse would have been to get in front of him to protect him. The noblest women probably always love in this way, and yet it is those who would hide behind them that men seem to love the best.

"I always feel--oh, I never can help feeling," she said, "that nothing could happen to you, that God Himself could not take you from me, while I had hold of you."

"Grizel!"

"I mean only that He could not have the heart," she said hastily. "No, I don't," she had to add. "I meant what you thought I meant. That is why I feel it would be so sweet to be married, so that I could be close to you every moment, and then no harm could come to you. I would keep such

a grip of you, I should be such a part of you, that you could not die without my dying also.

"Oh, do you care less for me now?" she cried. "I can't see things as clearly as you do, dearest, darlingest. I have not a beautiful nature like yours. I am naturally rebellious. I have to struggle even to be as good as I am. There are evil things in my blood. You remember how we found out that. God knew it, too, and He is compassionate. I think He makes many pitying allowances for me. It is not wicked, is it, to think that?"

"You used to know me too well, Grizel, to speak of my beautiful nature," he said humbly.

"I did think you vain," she replied. "How odd to remember that!"

"But I was, and am."

"I love to hear you proving you are not," said she, beaming upon him. "Do you think," she asked, with a sudden change of manner to the childish, like one trying to coax a compliment out of him, "that I have improved at all during those last days? I think I am not quite such a horrid girl as I used to be; and if I am not, I owe it to you. I am so glad to owe it to you." She told him that she was trying to make herself a tiny bit more like him by studying his book. "It is not exactly the things you say of women that help me, for though they are lovely I am not sure that they are quite true. I almost hope they are not true; for if they are, then I am not even an average woman." She buried her face in his coat. "You say women are naturally purer than men, but I don't know. Perhaps we are more cunning only. Perhaps it is not even a thing to wish; for if we were, it would mean that we are good because there is less evil in us to fight against. Dear, forgive me for saying that; it may be all wrong; but I think it is what nearly all women feel in their hearts, though they keep it locked up till they die. I don't even want you to believe me. You think otherwise of us, and it is so sweet of you that we try to be better than we are--to undeceive you would hurt so. It is not the book that makes me a better woman--it is the man I see behind it."

He was too much moved to be able to reply--too much humbled. He vowed to himself that, whether he could love or not, he would be a good husband to this dear woman.

"Ah, Grizel," he declared, by and by, "what a delicious book you are, and how I wish I had written you! With every word you say, something within me is shouting, 'Am I not a wonder!' I warned you it would be so as soon as I felt that I had done anything really big, and I have. I have somehow made you love me. Ladies and gentlemen," he exclaimed, addressing the river and the trees and the roses, "I have somehow made her love me! Am I not a wonder?"

Grizel clapped her hands gaily; she was merry again. She could always be what Tommy wanted her to be. "Ladies and gentlemen," she cried, "how could I help it?"

David had been coming back for his fly-book, and though he did not hear their words, he saw a light in Grizel's face that suddenly set him thinking. For the rest of the day he paid little attention to Elspeth; some of his answers showed her that he was not even listening to her.