

CHAPTER XVI - "HOW COULD YOU HURT YOUR GRIZEL SO!"

To concentrate on Elspeth so that he might find out what was in her mind was, as we have seen, seldom necessary to Tommy; for he had learned her by heart long ago. Yet a time was now come when he had to concentrate, and even then he was doubtful of the result. So often he had put that mind of hers to rights that it was an open box to him, or had been until he conceived the odd notion that perhaps it contained a secret drawer. This would have been resented by most brothers, but Tommy's chagrin was nothing compared to the exhilaration with which he perceived that he might be about to discover something new about woman. He was like the digger whose hand is on the point of closing on a diamond--a certain holiness added.

What puzzled him was the state of affairs now existing between Elspeth and the doctor. A week had elapsed since the fishing excursion, and David had not visited them. Too busy? Tommy knew that it is the busy people who can find time. Could it be that David had proposed to her at the waterside?

No, he could not read that in Elspeth's face. He knew that she would be in distress lest her refusal should darken the doctor's life for too long a time; but yet (shake your fist at him, ladies, for so misunderstanding you!) he expected also to note in that sympathetic face a look of subdued triumph, and as it was not there, David could not have proposed.

The fact of her not having told him about it at once did not prove to Tommy that there had been no proposal. His feeling was that she would consider it too sacred a thing to tell even to him, but that it would force its way out in a week or two.

On the other hand, she could not have resisted dropping shyly such remarks as these: "I think Dr. Gemmell is a noble man," or, "How wonderfully good Dr. Gemmell is to the poor!"

Also she would sometimes have given Tommy a glance that said, "I wonder if you guess." Had they quarrelled? Tommy smiled. If it was but a quarrel he was not merely appeased--he was pleased. Had he had the ordering of the affair, he would certainly have included a lovers' quarrel in it, and had it not been that he wanted to give her the pleasure of

finding these things out for herself, he would have taken her aside and addressed her thus: "No need to look tragic, Elspeth; for to a woman this must be really one of the most charming moments in the comedy. You feel that he would not have quarrelled had he had any real caring for you, and yet in your heart you know it is a proof that he has. To a woman, I who know assure you that nothing can be more delicious. Your feeling for him, as you and I well know, is but a sentiment of attraction because he loves you as you are unable to love him, and as you are so pained by this quarrel, consider how much more painful it must be to him. You think you have been slighted; that when a man has seemed to like you so much you have a right to be told so by him, that you may help him with your sympathy. Oh, Elspeth, you think yourself unhappy just now when you are really in the middle of one of the pleasantest bits of it! Love is a series of thrills, the one leading to the other, and, as your careful guardian, I would not have you miss one of them. You will come to the final bang quickly enough, and find it the finest thrill of all, but it is soon over. When you have had to tell him that you are not for him, there are left only the pleasures of memory, and the more of them there were, the more there will be to look back to. I beg you, Elspeth, not to hurry; loiter rather, smelling the flowers and plucking them, for you may never be this way again."

All these things he might have pointed out to Elspeth had he wanted her to look at the matter rationally, but he had no such wish. He wanted her to enjoy herself as the blessed do, without knowing why. No pity for the man, you see, but no ill will to him. David was having his thrills also, and though the last of them would seem a staggerer to him at the time, it would gradually become a sunny memory. The only tragedy is not to have known love. So long as you have the experiences, it does not greatly matter whether your suit was a failure or successful.

So Tommy decided, but he feared at the same time that there had been no quarrel--that David had simply drawn back.

How he saw through Elspeth's brave attempts to show that she had never for a moment thought of David's having any feeling for her save ordinary friendship--yes, they were brave, but not brave enough for Tommy. At times she would say something bitter about life (not about the doctor, for he was never mentioned), and it was painful to her brother to see gentle Elspeth grown cynical. He suffered even more when her manner indicated that she knew she was too poor a creature to be loved

by any man. Tommy was in great woe about Elspeth at this time. He was thinking much more about her than about Grizel; but do not blame him unreservedly for that: the two women who were his dears were pulling him different ways, and he could not accompany both. He had made up his mind to be loyal to Grizel, and so all his pity could go to Elspeth. On the day he had his talk with the doctor, therefore, he had, as it were, put Grizel aside only because she was happy just now, and so had not Elspeth's need of him.

The doctor and he had met on the hill, whence the few who look may see one of the fairest views in Scotland. Tommy was strolling up and down, and the few other persons on the hill were glancing with good-humoured suspicion at him, as we all look at celebrated characters. Had he been happy he would have known that they were watching him, and perhaps have put his hands behind his back to give them more for their money, as the saying is; but he was miserable. His one consolation was that the blow he must strike Elspeth when he told her of his engagement need not be struck just yet. David could not have chosen a worse moment, therefore, for saying so bluntly what he said: "I hear you are to be married. If so, I should like to congratulate you."

Tommy winced like one charged with open cruelty to his sister--charged with it, too, by the real criminal.

"It is not true?" David asked quietly, and Tommy turned from him glaring. "I am sorry I spoke of it, as it is not true," the doctor said after a pause, the crow's-feet showing round his eyes as always when he was in mental pain; and presently he went away, after giving Tommy a contemptuous look. Did Tommy deserve that look? We must remember that he had wanted to make the engagement public at once; if he shrank from admitting it for the present, it was because of Elspeth's plight.

"Grizel, you might have given her a little time to recover from this man's faithlessness," was what his heart cried. He believed that Grizel had told David, and for the last time in his life he was angry with her. He strode down the hill savagely towards Caddam Wood, where he knew he should find her.

Soon he saw her. She was on one of the many tiny paths that lead the stranger into the middle of the wood and then leave him there maliciously or because they dare not venture any farther themselves. They could play no tricks on Grizel, however, for she knew and was fond

of them all. Tommy had said that she loved them because they were such little paths, that they appealed to her like babies; and perhaps there was something in it.

She came up the path with the swing of one who was gleefully happy. Some of the Thrums people, you remember, said that Grizel strutted because she was so satisfied with herself, and if you like an ugly word, we may say that she strutted to-day. It was her whole being giving utterance to the joy within her that love had brought. As Grizel came up the path on that bright afternoon, she could no more have helped strutting than the bud to open on the appointed day. She was obeying one of Nature's laws. I think I promised long ago to tell you of the day when Grizel would strut no more. Well, this is the day. Observe her strutting for the last time. It was very strange and touching to her to remember in the after years that she had once strutted, but it was still more strange and touching to Tommy.

She was like one overfilled with delight when she saw him. How could she know that he was to strike her?

He did not speak. She was not displeased. When anything so tremendous happened as the meeting of these two, how could they find words at once?

She bent and pressed her lips to his sleeve; but he drew away with a gesture that startled her.

"You are not angry?" she said, stopping.

"Yes," he replied doggedly.

"Not with me?" Her hand went to her heart. "With me!" A wounded animal could not have uttered a cry more pathetic. "Not with me!" She clutched his arm.

"Have I no cause to be angry?" he said.

She looked at him in bewilderment. Could this be he? Oh, could it be she?

"Cause? How could I give you cause?"

It seemed unanswerable to her. How could Grizel do anything that would give him the right to be angry with her? Oh, men, men! will you never

understand how absolutely all of her a woman's love can be? If she gives you everything, how can she give you more? She is not another person; she is part of you. Does one finger of your hand plot against another?

He told her sullenly of his scene with the doctor.

"I am very sorry," she said; but her eyes were still searching for the reason why Tommy could be angry with her.

"You made me promise to tell no one," he said, "and I have kept my promise: but you----"

The anguish that was Grizel's then! "You can't think that I told him!" she cried, and she held out her arms as if to remind him of who she was. "You can believe that of your Grizel?"

"I daresay you have not done it wittingly; but this man has guessed, and he could never have guessed it from look or word of mine."

"It must have been I!" she said slowly. "Tell me," she cried like a suppliant, "how have I done it?"

"Your manner, your face," he answered; "it must have been that. I don't blame you. Grizel, but--yes, it must have been that, and it is hard on me."

He was in misery, and these words leaped out. They meant only that it was hard on him if Elspeth had to be told of his engagement in the hour of her dejection. He did not mean to hurt Grizel to the quick. However terrible the loss of his freedom might be to the man who could not love, he always intended to be true to her. But she gave the words a deeper meaning.

She stood so still she seemed to be pondering, and at last she said quietly, as if they had been discussing some problem outside themselves: "Yes, I think it must have been that." She looked long at him. "It is very hard on you," she said.

"I feel sure it was that," she went on; and now her figure was erect, and again it broke, and sometimes there was a noble scorn in her voice, but more often there was only pitiful humility. "I feel sure it was that, for I have often wondered how everybody did not know. I have broken my promise. I used always to be able to keep a promise. I had every other

fault,--I was hard and proud and intolerant,--but I was true. I think I was vain of that, though I see now it was only something I could not help; from the moment when I had a difficulty in keeping a promise, I ceased to keep it. I love you so much that I carry my love in my face for all to read. They cannot see me meet you without knowing the truth; they cannot hear me say your name but I betray myself; I show how I love you in every movement; I am full of you. How can anyone look at me and not see you? I should have been more careful--oh, I could have been so much more careful had I loved you a little less! It is very hard on you."

The note of satire had died out of her voice; her every look and gesture carried in it nothing but love for him; but all the unhappy dog could say was something about self-respect.

Her mouth opened as if for bitterness; but no sound came. "How much self-respect do you think is left for me after to-day?" she said mournfully at last; and then she quickly took a step nearer her dear one, as if to caress the spot where these words had struck him. But she stopped, and for a moment she was the Grizel of old. "Have no fear," she said, with a trembling, crooked smile; "there is only one thing to be done now, and I shall do it. All the blame is mine. You shall not be deprived of your self-respect."

He had not been asking for his freedom; but he heard it running to him now, and he knew that if he answered nothing he would be whistling it back for ever. A madness to be free at any cost swept over him. He let go his hold on self-respect, and clapped his hand on freedom.

He answered nothing, and the one thing for her to do was to go; and she did it. But it was only for a moment that she could be altogether the Grizel of old. She turned to take a long, last look at him; but the wofulness of herself was what she saw. She cried, with infinite pathos, "Oh, how could you hurt your Grizel so!"

He controlled himself and let her go. His freedom was fawning on him, licking his hands and face, and in that madness he actually let Grizel go. It was not until she was out of sight that he gave utterance to a harsh laugh. He knew what he was at that moment, as you and I shall never be able to know him, eavesdrop how we may.

He flung himself down in a blaeberry-bed, and lay there doggedly, his weak mouth tightly closed. A great silence reigned; no, not a great

silence, for he continued to hear the cry: "Oh, how could you hurt your Grizel so!" She scarcely knew that she had said it; but to him who knew what she had been, and what he had changed her into, and for what alone she was to blame, there was an unconscious pathos in it that was terrible. It was the epitome of all that was Grizel, all that was adorable and all that was pitiful in her. It rang in his mind like a bell of doom. He believed its echo would not be quite gone from his ears when he died. If all the wise men in the world had met to consider how Grizel could most effectively say farewell to Tommy, they could not have thought out a better sentence. However completely he had put himself emotionally in her place with this same object, he would have been inspired by nothing quite so good.

But they were love's dying words. He knew he could never again, though he tried, be to Grizel what he had been. The water was spilled on the ground. She had thought him all that was glorious in man--that was what her love had meant; and it was spilled. There was only one way in which he could wound her more cruelly than she was already hurt, and that was by daring to ask her to love him still. To imply that he thought her pride so broken, her independence, her maidenly modesty, all that make up the loveliness of a girl, so lost that by entreaties he could persuade her to forgive him, would destroy her altogether. It would reveal to her how low he thought her capable of falling.

I suppose we should all like to think that it would have been thus with Grizel, but our wishes are of small account. It was not many minutes since she left Tommy, to be his no more, his knife still in her heart; but she had not reached the end of the wood when all in front of her seemed a world of goblins, and a future without him not to be faced. He might beat her or scorn her, but not for an hour could she exist without him. She wrung her arms in woe; the horror of what she was doing tore her in pieces; but not all this prevented her turning back. It could not even make her go slowly. She did not walk back; she stole back in little runs. She knew it was her destruction, but her arms were outstretched to the spot where she had left him.

He was no longer there, and he saw her between the firs before she could see him. As he realized what her coming back meant, his frame shook with pity for her. All the dignity had gone from her. She looked as shamed as a dog stealing back after it had been whipped. She knew she

was shamed. He saw she knew it: the despairing rocking of her arms proved it; yet she was coming back to him in little runs.

Pity, chivalry, oh, surely love itself, lifted him to his feet, and all else passed out of him save an imperious desire to save her as much humiliation as he could--to give her back a few of those garments of pride and self-respect that had fallen from her. At least she should not think that she had to come all the way to him. With a stifled sob, he rose and ran up the path towards her.

"Grizel! it is you! My beloved! how could you leave me! Oh, Grizel, my love, how could you misunderstand me so!"

She gave a glad cry. She sought feebly to hold him at arm's length, to look at him watchfully, to read him as in the old days; but the old days were gone. He strained her to him. Oh, surely it was love at last! He thanked God that he loved at last.