

## CHAPTER XXI - THE ATTEMPT TO CARRY ELSPETH BY NUMBERS

That was one of Grizel's beautiful days, but there were others to follow as sweet, if not so exciting; she could travel back through the long length of them without coming once to a moment when she had held her breath in sudden fear; and this was so delicious that she sometimes thought these were the best days of all.

Of course she had little anxieties, but they were nearly all about David. He was often at Aaron's house now, and what exercised her was this-- that she could not be certain that he was approaching Elspeth in the right way. The masterful Grizel seemed to have come to life again, for, evidently, she was convinced that she alone knew the right way.

"Oh, David, I would not have said that to her!" she told him, when he reported progress; and now she would warn him, "You are too humble," and again, "You were over-bold." The doctor, to his bewilderment, frequently discovered, on laying results before her, that what he had looked upon as encouraging signs were really bad, and that, on the other hand, he had often left the cottage disconsolately when he ought to have been strutting. The issue was that he lost all faith in his own judgment, and if Grizel said that he was getting on well, his face became foolishly triumphant, but if she frowned, it cried, "All is over!"

Of the proposal Tommy did not know; it seemed to her that she had no right to tell even him of that; but the rest she did tell him: that David, by his own confession, was in love with Elspeth; and so pleased was Tommy that his delight made another day for her to cherish.

So now everything depended on Elspeth. "Oh, if she only would!" Grizel cried, and for her sake Tommy tried to look bright, but his head shook in spite of him.

"Do you mean that we should discourage David?" she asked dolefully; but he said No to that.

"I was afraid," she confessed, "that as you are so hopeless, you might think it your duty to discourage him so as to save him the pain of a refusal."

"Not at all," Tommy said, with some hastiness.

"Then you do really have a tiny bit of hope?"

"While there is life there is hope," he answered.

She said: "I have been thinking it over, for it is so important to us, and I see various ways in which you could help David, if you would."

"What would I not do, Grizel! You have to name them only."

"Well, for instance, you might show her that you have a very high opinion of him."

"Agreed. But she knows that already."

"Then, David is an only child. Don't you think you could say that men who have never had a sister are peculiarly gentle and considerate to women?"

"Oh, Grizel! But I think I can say that."

"And--and that having been so long accustomed to doing everything for themselves, they don't need managing wives as men brought up among women need them."

"Yes. But how cunning you are, Grizel! Who would have believed it?"

"And then----" She hesitated.

"Go on. I see by your manner that this is to be a big one."

"It would be such a help," she said eagerly, "if you could be just a little less attentive to her. I know you do ever so much of the housework because she is not fond of it; and if she has a headache you sit with her all day; and you beg her to play and sing to you, though you really dislike music. Oh, there are scores of things you do for her, and if you were to do them a little less willingly, in such a way as to show her that they interrupt your work and are a slight trial to you, I--I am sure that would help!"

"She would see through me, Grizel. Elspeth is sharper than you think her."

"Not if you did it very skilfully."

"Then she would believe I had grown cold to her, and it would break her heart."

"One of your failings," replied Grizel, giving him her hand for a moment as recompense for what she was about to say, "is that you think women's hearts break so easily. If, at the slightest sign that she notices any change in you, you think her heart is breaking, and seize her in your arms, crying, 'Elspeth, dear little Elspeth!'--and that is what your first impulse would be----"

"How well you know me, Grizel!" groaned Sentimental Tommy.

"If that would be the result," she went on, "better not do it at all. But if you were to restrain yourself, then she could not but reflect that many of the things you did for her with a sigh David did for pleasure, and she would compare him and you--"

"To my disadvantage?" Tommy exclaimed, with sad incredulity. "Do you really think she could, Grizel?"

"Give her the chance," Grizel continued, "and if you find it hard, you must remember that what you are doing is for her good."

"And for ours," Tommy cried fervently.

Every promise he made her at this time he fulfilled, and more; he was hopeless, but all a man could do to make Elspeth love David he did.

The doctor was quite unaware of it. "Fortunately, her brother had a headache yesterday and was lying down," he told Grizel, with calm brutality, "so I saw her alone for a few minutes."

"The fibs I have to invent," said Tommy, to the same confidante, "to get myself out of their way!"

"Luckily he does not care for music," David said, "so when she is at the piano he sometimes remains in the kitchen talking to Aaron."

Tommy and Aaron left together! Tommy described those scenes with much good humour. "I was amazed at first," he said to Grizel, "to find Aaron determinedly enduring me, but now I understand. He wants what we want. He says not a word about it, but he is watching those two courting like a born match-maker. Aaron has several reasons for hoping that Elspeth will get our friend (as he would express it): one, that this

would keep her in Thrums; another, that to be the wife of a doctor is second only in worldly grandeur to marrying the manse; and thirdly and lastly, because he is convinced that it would be such a staggerer to me. For he thinks I have not a notion of what is going on, and that, if I had, I would whisk her away to London."

He gave Grizel the most graphic, solemn pictures of those evenings in the cottage. "Conceive the four of us gathered round the kitchen fire--three men and a maid; the three men yearning to know what is in the maid's mind, and each concealing his anxiety from the others. Elspeth gives the doctor a look which may mean much or nothing, and he glares at me as if I were in the way, and I glance at Aaron, and he is on tenterhooks lest I have noticed anything. Next minute, perhaps, David gives utterance to a plaintive sigh, and Aaron and I pounce upon Elspeth (with our eyes) to observe its effect on her, and Elspeth wonders why Aaron is staring, and he looks apprehensively at me, and I am gazing absent-mindedly at the fender.

"You may smile, Grizel," Tommy would say, "and now that I think of it, I can smile myself, but we are an eerie quartet at the time. When the strain becomes unendurable, one of us rises and mends the fire with his foot, and then I think the rest of us could say 'Thank you.' We talk desperately for a little after that, but soon again the awful pall creeps down."

"If I were there," cried Grizel, "I would not have the parlour standing empty all this time."

"We are coming to the parlour," Tommy replies impressively. "The parlour, Grizel, now begins to stir. Elspeth has disappeared from the kitchen, we three men know not whither. We did not notice her go; we don't even observe that she has gone--we are too busy looking at the fire. By and by the tremulous tinkling of an aged piano reaches us from an adjoining chamber, and Aaron looks at me through his fingers, and I take a lightning glance at Mr. David, and he uncrosses his legs and rises, and sits down again. Aaron, in the most unconcerned way, proceeds to cut tobacco and rub it between his fingers, and I stretch out my legs and contemplate them with passionate approval. While we are thus occupied David has risen, and he is so thoroughly at his ease that he has begun to hum. He strolls round the kitchen, looking with sudden interest at the mantelpiece ornaments; he reads, for the hundredth time, the sampler

on the wall. Next the clock engages his attention; it is ticking, and that seems to impress him as novel and curious. By this time he has reached the door; it opens to his touch, and in a fit of abstraction he leaves the room."

"You don't follow him into the parlour?" asks Grizel, anxiously.

"Follow whom?" Tommy replies severely. "I don't even know that he has gone to the parlour; now that I think of it, I have not even noticed that he has left the kitchen; nor has Aaron noticed it. Aaron and I are not in a condition to notice such things; we are conscious only that at last we have the opportunity for the quiet social chat we so much enjoy in each other's company. That, at least, is Aaron's way of looking at it, and he keeps me there with talk of the most varied and absorbing character; one topic down, another up; when very hard put to it, he even questions me about my next book, as if he would like to read the proof-sheets, and when I seem to be listening, a little restively, for sounds from the parlour (the piano has stopped), he has the face of one who would bar the door rather than lose my society. Aaron appreciates me at my true value at last, Grizel. I had begun to despair almost of ever bringing him under my charm."

"I should be very angry with you," Grizel said warningly, "if I thought you teased the poor old man."

"Tease him! The consideration I show that poor old man, Grizel, while I know all the time that he is plotting to diddle me! You should see me when it is he who is fidgeting to know why the piano has stopped. He stretches his head to listen, and does something to his ear that sends it another inch nearer the door; he chuckles and groans on the sly; and I--I notice nothing. Oh, he is becoming quite fond of me; he thinks me an idiot."

"Why not tell him that you want it as much as he?"

"He would not believe me. Aaron is firmly convinced that I am too jealous of Elspeth's affection to give away a thimbleful of it. He blames me for preventing her caring much even for him."

"At any rate," said Grizel, "he is on our side, and it is because he sees it would be so much the best thing for her."

"And, at the same time, such a shock to me. That poor old man, Grizel! I have seen him rubbing his hands together with glee and looking quite leery as he thought of what was coming to me."

But Grizel could not laugh now. When Tommy saw so well through Aaron and David, through everyone he came in contact with, indeed, what hope could there be that he was deceived in Elspeth?

"And yet she knows what takes him there; she must know it!" she cried.

"A woman," Tommy said, "is never sure that a man is in love with her until he proposes. She may fancy--but it is never safe to fancy, as so many have discovered."

"She has no right," declared Grizel, "to wait until she is sure, if she does not care for him. If she fears that he is falling in love with her, she knows how to discourage him; there are surely a hundred easy, kind ways of doing that."

"Fears he is falling in love with her!" Tommy repeated. "Is any woman ever afraid of that?"

He really bewildered her. "No woman would like it," Grizel answered promptly for them all, because she would not have liked it. "She must see that it would result only in pain to him."

"Still----" said Tommy.

"Oh, but how dense you are!" she said, in surprise. "Don't you understand that she would stop him, though it were for no better reasons than selfish ones? Consider her shame if, in thinking it over afterwards, she saw that she might have stopped him sooner! Why," she cried, with a sudden smile, "it is in your book! You say: 'Every maiden carries secretly in her heart an idea of love so pure and sacred that, if by any act she is once false to that conception, her punishment is that she never dares to look at it again.' And this is one of the acts you mean."

"I had not thought of it, though," he said humbly. He was never prouder of Grizel than at that moment. "If Elspeth's outlook," he went on, "is different----"

"It can't be different."

"If it is, the fault is mine; yes, though I wrote the passage that you interpret so nobly, Grizel. Shall I tell you," he said gently, "what I believe is Elspeth's outlook exactly, just now? She knows that the doctor is attracted by her, and it gives her little thrills of exultation; but that it can be love--she puts that question in such a low voice, as if to prevent herself hearing it. And yet she listens, Grizel, like one who would like to know! Elspeth is pitifully distrustful of anyone's really loving her, and she will never admit to herself that he does until he tells her."

"And then?"

Tommy had to droop his head.

"I see you have still no hope!" she said.

"It would be so easy to pretend I have," he replied, with longing, "in order to cheer you for the moment. Oh, it would even be easy to me to deceive myself; but should I do it?"

"No, no," she said; "anything but that; I can bear anything but that," and she shuddered. "But we seem to be treating David cruelly."

"I don't think so," he assured her. "Men like to have these things to look back to. But, if you want it, Grizel, I have to say only a word to Elspeth to bring it to an end. She is as tender as she is innocent, and--but it would be a hard task to me," he admitted, his heart suddenly going out to Elspeth; he had never deprived her of any gratification before. "Still, I am willing to do it."

"No!" Grizel cried, restraining him with her hand. "I am a coward, I suppose, but I can't help wanting to hope for a little longer, and David won't grudge it to me."

It was but a very little longer that they had to wait. Tommy, returning home one day from a walk with his old school-friend, Gav Dishart (now M.A.), found Aaron suspiciously near the parlour keyhole.

"There's a better fire in the other end," Aaron said, luring him into the kitchen. So desirous was he of keeping Tommy there, fixed down on a stool, that "I'll play you at the dambrod," he said briskly.

"Anyone with Elspeth?"

"Some women-folk you dinna like," replied Aaron.

Tommy rose. Aaron, with a subdued snarl, got between him and the door.

"I was wondering, merely," Tommy said, pointing pleasantly to something on the dresser, "why one of them wore the doctor's hat."

"I forgot; he's there, too," Aaron said promptly; but he looked at Tommy with misgivings. They sat down to their game.

"You begin," said Tommy; "you're black." And Aaron opened with the Double Corner; but so preoccupied was he that it became a variation of the Ayrshire lassie, without his knowing. His suspicions had to find vent in words: "You dinna speir wha the women-folk are?"

"No."

"Do you think I'm just pretending they're there?" Aaron asked apprehensively.

"Not at all," said Tommy, with much politeness, "but I thought you might be mistaken." He could have "blown" Aaron immediately thereafter, but, with great consideration, forbore. The old man was so troubled that he could not lift a king without its falling in two. His sleeve got in the way of his fingers. At last he sat back in his chair. "Do you ken what is going on, man?" he demanded, "or do you no ken? I can stand this doubt no longer."

A less soft-hearted person might have affected not to understand, but that was not Tommy's way. "I know, Aaron," he admitted. "I have known all the time." It was said in the kindest manner, but its effect on Aaron was not soothing.

"Curse you!" he cried, with extraordinary vehemence, "you have been playing wi' me a' the time, ay, and wi' him and wi' her!"

What had Aaron been doing with Tommy? But Tommy did not ask that.

"I am sorry you think so badly of me," he said quietly. "I have known all the time, Aaron, but have I interfered?"

"Because you ken she winna take him. I see it plain enough now. You ken your power over her; the honest man that thinks he could take her frae you is to you but a divert."



He took a step nearer Tommy. "Listen," he said. "When you came back he was on the point o' speiring her; I saw it in his face as she was playing the piano, and she saw it, too, for her hands began to trem'le and the tune wouldna play. I daursay you think I was keeking, but if I was I stoppit it when the piano stoppit; it was a hard thing to me to do, and it would hae been an easy thing no to do, but I wouldna spy upon Elspeth in her great hour."

"I like you for that, Aaron," Tommy said; but Aaron waved his likes aside.

"The reason I stood at the door," he continued, "was to keep you out o' that room. I offered to play you at the dambrod to keep you out. Ay, you ken that without my telling you, but do you ken what makes me tell you now? It's to see whether you'll go in and stop him; let's see you do that, and I'll hae some hope yet." He waited eagerly.

"You do puzzle me now," Tommy said.

"Ay," replied the old man, bitterly, "you're dull in the uptak' when you like! I dinna ken, I suppose, and you dinna ken, that if you had the least dread o' her taking him you would be into that room full bend to stop it; but you're so sure o' her, you're so mighty sure, that you can sit here and lauch instead."

"Am I laughing, Aaron? If you but knew, Elspeth's marriage would be a far more joyful thing to me than it could ever be to you."

The old warper laughed unpleasantly at that. "And I'se uphaud," he said, "you're none sure but what shell tak' him! You're no as sure she'll refuse him as that there's a sun in the heavens, and I'm a broken man."

For a moment sympathy nigh compelled Tommy to say a hopeful thing, but he mastered himself. "It would be weakness," was what he did say, "to pretend that there is any hope."

Aaron gave him an ugly look, and was about to leave the house; but Tommy would not have it. "If one of us must go, Aaron," he said, with much gentleness, "let it be me"; and he went out, passing the parlour door softly, so that he might not disturb poor David. The warper sat on by the fire, his head sunk miserably in his shoulders. The vehemence had passed out of him; you would have hesitated to believe that such a listless, shrunken man could have been vehement that same year. It is a hardy proof of his faith in Tommy that he did not even think it worth

while to look up when, by and by, the parlour door opened and the doctor came in for his hat. Elspeth was with him.

They told Aaron something.

It lifted him off his feet and bore him out at the door. When he made up on himself he knew he was searching everywhere for Tommy. A terror seized him, lest he should not be the first to convey the news.

Had he been left a fortune? neighbours asked, amazed at this unwonted sight; and he replied, as he ran, "I have, and I want to share it wi' him!"

It was his only joke. People came to their doors to see Aaron Latta laughing.