

CHAPTER XXII - GRIZEL'S GLORIOUS HOUR

Elsbeth was to be his wife! David had carried the wondrous promise straight to Grizel, and now he was gone and she was alone again.

Oh, foolish Grizel, are you crying, and I thought it was so hard to you to cry!

"Me crying! Oh, no!"

Put your hand to your cheeks, Grizel. Are they not wet?

"They are wet, and I did not know it! It is hard to me to cry in sorrow, but I can cry for joy. I am crying because it has all come right, and I was so much afraid that it never would."

Ah, Grizel, I think you said you wanted nothing else so long as you had his love!

"But God has let it all come right, just the same, and I am thanking Him. That is why I did not know that I was crying."

She was by the fireplace, on the stool that had always been her favourite seat, and of course she sat very straight. When Grizel walked or stood her strong, round figure took a hundred beautiful poses, but when she sat it had but one. The old doctor, in experimenting moods, had sometimes compelled her to recline, and then watched to see her body spring erect the moment he released his hold. "What a dreadful patient I should make!" she said contritely. "I would chloroform you, miss," said he.

She sat thus for a long time; she had so much for which to thank God, though not with her lips, for how could they keep pace with her heart? Her heart was very full; chiefly, I think, with the tears that rolled down unknown to her.

She thanked God, in the name of the little hunted girl who had not been taught how to pray, and so did it standing. "I do so want to be good; oh, how sweet it would be to be good!" she had said in that long ago. She had said it out loud when she was alone on the chance of His hearing, but she had not addressed Him by name because she was not sure that he was really called God. She had not even known that you should end by

saying "Amen," which Tommy afterwards told her is the most solemn part of it.

How sweet it would be to be good, but how much sweeter it is to be good! The woman that girl had grown into knew that she was good, and she thanked God for that. She thanked Him for letting her help. If He had said that she had not helped, she would have rocked her arms and replied almost hotly: "You know I have." And He did know: He had seen her many times in the grip of inherited passions, and watched her fighting with them and subduing them; He had seen ugly thoughts stealing upon her, as they crawl towards every child of man; ah, He had seen them leap into the heart of the Painted Lady's daughter, as if a nest already made for them must be there, and still she had driven them away. Grizel had helped. The tears came more quickly now.

She thanked God that she had never worn the ring. But why had she never worn it, when she wanted so much to do so, and it was hers? Why had she watched herself more carefully than ever of late, and forced happiness to her face when it was not in her heart, and denied herself, at fierce moments, the luxuries of grief and despair, and even of rebellion? For she had carried about with her the capacity to rebel, but she had hidden it, and the reason was that she thought God was testing her. If she fell He would not give her the thing she coveted. Unworthy reason for being good, as she knew, but God overlooked it, and she thanked Him for that.

Her hands pressed each other impulsively, as if at the shock of a sudden beautiful thought, and then perhaps she was thanking God for making her the one woman who could be the right wife for Tommy. She was so certain that no other woman could help him as she could; none knew his virtues as she knew them. Had it not been for her, his showy parts only would have been loved; the dear, quiet ones would never have heard how dear they were: the showy ones were open to all the world, but the quiet ones were her private garden. His faults as well as his virtues passed before her, and it is strange to know that it was about this time that Grizel ceased to cry and began to smile instead. I know why she smiled; it was because sentimentality was one of the little monsters that came skipping into her view, and Tommy was so confident that he had got rid at last of it! Grizel knew better! But she could look at it and smile. Perhaps she was not sorry that it was still there with the others, it had so long led the procession. I daresay she saw herself taking the leering,

distorted thing in hand and making something gallant of it. She thought that she was too practical, too much given to seeing but one side to a question, too lacking in consideration for others, too impatient, too relentlessly just, and she humbly thanked God for all these faults, because Tommy's excesses were in the opposite direction, and she could thus restore the balance. She was full of humility while she saw how useful she could be to him, but her face did not show this; she had forgotten her face, and elation had spread over it without her knowing. Perhaps God accepted the elation as part of the thanks.

She thanked God for giving Tommy what he wanted so much--herself. Ah, she had thanked Him for that before, but she did it again. And then she went on her knees by her dear doctor's chair, and prayed that she might be a good wife to Tommy.

When she rose the blood was not surging through her veins. Instead of a passion of joy it was a beautiful calm that possessed her, and on noticing this she regarded herself with sudden suspicion, as we put our ear to a watch to see if it has stopped. She found that she was still going, but no longer either fast or slow, and she saw what had happened: her old serene self had come back to her. I think she thanked God for that most of all.

And then she caught sight of her face--oh, oh! Her first practical act as an engaged woman was to wash her face.

Engaged! But was she? Grizel laughed. It is not usually a laughing matter, but she could not help that. Consider her predicament. She could be engaged at once, if she liked, even before she wiped the water from her face, or she might postpone it, to let Tommy share. The careful reader will have noticed that this problem presented itself to her at an awkward moment. She laughed, in short, while her face was still in the basin, with the very proper result that she had to grope for the towel with her eyes shut.

It was still a cold, damp face (Grizel was always in such a hurry) when she opened her most precious drawer and took from it a certain glove which was wrapped in silk paper, but was not perhaps quite so conceited as it had been, for, alas and alack! it was now used as a wrapper itself. The ring was inside it. If Grizel wanted to be engaged, absolutely and at once, all she had to do was to slip that ring upon her finger.

It had been hers for a week or more. Tommy had bought it in a certain Scottish town whose merchant princes are so many, and have risen splendidly from such small beginnings, that after you have been there a short time you beg to be introduced to someone who has not got on. When you look at them they slap their trouser pockets. When they look at you they are wondering if you know how much they are worth. Tommy, one day, roaming their streets (in which he was worth incredibly little), and thinking sadly of what could never be, saw the modest little garnet ring in a jeweller's window, and attached to it was a pathetic story. No other person could have seen the story, but it was as plain to him as though it had been beautifully written on the tag of paper which really contained the price. With his hand on the door he paused, overcome by that horror of entering shops without a lady to do the talking, which all men of genius feel (it is the one sure test), hurried away, came back, went to and fro shyly, until he saw that he was yielding once more to the indecision he thought he had so completely mastered, whereupon he entered bravely (though it was one of those detestable doors that ring a bell as they open), and sternly ordered the jeweller, who could have bought and sold our Tommy with one slap on the trouser leg, to hand the ring over to him.

He had no intention of giving it to Grizel. That, indeed, was part of its great tragedy, for this is the story Tommy read into the ring: There was once a sorrowful man of twenty-three, and forty, and sixty. Ah, how gray the beard has grown as we speak! How thin the locks! But still we know him for the same by that garnet ring. Since it became his no other eye has seen it, and yet it is her engagement ring. Never can he give it to her, but must always carry it about with him as the piteous memory of what had never been. How innocent it looked in his hand, and with an innocence that never wore off, not even when he had reached his threescore years. As it aged it took on another kind of innocence only. It looked pitiable now, for there is but a dishonoured age for a lonely little ring which can never see the finger it was made to span.

A hair-shirt! Such it was to him, and he put it on willingly, knowing it could be nothing else. Every smart it gave him pleased, even while it pained. If ever his mind roamed again to the world of make-believe, that ring would jerk him back to facts.

Grizel remembered well her finding of it. She had been in his pockets. She loved to rifle them; to pull out his watch herself, instead of asking

him for the time; to exclaim "Oh!" at the many things she found there, when they should have been neatly docketed or in the fire, and from his waistcoat pocket she drew the ring. She seemed to understand all about it at once. She was far ahead while he was explaining. It seemed quite strange to her that there had ever been a time when she did not know of her garnet ring.

How her arms rocked! It was delicious to her to remember now with what agony her arms had rocked. She kissed it; she had not been the first to kiss it.

It was "Oh, how I wish I could have saved you this pain!"

"But I love it," she cried, "and I love the pain."

It was "Am I not to see it on your finger once?"

"No, no; we must not."

"Let me, Grizel!"

"Is it right, oh, is it right?"

"Only this once!"

"Very well!"

"I dare not, Grizel, I can't! What are we to do with it now?"

"Give it to me. It is mine. I will keep it, beside my glove."

"Let me keep it, Grizel."

"No; it is mine."

"Shall I fling it away?"

"How can you be so cruel? It is mine."

"Let me bury it."

"It is mine."

And of course she had got her way. Could he resist her in anything? They had never spoken of it since, it was such a sad little ring. Sad! It was not in the least little bit sad. Grizel wondered as she looked at it now how she could ever have thought it sad.

The object with which she put on her hat was to go to Aaron's cottage, to congratulate Elspeth. So she said to herself. Oh, Grizel!

But first she opened two drawers. They were in a great press and full of beautiful linen woven in Thrums, that had come to Dr. McQueen as a "bad debt." "Your marriage portion, young lady," he had said to Grizel, then but a slip of a girl, whereupon, without waiting to lengthen her frock, she rushed rapturously at her work-basket. "Not at all, miss," he cried ferociously; "you are here to look after this house, not to be preparing for another, and until you are respectably bespoken by some rash crittur of a man, into the drawers with your linen and down with those murderous shears." And she had obeyed; no scissors, the most relentless things in nature when in Grizel's hand, had ever cleaved their way through that snowy expanse; never a stitch had she put into her linen except with her eyes, which became horribly like needles as she looked at it.

And now at last she could begin! Oh, but she was anxious to begin; it is almost a fact that, as she looked at those drawers, she grudged the time that must be given to-day to Tommy and his ring.

Do you see her now, ready to start? She was wearing her brown jacket with the fur collar, over which she used to look so searchingly at Tommy. To think there was a time when that serene face had to look searchingly at him! It nearly made her sad again. She paused to bring out the ring and take another exultant look at it. It was attached now to a ribbon round her neck. Sweet ring! She put it to her eyes. That was her way of letting her eyes kiss it Then she rubbed them and it, in case the one had left a tear upon the other.

And then she went out, joy surging in her heart For this was Grizel's glorious hour, the end of it.