

CHAPTER XXIII - TOMMY LOSES GRIZEL

It was not Aaron's good fortune to find Tommy. He should have looked for him in the Den.

In that haunt of happier lovers than he, Tommy walked slowly, pondering. He scarce noticed that he had the Den to himself, or that, since he was last here, autumn had slipped away, leaving all her garments on the ground. By this time, undoubtedly, Elspeth had said her gentle No; but he was not railing against Fate, not even for striking the final blow at him through that innocent medium. He had still too much to do for that--to help others. There were three of them at present, and by some sort of sympathetic jugglery he had an arm for each.

"Lean on me, Grizel--dear sister Elspeth, you little know the harm you have done--David, old friend, your hand."

Thus loaded, he bravely returned at the fitting time to the cottage. His head was not even bent.

Had you asked Tommy what Elspeth would probably do when she dismissed David, he might have replied that she would go up to his room and lock herself into it, so that no one should disturb her for a time. And this he discovered, on returning home, was actually what had happened. How well he knew her! How distinctly he heard every beat of her tender heart, and how easy to him to tell why it was beating! He did not go up; he waited for little Elspeth to come to him, all in her own good time. And when she came, looking just as he knew she would look, he had a brave, bright face for her.

She was shaking after her excitement, or perhaps she had ceased to shake and begun again as she came down to him. He pretended not to notice it; he would notice it the moment he was sure she wanted him to, but perhaps that would not be until she was in bed and he had come to say good-night and put out her light, for, as we know, she often kept her great confidences till then, when she discovered that he already knew them.

"The doctor has been in."

She began almost at once, and in a quaking voice and from a distance, as if in hope that the bullet might be spent before it reached her brother.

"I am sorry I missed him," he replied cautiously. "What a fine fellow he is!"

"You always liked him," said Elspeth, clinging eagerly to that.

"No one could help liking him, Elspeth, he has such winning ways," said Tommy, perhaps a little in the voice with which at funerals we refer to the departed. She loved his words, but she knew she had a surprise for him this time, and she tried to blurt it out.

"He said something to me. He--oh, what a high opinion he has of you!" (She really thought he had.)

"Was that the something?" Tommy asked, with a smile that helped her, as it was meant to do.

"You understand, don't you?" she said, almost in a whisper.

"Of course I do, Elspeth," he answered reassuringly; but somehow she still thought he didn't.

"No one could have been more manly and gentle and humble," she said beseechingly.

"I am sure of it," said Tommy.

"He thinks nothing of himself," she said.

"We shall always think a great deal of him," replied Tommy.

"Yes, but----" Elspeth found the strangest difficulty in continuing, for, though it would have surprised him to be told so, Tommy was not helping her nearly as much as he imagined.

"I told him," she said, shaking, "that no one could be to me what you were. I told him----" and then timid Elspeth altogether broke down. Tommy drew her to him, as he had so often done since she was the smallest child, and pressed her head against his breast, and waited. So often he had waited thus upon Elspeth.

"There is nothing to cry about, dear," he said tenderly, when the time to speak came. "You have, instead, the right to be proud that so good a man loves you. I am very proud of it, Elspeth."

"If I could be sure of that!" she gasped.

"Don't you believe me, dear?"

"Yes, but--that is not what makes me cry. Tommy, don't you see?"

"Yes," he assured her, "I see. You are crying because you feel so sorry for him. But I don't feel sorry for him, Elspeth. If I know anything at all, it is this: that no man needs pity who sincerely loves; whether that love be returned or not, he walks in a new and more beautiful world for evermore."

She clutched his hand. "I don't understand how you know those things," she whispered.

Please God, was Tommy's reflection, she should never know. He saw most vividly the pathos of his case, but he did not break down under it; it helped him, rather, to proceed.

"It will be the test of Gemmell," he said, "how he bears this. No man, I am very sure, was ever told that his dream could not come true more kindly and tenderly than you told it to him." He was in the middle of the next sentence (a fine one) before her distress stopped him.

"Tommy," she cried, "you don't understand. That is not what I told him at all!"

It was one of the few occasions on which the expression on the face of T. Sandys perceptibly changed.

"What did you tell him?" he asked, almost sharply.

"I accepted him," she said guiltily, backing away from this alarming face.

"What!"

"If you only knew how manly and gentle and humble he was," she cried quickly, as if something dire might happen if Tommy were not assured of this at once.

"You--said you would marry him, Elspeth?"

"Yes!"

"And leave me?"

"Oh, oh!" She flung her arms around his neck.

"Yes, but that is what you are prepared to do!" said he, and he held her away from him and stared at her, as if he had never seen Elspeth before. "Were you not afraid?" he exclaimed, in amazement.

"I am not the least bit afraid," she answered. "Oh Tommy, if you knew how manly----" And then she remembered that she had said that already.

"You did not even say that you would--consult me?"

"Oh, oh!"

"Why didn't you, Elspeth?"

"I--I forgot!" she moaned. "Tommy, you are angry!" She hugged him, and he let her do it, but all the time he was looking over her head fixedly, with his mouth open.

"And I was always so sure of you!" were the words that came to him at last, with a hard little laugh at the end of them.

"Can you think it makes me love you less," she sobbed, "because I love him, too? Oh, Tommy, I thought you would be so glad!"

He kissed her; he put his hand fondly upon her head.

"I am glad," he said, with emotion. "When that which you want has come to you, Elspeth, how can I but be glad? But it takes me aback, and if for a moment I felt forlorn, if, when I should have been rejoicing only in your happiness, the selfish thought passed through my mind, 'What is to become of me?' I hope--I hope--" Then he sat down and buried his face in the table.

And he might have been telling her about Grizel! Has the shock stunned you, Tommy? Elspeth thinks it has been a shock of pain. May we lift your head to show her your joyous face?

"I am so proud," she was saying, "that at last, after you have done so much for me, I can do a little thing for you. For it is something to free you, Tommy. You have always pretended, for my sake, that we could not

do without each other, but we both knew all the time that it was only I who was unable to do without you. You can't deny it."

He might deny it, but it was true. Ah, Tommy, you bore with her with infinite patience, but did it never strike you that she kept you to the earth? If Elspeth could be happy without you! You were sure she could not, but if she could!--had that thought never made you flap your wings?

"I often had a pain at my heart," she told him, "which I kept from you. It was a feeling that your solicitude for me, perhaps, prevented your caring for any other woman. It seemed terrible and unnatural that I should be a bar to that. I felt that I was starving you, and not you only, but an unknown woman as well."

"So long as I had you, Elspeth," he said reproachfully, "was not that enough?"

"It seemed to be enough," she answered gravely, "but even while I comforted myself with that, I knew that it should not be enough, and still I feared that if it was, the blame was mine. Now I am no longer in the way, and I hope, so ardently, that you will fall in love, like other people. If you never do, I shall always have the fear that I am the cause, that you lost the capacity in the days when I let you devote yourself too much to me."

Oh, blind Elspeth! Now is the time to tell her, Tommy, and fill her cup of happiness to the brim.

But it is she who is speaking still, almost gaily now, yet with a full heart. "What a time you have had with me, Tommy! I told David all about it, and what he has to look forward to, but he says he is not afraid. And when you find someone you can love," she continued sweetly, though she had a sigh to stifle, "I hope she will be someone quite unlike me, for oh, my dear, good brother, I know you need a change."

Not a word said Tommy.

She said, timidly, that she had begun to hope of late that Grizel might be the woman, and still he did not speak. He drew Elspeth closer to him, that she might not see his face and the horror of himself that surely sat on it. To the very marrow of him he was in such cold misery that I wonder his arms did not chill her.

This poor devil of a Sentimental Tommy! He had wakened up in the world of facts, where he thought he had been dwelling of late, to discover that he had not been here for weeks, except at meal-times. During those weeks he had most honestly thought that he was in a passion to be married. What do you say to pitying instead of cursing him? It is a sudden idea of mine, and we must be quick, for joyous Grizel is drawing near, and this, you know, is the chapter in which her heart breaks.

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It was Elspeth who opened the door to Grizel. "Does she know?" said Elspeth to herself, before either of them spoke.

"Does she know?" It was what Grizel was saying also.

"Oh, Elspeth, I am so glad! David has told me."

"She does know," Elspeth told herself, and she thought it was kind of Grizel to come so quickly. She said so.

"She doesn't know!" thought Grizel, and then these two kissed for the first time. It was a kiss of thanks from each.

"But why does she not know?" Grizel wondered a little as they entered the parlour, where Tommy was; he had been standing with his teeth knit since he heard the knock. As if in answer to the question, Elspeth said: "I have just broken it to Tommy. He has been in a few minutes only, and he is so surprised he can scarcely speak."

Grizel laughed happily, for that explained it. Tommy had not had time to tell her yet. She laughed again at Elspeth, who had thought she had so much to tell and did not know half the story.

Elspeth begged Tommy to listen to the beautiful things Grizel was saying about David, but, truth to tell, Grizel scarcely heard them herself. She had given Tommy a shy, rapturous glance. She was wondering when he would begin. What a delicious opening when he shook hands! Suppose he had kissed her instead! Or, suppose he casually addressed her as darling! He might do it at any moment now! Just for once she would not mind though he did it in public. Perhaps as soon as this new remark of Elspeth's was finished, he meant to say: "You are not the only engaged person in the room, Miss Elspeth; I think I see another two!" Grizel laughed as if she had heard him say it. And then she ceased laughing

suddenly, for some little duty had called Elspeth into the other room, and as she went out she stopped the movement of the earth.

These two were alone with their great joy.

Elspeth had said that she would be back in two minutes. Was Grizel wasting a moment when she looked only at him, her eyes filmy with love, the crooked smile upon her face so happy that it could not stand still? Her arms made a slight gesture towards him; her hands were open; she was giving herself to him. She could not see. For a fraction of time the space between them seemed to be annihilated. His arms were closing round her. Then she knew that neither of them had moved.

"Grizel!"

He tried to be true to her by deceiving her. It was the only way. "At last, Grizel," he cried, "at last!" and he put joyousness into his voice. "It has all come right, dear one!" he cried like an ecstatic lover. Never in his life had he tried so hard to deceive at the sacrifice of himself. But he was fighting something as strong as the instinct of self-preservation, and his usually expressionless face gave the lie to his joyous words. Loud above his voice his ashen face was speaking to her, and she cried in terror, "What is wrong?" Even then he attempted to deceive her, but suddenly she knew the truth.

"You don't want to be married!"

I think the room swam round with her. When it was steady again, "You did not say that, did you?" she asked. She was sure he had not said it. She was smiling again tremulously to show him that he had not said it.

"I want to be married above all else on earth," he said imploringly; but his face betrayed him still, and she demanded the truth, and he was forced to tell it.

A little shiver passed through her, that was all.

"Do you mean that you don't love me?" she said. "You must tell me what you mean."

"That is how others would put it, I suppose," he replied. "I believe they would be wrong. I think I love you in my own way; but I thought I loved you in their way, and it is the only way that counts in this world of

theirs. It does not seem to be my world. I was given wings, I think, but I am never to know that I have left the earth until I come flop upon it with an arrow through them. I crawl and wriggle here, and yet"--he laughed harshly--"I believe I am rather a fine fellow when I am flying!"

She nodded. "You mean you want me to let you off?" she asked. "You must tell me what you mean." And as he did not answer instantly, "Because I think I have some little claim upon you," she said, with a pleasant smile.

"I am as pitiful a puzzle to myself as I can be to you," he replied. "All I know is that I don't want to marry anyone. And yet I am sure I could die for you, Grizel."

It was quite true. A burning house and Grizel among the flames, and he would have been the first on the ladder. But there is no such luck for you, Tommy.

"You are free," was what she said. "Don't look so tragic," she added, again with the pleasant smile. "It must be very distressing to you, but--you will soon fly again." Her lips twitched tremulously. "I can't fly," she said.

She took the ring from her neck. She took it off its ribbon.

"I brought it," she said, "to let you put it on my finger. I thought you would want to do that," she said.

"Grizel," he cried, "can we not be as we have been?"

"No," she answered.

"It would all come right, Grizel. I am sure it would. I don't know why I am as I am; but I shall try to change myself. You have borne with me since we were children. Won't you bear with me for a little longer?"

She shook her head, but did not trust herself to speak.

"I have lost you," he said, and she nodded.

"Then I am lost indeed!" said he, and he knew it, too; but with a gesture of the hand she begged him not to say that.

"Without your love to help me----" he began.

"You shall always have that," she told him with shining eyes, "always, always." And what could he do but look at her with the wonder and the awe that come to every man who, for one moment in his life, knows a woman well?

"You can love me still, Grizel!" His voice was shaky.

"Just the same," she answered, and I suppose he looked uplifted. "But you should be sorry," she said gravely, and it was then that Elspeth came back. She had not much exceeded her two minutes.

It was always terrible to Tommy not to have the feelings of a hero. At that moment he could not endure it. In a splendid burst of self-sacrifice he suddenly startled both Grizel and himself by crying, "Elspeth, I love Grizel, and I have just asked her to be my wife."

Yes, the nobility of it amazed himself, but bewitched him, too, and he turned gloriously to Grizel, never doubting but that she would have him still.

He need not have spoken so impulsively, nor looked so grand. She swayed for an instant and then was erect again. "You must forgive me, Elspeth," she said, "but I have refused him"; and that was the biggest surprise Tommy ever got in his life.

"You don't care for him!" Elspeth blurted out.

"Not in the way he cares for me," Grizel replied quietly, and when Elspeth would have said more she begged her to desist. "The only thing for me to do now, Elspeth," she said, smiling, "is to run away, but I want you first to accept a little wedding-gift from me. I wish you and David so much happiness; you won't refuse it, will you?"

Elspeth, still astounded, took the gift. It was a little garnet ring.

"It will have to be cut," Grizel said. "It was meant, I think, for a larger finger. I have had it some time, but I never wore it."

Elspeth said she would always treasure her ring, and that it was beautiful.

"I used to think it--rather sweet," Grizel admitted, and then she said good-bye to them both and went away.