

CHAPTER XXIV - THE MONSTER

Tommy's new character was that of a monster. He always liked the big parts.

Concealed, as usual, in the garments that clung so oddly to him, modesty, generosity, indifference to applause and all the nobler impulses, he could not strip himself of them, try as he would, and so he found, to his scornful amusement, that he still escaped the public fury. In the two months that preceded Elspeth's marriage there was positively scarce a soul in Thrums who did not think rather well of him. "If they knew what I really am," he cried with splendid bitterness, "how they would run from me!"

Even David could no longer withhold the hand of fellowship, for Grizel would tell him nothing, except that, after all, and for reasons sufficient to herself, she had declined to become Mrs. Sandys. He sought in vain to discover how Tommy could be to blame. "And now," Tommy said grimly to Grizel, "our doctor thinks you have used me badly, and that I am a fine fellow to bear no resentment! Elspeth told me that he admires the gentle and manly dignity with which I submit to the blow, and I have no doubt that, as soon as I heard that, I made it more gentle and manly than ever!"

"I have forbidden Elspeth," he told her, "to upbraid you for not accepting me, with the result that she thinks me too good to live! Ha, ha! what do you think, Grizel?"

It became known in the town that she had refused him. Everybody was on Tommy's side. They said she had treated him badly. Even Aaron was staggered at the sight of Tommy accepting his double defeat in such good part. "And all the time I am the greatest cur unhung," says Tommy. "Why don't you laugh, Grizel?"

Never, they said, had there been such a generous brother. The town was astir about this poor man's gifts to the lucky bride. There were rumours that among the articles was a silver coal-scuttle, but it proved to be a sugar-bowl in that pattern. Three bandboxes came for her to select from; somebody discovered who was on the watch, but may I be struck dead if more than one went back. Yesterday it was bonnets; to-day she is at

Tilliedrum again, trying on her going-away dress. And she really was to go away in it, a noticeable thing, for in Thrums society, though they usually get a going-away dress, they are too canny to go away in it. The local shops were not ignored, but the best of the trousseau came from London. "That makes the second box this week, as I'm a living sinner," cries the lady on the watch again. When boxes arrived at the station Corp wheeled them up to Elspeth without so much as looking at the label.

Ah, what a brother! They said it openly to their own brothers, and to Tommy in the way they looked at him.

"There has been nothing like it," he assured Grizel, "since Red Riding-hood and the wolf. Why can't I fling off my disguise and cry, 'The better to eat you with!'"

He always spoke to her now in this vein of magnificent bitterness, but Grizel seldom rewarded him by crying, "Oh, oh!" She might, however, give him a patient, reproachful glance instead, and it had the irritating effect of making him feel that perhaps he was under life-size, instead of over it.

"I daresay you are right," says Tommy, savagely.

"I said nothing."

"You don't need to say it. What a grand capacity you have for knocking me off my horse, Grizel!"

"Are you angry with me for that?"

"No; it is delicious to pick one's self out of the mud, especially when you find it is a baby you are picking up, instead of a brute. Am I a baby only, Grizel?"

"I think it is childish of you," she replied, "to say you are a brute."

"There is not to be even that satisfaction left to me! You are hard on me, Grizel."

"I am trying to help you. How can you be angry with me?"

"The instinct of self-preservation, I suppose. I see myself dwindling so rapidly under your treatment that soon there will be nothing of me left."

It was said cruelly, for he knew that the one thing Grizel could not bear now was the implication that she saw his faults only. She always went

down under that blow with pitiful surrender, showing the woman suddenly, as if under a physical knouting.

He apologized contritely. "But, after all, it proves my case," he said, "for I could not hurt you in this way, Grizel, if I were not a pretty well-grown specimen of a monster."

"Don't," she said; but she did not seek to help him by drawing him away to other subjects, which would have been his way. "What is there monstrous," she asked, "in your being so good to Elspeth? It is very kind of you to give her all these things."

"Especially when by rights they are yours, Grizel!"

"No, not when you did not want to give them to me."

He dared say nothing to that; there were some matters on which he must not contradict Grizel now.

"It is nice of you," she said, "not to complain, though Elspeth is deserting you. It must have been a blow."

"You and I only know why," he answered. "But for her, Grizel, I might be whining sentiment to you at this moment."

"That," she said, "would be the monstrous thing."

"And it is not monstrous, I suppose, that I should let Gemmell press my hand under the conviction that, after all, I am a trump."

"You don't pose as one."

"That makes them think the more highly of me! Nothing monstrous, Grizel, in my standing quietly by while you are showing Elspeth how to furnish her house--I, who know why you have the subject at your fingertips!"

For Grizel had given all her sweet ideas to Elspeth. Heigh-ho! how she had guarded them once, confiding them half reluctantly even to Tommy; half reluctantly, that is, at the start, because they were her very own, but once she was embarked on the subject talking with such rapture that every minute or two he had to beg her to be calm. She was the first person in that part of the world to think that old furniture need not be kept in the dark corners, and she knew where there was an oak bedstead

that was looked upon as a disgrace, and where to obtain the dearest cupboards, one of them in use as the retiring-chamber of a rabbit-hutch, and stately clocks made in the town a hundred years ago, and quaint old-farrant lamps and cogeys and sand-glasses that apologized if you looked at them, and yet were as willing to be loved again as any old lady in a mutch. You will not buy them easily now, the people will not chuckle at you when you bid for them now. We have become so cute in Thrums that when the fender breaks we think it may have increased in value, and we preserve any old board lest the worms have made it artistic. Grizel, however, was in advance of her time. She could lay her hands on all she wanted, and she did, but it was for Elspeth's house.

"And the table-cloths and the towels and the sheets," said Tommy.
"Nothing monstrous in my letting you give Elspeth them?"

The linen, you see, was no longer in Grizel's press.

"I could not help making them," she answered, "they were so longing to be made. I did not mean to give them to her. I think I meant to put them back in the press, but when they were made it was natural that they should want to have something to do. So I gave them to Elspeth."

"With how many tears on them?"

"Not many. But with some kisses."

"All which," says Tommy, "goes to prove that I have nothing with which to reproach myself!"

"No, I never said that," she told him. "You have to reproach yourself with wanting me to love you."

She paused a moment to let him say, if he dared, that he had not done that, when she would have replied instantly, "You know you did." He could have disabused her, but it would have been cruel, and so on this subject, as ever, he remained silent.

"But that is not what I have been trying to prove," she continued. "You know as well as I that the cause of this unhappiness has been--what you call your wings."

He was about to thank her for her delicacy in avoiding its real name, when she added, "I mean your sentiment," and he laughed instead.

"I flatter myself that I no longer fly, at all events," he said. "I know what I am at last, Grizel"

"It is flattery only," she replied with her old directness. "This thing you are regarding with a morbid satisfaction is not you at all."

He groaned. "Which of them all is me, Grizel?" he asked gloomily.

"We shall see," she said, "when we have got the wings off."

"They will have to come off a feather at a time."

"That," she declared, "is what I have been trying to prove."

"It will be a weary task, Grizel."

"I won't weary at it," she said, smiling.

Her cheerfulness was a continual surprise to him. "You bear up wonderfully well yourself," he sometimes said to her, almost reproachfully, and she never replied that, perhaps, that was one of her ways of trying to help him.

She is not so heartbroken, after all, you may be saying, and I had promised to break her heart. But, honestly, I don't know how to do it more thoroughly, and you must remember that we have not seen her alone yet.

She tried to be very little alone. She helped David in his work more than ever; not a person, for instance, managed to escape the bath because Grizel's heart was broken. You could never say that she was alone when her needle was going, and the linen became sheets and the like, in what was probably record time. Yet they could have been sewn more quickly; for at times the needle stopped and she did not know it. Once a bedridden old woman, with whom she had been sitting up, lay watching her instead of sleeping, and finally said: "What makes you sit staring at a cauld fire, and speaking to yourself?" And there was a strange day when she had been too long in the Den. When she started for home she went in the direction of Double Dykes, her old home, instead.

She could bear everything except doubt. She had told him so, when he wondered at her calmness; she often said it to herself. She could tread any path, however drearily it stretched before her, so long as she knew whither it led, but there could be no more doubt. Oh, he must never

again disturb her mind with hope! How clearly she showed him that, and yet they had perhaps no more than parted when it seemed impossible to bear for the next hour the desolation she was sentenced to for life. She lay quivering and tossing on the hearth-rug of the parlour, beating it with her fists, rocking her arms, and calling to him to give her doubt again, that she might get through the days.

"Let me doubt again!" Here was Grizel starting to beg it of him. More than once she got half-way to Aaron's house before she could turn; but she always did turn, with the words unspoken; never did Tommy hear her say them, but always that she was tranquil now. Was it pride that supported her in the trying hour? Oh, no, it was not pride. That is an old garment, which once became Grizel well, but she does not wear it now; she takes it out of the closet, perhaps, at times to look at it. What gave her strength when he was by was her promise to help him. It was not by asking for leave to dream herself that she could make him dream the less. All done for you, Tommy! It might have helped you to loosen a few of the feathers.

Sometimes she thought it might not be Tommy, but herself, who was so unlike other people; that it was not he who was unable to love, but she who could not be loved. This idea did not agitate her as a terrible thing; she could almost welcome it. But she did not go to him with it. While it might be but a fancy, that was no way to help a man who was overfull of them. It was the bare truth only that she wanted him to see, and so she made elaborate inquiries into herself, to discover whether she was quite unlovable. I suppose it would have been quaint, had she not been quite so much in earnest. She examined herself in the long mirror most conscientiously, and with a determinedly open mind, to see whether she was too ugly for any man to love. Our beautiful Grizel really did.

She had always thought that she was a nice girl, but was she? No one had ever loved her, except the old doctor, and he began when she was so young that perhaps he had been inveigled into it, like a father. Even David had not loved her. Was it because he knew her so well? What was it in women that made men love them? She asked it of David in such a way that he never knew she was putting him to the question. He merely thought that he and she were having a pleasant chat about Elspeth, and, as a result, she decided that he loved Elspeth because she was so helpless. His head sat with uncommon pride on his shoulders while he talked of Elspeth's timidity. There was a ring of boastfulness in his voice

as he paraded the large number of useful things that Elspeth could not do. And yet David was a sensible and careful man.

Was it helplessness that man loved in woman, then? It seemed to be Elspeth's helplessness that had made Tommy such a brother, and how it had always appealed to Aaron! No woman could be less helpless than herself, Grizel knew. She thought back and back, and she could not come to a time when she was not managing somebody. Women, she reflected, fall more or less deeply in love with every baby they see, while men, even the best of them, can look calmly at other people's babies. But when the helplessness of the child is in the woman, then other women are unmoved; but the great heart of man is stirred--woman is his baby. She remembered that the language of love is in two sexes--for the woman superlatives, for the man diminutives. The more she loves the bigger he grows, but in an ecstasy he could put her in his pocket. Had not Tommy taught her this? His little one, his child! Perhaps he really had loved her in the days when they both made believe that she was infantile; but soon she had shown with fatal clearness that she was not. Instead of needing to be taken care of, she had obviously wanted to take care of him: their positions were reversed. Perhaps, said Grizel to herself, I should have been a man.

If this was the true explanation, then, though Tommy, who had tried so hard, could not love her, he might be able to love--what is the phrase?--a more womanly woman, or, more popular phrase still, a very woman. Some other woman might be the right wife for him. She did not shrink from considering this theory, and she considered so long that I, for one, cannot smile at her for deciding ultimately, as she did, that there was nothing in it.

The strong like to be leaned upon and the weak to lean, and this irrespective of sex. This was the solution she woke up with one morning, and it seemed to explain not only David's and Elspeth's love, but her own, so clearly that in her desire to help she put it before Tommy. It implied that she cared for him because he was weak, and he drew a very long face.

"You don't know how the feathers hurt as they come out," he explained.

"But so long as we do get them out!" she said.

"Every other person who knows me thinks that strength is my great characteristic," he maintained, rather querulously.

"But when you know it is not," said Grizel. "You do know, don't you?" she asked anxiously. "To know the truth about one's self, that is the beginning of being strong."

"You seem determined," he retorted, "to prevent my loving you."

"Why?" she asked.

"You are to make me strong in spite of myself, I understand. But, according to your theory, the strong love the weak only. Are you to grow weak, Grizel, as I grow strong?"

She had not thought of that, and she would have liked to rock her arms. But she was able to reply: "I am not trying to help you in order to make you love me; you know, quite well, that all that is over and done with. I am trying only to help you to be what a man should be."

She could say that to him, but to herself? Was she prepared to make a man of him at the cost of his possible love? This faced her when she was alone with her passionate nature, and she fought it, and with her fists clenched she cried: "Yes, yes, yes!"

Do we know all that Grizel had to fight? There were times when Tommy's mind wandered to excuses for himself; he knew what men were, and he shuddered to think of the might have been, had a girl who could love as Grizel did loved such a man as her father. He thanked his Maker, did Tommy, that he, who was made as those other men, had avoided raising passions in her. I wonder how he was so sure. Do we know all that Grizel had to fight?

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They spoke much during those days of the coming parting, and she always said that she could bear it if she saw him go away more of a man than he had come.

"Then anything I have suffered or may suffer," she told him, "will have been done to help you, and perhaps in time that will make me proud of my poor little love-story. It would be rather pitiful, would it not, if I have gone through so much for no end at all?"

She spoke, he said, almost reproachfully, as if she thought he might go away on his wings, after all.

"We can't be sure," she murmured, she was so eager to make him watchful.

"Yes," he said, humbly but firmly, "I may be a scoundrel, Grizel, I am a scoundrel, but one thing you may be sure of, I am done with sentiment." But even as he said it, even as he felt that he could tear himself asunder for being untrue to Grizel, a bird was singing at his heart because he was free again, free to go out into the world and play as if it were but a larger den. Ah, if only Tommy could always have remained a boy!

Elsbeth's marriage day came round, and I should like to linger in it, and show you Elsbeth in her wedding-gown, and Tommy standing behind to catch her if she fainted, and Ailie weeping, and Aaron Latta rubbing his gleeful hands, and a smiling bridesmaid who had once thought she might be a bride. But that was a day in Elsbeth's story, not in Tommy's and Grizel's. Only one incident in their story crept into that happy day. There were speeches at the feast, and the Rev. Mr. Dishart referred to Tommy in the kindest way, called him "my young friend," quoted (inaccurately) from his book, and expressed an opinion, formed, he might say, when Mr. Sandys was a lad at school (cheers), that he had a career before him. Tommy bore it well, all except the quotation, which he was burning to correct, but sighed to find that it had set the dominies on his left talking about precocity. "To produce such a graybeard of a book at two and twenty, Mr. Sandys," said Cathro, "is amazing. It partakes, sir, of the nature of the miraculous; it's onchancey, by which we mean a deviation from the normal." And so on. To escape this kind of flattery (he had so often heard it said by ladies, who could say it so much better), Tommy turned to his neighbours on the right.

Oddly enough, they also were discussing deviations from the normal. On the table was a plant in full flower, and Ailie, who had lent it, was expressing surprise that it should bloom so late in the season.

"So early in its life, I should rather say," the doctor remarked after examining it. "It is a young plant, and in the ordinary course would not have come to flower before next year. But it is afraid that it will never see next year. It is one of those poor little plants that bloom prematurely because they are diseased."

Tommy was a little startled. He had often marvelled over his own precocity, but never guessed that this might be the explanation why he was in flower at twenty-two. "Is that a scientific fact?" he asked.

"It is a law of nature," the doctor replied gravely, and if anything more was said on the subject our Tommy did not hear it. What did he hear? He was a child again, in miserable lodgings, and it was sometime in the long middle of the night, and what he heard from his bed was his mother coughing away her life in hers. There was an angry knock, knock, knock, from somewhere near, and he crept out of bed to tell his mother that the people through the wall were complaining because she would not die more quietly; but when he reached her bed it was not his mother he saw lying there, but himself, aged twenty-four or thereabouts. For Tommy had inherited his mother's cough; he had known it every winter, but he remembered it as if for the first time now.

Did he hear anything else? I think he heard his wings slipping to the floor.

He asked Ailie to give him the plant, and he kept it in his room very lovingly, though he forgot to water it. He sat for long periods looking at it, and his thoughts were very deep, but all he actually said aloud was, "There are two of us." Aaron sometimes saw them together, and thought they were an odd pair, and perhaps they were.

Tommy did not tell Grizel of the tragedy that was hanging over him. He was determined to save her that pain. He knew that most men in his position would have told her, and was glad to find that he could keep it so gallantly to himself. She was brave; perhaps some day she would discover that he had been brave also. When she talked of wings now, what he seemed to see was a green grave. His eyes were moist, but he held his head high. All this helped him.

Ah, well, but the world must jog along though you and I be damned. Elspeth was happily married, and there came the day when Tommy and Grizel must say good-bye. He was returning to London. His luggage was already in Corp's barrow, all but the insignificant part of it, which yet made a bulky package in its author's pocket, for it was his new manuscript, for which he would have fought a regiment, yes, and beaten them. Little cared Tommy what became of the rest of his luggage so long as that palpitating package was safe.

"And little you care," Grizel said, in a moment of sudden bitterness, "whom you leave behind, so long as you take it with you."

He forgave her with a sad smile. She did not know, you see, that this manuscript might be his last.

And it was the only bitter thing she said. Even when he looked very sorry for her, she took advantage of his emotion to help him only. "Don't be too sorry for me," she said calmly; "remember, rather, that there is one episode in a woman's life to which she must always cling in memory, whether it was a pride to her or a shame, and that it rests with you to make mine proud or shameful."

In other words, he was to get rid of his wings. How she harped on that!

He wanted to kiss her on the brow, but she would not have it. He was about to do it, not to gratify any selfish desire, but of a beautiful impulse that if anything happened she would have this to remember as the last of him. But she drew back almost angrily. Positively, she was putting it down to sentiment, and he forgave her even that.

But she kissed the manuscript. "Wish it luck," he had begged of her; "you were always so fond of babies, and this is my baby." So Grizel kissed Tommy's baby, and then she turned away her face.