

CHAPTER XXX - THE LITTLE GODS DESERT HIM

And all next day he searched like a man whose eyes would never close again. She had not passed the night in any inn or village house of St. Gian; of that he made certain by inquiries from door to door. None of the guides had seen her, though they are astir so late and so early, patiently waiting at the hotel doors to be hired, that there seems to be no night for them--darkness only, that blots them out for a time as they stand waiting. At all hours there is in St. Gian the tinkle of bells, the clatter of hoofs, the crack of a whip, dust in retreat; but no coachman brought him news. The streets were thronged with other coachmen on foot looking into every face in quest of some person who wanted to return to the lowlands, but none had looked into her face.

Within five minutes of the hotel she might have been on any of half a dozen roads. He wandered or rushed along them all for a space, and came back. One of them was short and ended in the lake. All through that long and beautiful day this miserable man found himself coming back to the road that ended in the lake.

There were moments when he cried to himself that it was an apparition he had seen and heard. He had avoided his friends all day; of the English-speaking people in St. Gian one only knew why he was distraught, and she was the last he wished to speak to; but more than once he nearly sought her to say, "Partner in my shame, what did you see? what did you hear?" In the afternoon he had a letter from Elspeth telling him how she was enjoying her holiday by the sea, and mentioning that David was at that moment writing to Grizel in Thrums. But was it, then, all a dream? he cried, nearly convinced for the first time, and he went into the arbour saying determinedly that it was a dream; and in the arbour, standing primly in a corner, was Grizel's umbrella. He knew that umbrella so well! He remembered once being by while she replaced one of its ribs so deftly that he seemed to be looking on at a surgical operation. The old doctor had given it to her, and that was why she would not let it grow old before she was old herself. Tommy opened it now with trembling hands and looked at the little bits of Grizel on it: the beautiful stitching with which she had coaxed the slits to close again; the one patch, so artful that she had clapped her hands over it. And he fell on his knees

and kissed these little bits of Grizel, and called her "beloved," and cried to his gods to give him one more chance.

"I woke up." It was all that she had said. It was Grizel's excuse for inconveniencing him. She had said it apologetically and as if she did not quite know how she came to be there herself. There was no look of reproach on her face while the match burned; there had been a pitiful smile, as if she was begging him not to be very angry with her; and then when he said her name she gave that little cry as if she had recognized herself, and stole away. He lived that moment over and over again, and she never seemed to be horror-stricken until he cried "Grizel!" when her recognition of herself made her scream. It was as if she had wakened up, dazed by the terrible things that were being said, and then, by the light of that one word "Grizel," suddenly knew who had been listening to them.

Did he know anything more? He pressed his hands harshly on his temples and thought. He knew that she was soaking wet, that she had probably sought the arbour for protection from the rain, and that, if so, she had been there for at least four hours. She had wakened up. She must have fallen asleep, knocked down by fatigue. What fatigue it must have been to make Grizel lie there for hours he could guess, and he beat his brow in anguish. But why she had come he could not guess. "Oh, miserable man, to seek for reasons," he cried passionately to himself, "when it is Grizel--Grizel herself--you should be seeking for!"

He walked and ran the round of the lake, and it was not on the bank that his staring eyes were fixed.

At last he came for a moment upon her track. The people of an inn six miles from St. Gian remembered being asked yesterday by an English miss, walking alone, how far she was from Bad-Platten. She was wearing something brown, and her boots were white with dust, and these people had never seen a lady look so tired before; when she stood still she had to lean against the wall. They said she had red-hot eyes.

Tommy was in an einspänner now, the merry conveyance of the country and more intoxicating than its wines, and he drove back through St. Gian to Bad-Platten, where again he heard from Grizel, though he did not find her. What he found was her telegram from London: "I am coming. GRIZEL." Why had she come? why had she sent that telegram? what had taken her to London? He was not losing time when he asked himself distractedly these questions, for he was again in his gay carriage

and driving back to the wayside inn. He spent the night there, afraid to go farther lest he should pass her in the darkness; for he had decided that, if alive, she was on this road. That she had walked all those forty miles uphill seemed certain, and apparently the best he could hope was that she was walking back. She had probably no money to enable her to take the diligence. Perhaps she had no money with which to buy food. It might be that while he lay tossing in bed she was somewhere near, dying for want of a franc.

He was off by morning light, and several times that day he heard of her, twice from people who had seen her pass both going and coming, and he knew it must be she when they said she rocked her arms as she walked. Oh, he knew why she rocked her arms! Once he thought he had found her. He heard of an English lady who was lying ill in the house of a sawmiller, whose dog (we know the dogs of these regions, but not the people) had found her prostrate in the wood, some distance from the highroad. Leaving his einspänner in a village, Tommy climbed down the mountain-side to this little house, which he was long in discovering. It was by the side of a roaring river, and he arrived only an hour too late. The lady had certainly been Grizel; but she was gone. The sawyer's wife described to him how her husband had brought her in, and how she seemed so tired and bewildered that she fell asleep while they were questioning her. She held her hands over her ears to shut out the noise of the river, which seemed to terrify her. So far as they could understand, she told them that she was running away from the river. She had been sleeping there for three hours, and was still asleep when the good woman went off to meet her husband; but when they returned she was gone.

He searched the wood for miles around, crying her name. The sawyer and some of his fellow-workers left the trees they were stripping of bark to help him, and for hours the wood rang with "Grizel, Grizel!" All the mountains round took up the cry; but there never came an answer. This long delay prevented his reaching the railway terminus until noon of the following day, and there he was again too late. But she had been here. He traced her to that hotel whence we saw her setting forth, and the portier had got a ticket for her for London. He had talked with her for some little time, and advised her, as she seemed so tired, to remain there for the night. But she said she must go home at once. She seemed to be passionately desirous to go home, and had looked at him suspiciously, as if fearing he might try to hold her back. He had been called away, and

on returning had seen her disappearing over the bridge. He had called to her, and then she ran as if afraid he was pursuing her. But he had observed her afterwards in the train.

So she was not without money, and she was on her way home! The relief it brought him came to the surface in great breaths, and at first every one of them was a prayer of thankfulness. Yet in time they were triumphant breaths. Translated into words, they said that he had got off cheaply for the hundredth time. His little gods had saved him again, as they had saved him in the harbour by sending Grizel to him. He could do as he liked, for they were always there to succour him; they would never desert him--never. In a moment of fierce elation he raised his hat to them, then seemed to see Grizel crying "I woke up," and in horror of himself clapped it on again. It was but a momentary aberration, and is recorded only to show that, however remorseful he felt afterwards, there was life in our Tommy still.

The train by which he was to follow her did not leave until evening, and through those long hours he was picturing, with horrible vividness and pain, the progress of Grizel up and down that terrible pass. Often his shoulders shook in agony over what he saw, and he shuddered to the teeth. He would have walked round the world on his knees to save her this long anguish! And then again it was less something he saw than something he was writing, and he altered it to make it more dramatic. "I woke up." How awful that was! but in this new scene she uttered no words. Lady Pippinworth was in his arms when they heard a little cry, so faint that a violin string makes as much moan when it snaps. In a dread silence he lit a match, and as it flared the figure of a girl was seen upon the floor. She was dead; and even as he knew that she was dead he recognized her. "Grizel!" he cried. The other woman who had lured him from his true love uttered a piercing scream and ran towards the hotel. When she returned with men and lanterns there was no one in the harbour, but there were what had been a man and a girl. They lay side by side. The startled onlookers unbared their heads. A solemn voice said, "In death not divided."

He was not the only occupant of the hotel reading-room as he saw all this, and when his head fell forward and he groaned, the others looked up from their papers. A lady asked if he was unwell.

"I have had a great shock," he replied in a daze, pulling his hand across his forehead.

"Something you have seen in your paper?" inquired a clergyman who had been complaining that there was no news.

"People I knew," said Tommy, not yet certain which world he was in.

"Dead?" the lady asked sympathetically.

"I knew them well," he said, and staggered into the fresh air.

Poor dog of a Tommy! He had been a total abstainer from sentiment, as one may say, for sixty hours, and this was his only glass. It was the nobler Tommy, sternly facing facts, who by and by stepped into the train. He even knew why he was going to Thrums. He was going to say certain things to her; and he said them to himself again and again in the train, and heard her answer. The words might vary, but they were always to the same effect.

"Grizel, I have come back!"

He saw himself say these words, as he opened her door in Gavinia's little house. And when he had said them he bowed his head.

At his sudden appearance she started up; then she stood pale and firm.

"Why have you come back?"

"Not to ask your forgiveness," he replied hoarsely; "not to attempt to excuse myself; not with any hope that there remains one drop of the love you once gave me so abundantly. I want only, Grizel, to put my life into your hands. I have made a sorry mess of it myself. Will you take charge of what may be left of it? You always said you were ready to help me. I have come back, Grizel, for your help. What you were once willing to do for love, will you do for pity now?"

She turned away her head, and he went nearer her. "There was always something of the mother in your love, Grizel; but for that you would never have borne with me so long. A mother, they say, can never quite forget her boy--oh, Grizel, is it true? I am the prodigal come back. Grizel, beloved, I have sinned and I am unworthy, but I am still your boy, and I have come back. Am I to be sent away?"

At the word "beloved" her arms rocked impulsively. "You must not call me that," she said.

"Then I am to go," he answered with a shudder, "for I must always call you that; whether I am with you or away, you shall always be beloved to me."

"You don't love me!" she cried. "Oh, do you love me at last!" And at that he fell upon his knees.

"Grizel, my love, my love!"

"But you don't want to be married," she said.

"Beloved, I have come back to ask you on my knees to be my wife."

"That woman--"

"She was a married woman, Grizel."

"Oh, oh, oh!"

"And now you know the worst of me. It is the whole truth at last. I don't know why you took that terrible journey, dear Grizel, but I do know that you were sent there to save me. Oh, my love, you have done so much, will you do no more?"

And so on, till there came a time when his head was on her lap and her hand caressing it, and she was whispering to her boy to look up and see her crooked smile again.

He passed on to the wedding. All the time between seemed to be spent in his fond entreaties to hasten the longed-for day. How radiant she looked in her bridal gown! "Oh, beautiful one, are you really mine? Oh, world, pause for a moment and look at the woman who has given herself to me!"

"My wife--this is my wife!" They were in London now; he was showing her to London. How he swaggered! There was a perpetual apology on her face; it begged people to excuse him for looking so proudly at her. It was a crooked apology, and he hurried her into dark places and kissed it.

Do you see that Tommy was doing all this for Grizel and pretending to her that it was for himself? He was passionately desirous of making amends, and he was to do it in the most generous way. Perhaps he believed when he seemed to enter her room saying, "Grizel, I have come

back," that she loved him still; perhaps he knew that he did not love in the way he said; perhaps he saw a remorseful man making splendid atonement: but never should she know these things; tenderly as he had begun he would go on to the end. Here at last is a Tommy worth looking at, and he looked.

Yet as he drew near Thrums, after almost exactly two days of continuous travel, many a shiver went down his back, for he could not be sure that he should find Grizel here; he sometimes seemed to see her lying ill at some wayside station in Switzerland, in France; everything that could have happened to her he conceived, and he moved restlessly in the carriage. His mouth went dry.

"Has she come back?"

The train had stopped for the taking of tickets, and his tremulous question checked the joy of Corp at sight of him.

"She's back," Corp answered in an excited whisper; and oh, the relief to Tommy! "She came back by the afternoon train; but I had scarce a word wi' her, she was so awid to be hame. 'I am going home,' she cried, and hurried away up the brae. Ay, and there's one queer thing."

"What?"

"Her luggage wasna in the van."

Tommy could smile at that. "But what sent her," he asked eagerly, "on that journey?"

Corp told him the little he knew. "But nobody kens except me and Gavinia," he said. "We pretend she gaed to London to see her father. We said he had wrote to her, wanting her to go to him. Gavinia said it would never do to let folk ken she had gaen to see you, and even Elspeth doesna ken."

"Is Elspeth back?"

"They came back yesterday."

Did David know the truth from Grizel? was what Tommy was asking himself now as he strode up the brae. But again he was in luck, for when he had explained away his abrupt return to Elspeth, and been joyfully welcomed by her, she told him that her husband had been in one of the

glens all day. "He does not know that Grizel has come back," she said. "Oh," she exclaimed, "but you don't even know that she has been away! Grizel has been in London."

"Corp told me," said Tommy.

"And did he tell you why she had gone?"

"Yes."

"She came back an hour or two ago. Maggy Ann saw her go past. Fancy her seeing her father at last! It must have been an ordeal for her. I wonder what took place."

"I think I had better go and ask her," Tommy said. He was mightily relieved for Grizel's sake. No one need ever know now what had called her away except Corp and Gavinia, and even they thought she had merely been to London. How well the little gods were managing the whole affair! As he walked to Grizel's lodgings to say what he had been saying in the train, the thought came to him for a moment that as no one need ever know where she had been there was less reason why he should do this generous thing. But he put it from him with lofty disdain. Any effect it had was to make him walk more firmly to his sacrifice, as if to show all ignoble impulses that they could find no home in that swelling breast He was pleased with himself, was Tommy.

"Grizel, I have come back." He said it to the night, and bowed his head. He said it with head accompaniment to Grizel's lighted window. He said it to himself as he reached the door. He never said it again.

For Gavinia's first words were: "It's you, Mr. Sandys! Wherever is she? For mercy's sake, dinna say you've come without her!" And when he blinked at this, she took him roughly by the arm and cried, "Wherever's Grizel?"

"She is here, Gavinia."

"She's no here."

"I saw her light."

"You saw my light."

"Gavinia, you are torturing me. She came back to-day."

"What makes you say that? You're dreaming. She hasna come back."

"Corp saw her come in by the afternoon train. He spoke to her."

Gavinia shook her head incredulously. "You're just imagining that," she said.

"He told me. Gavinia, I must see for myself," She stared after him as he went up the stairs. "You are very cruel, Gavinia," he said, when he came down. "Tell me where she is."

"May I be struck, Mr. Sandys, if I've seen or heard o' her since she left this house eight days syne." He knew she was speaking the truth. He had to lean against the door for support. "It canna be so bad as you think," she cried in pity. "If you're sure Corp said he saw her, she maun hae gone to the doctor's house."

"She is not there. But Elspeth knew she had come back. Others have seen her besides Corp. My God, Gavinia! what can have happened?"

In little more than an hour he knew what had happened. Many besides himself, David among them towards the end, were engaged in the search. And strange stories began to fly about like night-birds; you will not search for a missing woman without rousing them. Why had she gone off to London without telling anyone? Had Corp concocted that story about her father to blind them? Had she really been as far as London? Have you seen Sandys?--he's back. It's said Corp telegraphed to him to Switzerland that she had disappeared. It's weel kent Corp telegraphed. Sandys came at once. He is in a terrible state. Look how white he is aneath that lamp. What garred them telegraph for him? How is it he is in sic a state? Fond o' her, was he? Yea, yea, even after she gave him the go-by. Then it's a weary Sabbath for him, if half they say be true. What do they say? They say she was queer when she came back. Corp doesna say that. Maybe no; but Francie Crabb does. He says he met her on the station brae and spoke to her, and she said never a word, but put up her hands like as if she feared he was to strike her. The Dundas lassies saw her frae their window, and her hands were at her ears as if she was trying to drown the sound o' something. Do you mind o' her mother? They say she was looking terrible like her mother.

It was only between the station and Gavinia's house that she had been seen, but they searched far afield. Tommy, accompanied by Corp, even

sought for her in the Den. Do you remember the long, lonely path between two ragged little dykes that led from the Den to the house of the Painted Lady? It was there that Grizel had lived with her mamma. The two men went down that path, which is oppressed with trees. Elsewhere the night was not dark, but, as they had known so well when they were boys, it is always dark after evenfall in the Double Dykes. That is the legacy of the Painted Lady. Presently they saw the house--scarcely the house, but a lighted window. Tommy remembered the night when as a boy, Elspeth crouching beside him, he had peered in fearfully at that corner window on Grizel and her mamma, and the shuddersome things he had seen. He shuddered at them again.

"Who lives there now?" he asked.

"Nobody. It's toom."

"There is a light."

"Some going-about body. They often tak' bilbie in toom houses, and that door is without a lock; it's kept close wi' slipping a stick aneath it. Do you mind how feared we used to be at that house?"

"She was never afraid of it."

"It was her hame."

He meant no more than he said, but suddenly they both stopped dead.

"It's no possible," Corp said, as if in answer to a question. "It's no possible," he repeated beseechingly.

"Wait for me here, Corp."

"I would rather come wi' you."

"Wait here!" Tommy said almost fiercely, and he went on alone to that little window. It had needed an effort to make him look in when he was here before, and it needed a bigger effort now. But he looked.

What light there was came from the fire, and whether she had gathered the logs or found them in the room no one ever knew. A vagrant stated afterwards that he had been in the house some days before and left his match-box in it.

By this fire Grizel was crouching. She was comparatively tidy and neat again; the dust was gone from her boots, even. How she had managed to do it no one knows, but you remember how she loved to be neat. Her hands were extended to the blaze, and she was busy talking to herself.

His hand struck the window heavily, and she looked up and saw him. She nodded, and put her finger to her lips as a sign that he must be cautious. She had often, in the long ago, seen her mother signing thus to an imaginary face at the window--the face of the man who never came.

Tommy went into the house, and she was so pleased to see him that she quite simpered. He put his arms round her, and she lay there with a little giggle of contentment. She was in a plot of heat.

"Grizel! Oh, my God!" he said, "why do you look at me in that way?"

She passed her hand across her eyes, like one trying to think.

"I woke up," she said at last. Corp appeared at the window now, and she pointed to him in terror. Thus had she seen her mother point, in the long ago, at faces that came there to frighten her.

"Grizel," Tommy entreated her, "you know who I am, don't you?"

She said his name at once, but her eyes were on the window. "They want to take me away," she whispered.

"But you must come away, Grizel. You must come home."

"This is home," she said. "It is sweet."

After much coaxing, he prevailed upon her to leave. With his arm round her, and a terrible woe on his face, he took her to the doctor's house. She had her hands over her ears all the way. She thought the white river and the mountains and the villages and the crack of whips were marching with her still.