

CHAPTER XXXII - TOMMY'S BEST WORK

And thus was begun a year and a half of as great devotion as remorseful man ever gave to woman. When she was asleep and he could not write, his mind would sometimes roam after abandoned things; it sought them in the night as a savage beast steals forth for water to slake the thirst of many days. But if she stirred in her sleep they were all dispelled; there was not a moment in that eighteen months when he was twenty yards from Grizel's side.

He would not let himself lose hope. All the others lost it. "The only thing you can do is to humour her," even David was reduced in time to saying; but Tommy replied cheerily, "Not a bit of it." Every morning he had to begin at the same place as on the previous morning, and he was always as ready to do it, and as patient, as if this were the first time.

"I think she is a little more herself to-day," he would say determinedly, till David wondered to hear him.

"She makes no progress, Sandys."

"I can at least keep her from slipping back."

And he did, and there is no doubt that this was what saved Grizel in the end. How he strove to prevent her slipping back! The morning was the time when she was least troubled, and had he humoured her then they would often have been easy hours for him. But it was the time when he tried most doggedly, with a gentleness she could not ruffle, to teach her the alphabet of who she was. She coaxed him to let her off those mental struggles; she turned petulant and sulky; she was willing to be good and sweet if he would permit her to sew or to sing to herself instead, or to sit staring at the fire: but he would not yield; he promised those things as the reward, and in the end she stood before him like a child at lessons.

"What is your name?" The catechism always began thus.

"Grizel," she said obediently, if it was a day when she wanted to please him.

"And my name?"

"Tommy." Once, to his great delight, she said, "Sentimental Tommy." He quite bragged about this to David.

"Where is your home?"

"Here." She was never in doubt about this, and it was always a pleasure to her to say it.

"Did you live here long ago?"

She nodded.

"And then did you live for a long time somewhere else?"

"Yes."

"Where was it?"

"Here."

"No, it was with the old doctor. You were his little housekeeper; don't you remember? Try to remember, Grizel; he loved you so much."

She tried to think. Her face was very painful when she tried to think. "It hurts," she said.

"Do you remember him, Grizel?"

"Please let me sing," she begged, "such a sweet song!"

"Do you remember the old doctor who called you his little housekeeper? He used to sit in that chair."

The old chair was among Grizel's many possessions that had been brought to Double Dykes, and her face lit up with recollection. She ran to the chair and kissed it.

"What was his name, Grizel?"

"I should love to know his name," she said wistfully.

He told her the name many times, and she repeated it docilely.

Or perhaps she remembered her dear doctor quite well to-day, and thought Tommy was some one in need of his services.

"He has gone into the country," she said, as she had so often said to anxious people at the door; "but he won't be long, and I shall give him your message the moment he comes in."

But Tommy would not pass that. He explained to her again and again that the doctor was dead, and perhaps she would remember, or perhaps, without remembering, she said she was glad he was dead.

"Why are you glad, Grizel?"

She whispered, as if frightened she might be overheard: "I don't want him to see me like this." It was one of the pathetic things about her that she seemed at times to have some vague understanding of her condition, and then she would sob. Her tears were anguish to him, but it was at those times that she clung to him as if she knew he was trying to do something for her, and that encouraged him to go on. He went over, step by step, the time when she lived alone in the doctor's house, the time of his own coming back, her love for him and his treatment of her, the story of the garnet ring, her coming to Switzerland, her terrible walk, her return; he would miss out nothing, for he was fighting for her. Day after day, month by month, it went on, and to-morrow, perhaps, she would insist that the old doctor and this man who asked her so many questions were one. And Tommy argued with her until he had driven that notion out, to make way for another, and then he fought it, and so on and on all round the circle of her delusions, day by day and month by month.

She knew that he sometimes wrote while she was asleep, for she might start up from her bed or from the sofa, and there he was, laying down his pen to come to her. Her eyes were never open for any large fraction of a minute without his knowing, and immediately he went to her, nodding and smiling lest she had wakened with some fear upon her. Perhaps she refused to sleep again unless he promised to put away those horrid papers for the night, and however intoxicating a point he had reached in his labours, he always promised, and kept his word. He was most scrupulous in keeping any promise he made her, and one great result was that she trusted him implicitly. Whatever others promised, she doubted them.

There were times when she seemed to be casting about in her mind for something to do that would please him, and then she would bring pieces of paper to him, and pen and ink, and tell him to write. She thought this very clever of her, and expected to be praised for it.

But she might also bring him writing materials at times when she hated him very much. Then there would be sly smiles, even pretended affection, on her face, unless she thought he was not looking, when she cast him ugly glances. Her intention was to trick him into forgetting her so that she might talk to herself or slip out of the room to the Den, just as her mother had done in the days when it was Grizel who had to be tricked. He would not let her talk to herself until he had tried endless ways of exorcising that demon by interesting her in some sort of work, by going out with her, by talking of one thing and another till at last a subject was lit upon that made her forget to brood.

But sometimes it seemed best to let her go to the Den, she was in such a quiver of desire to go. She hurried to it, so that he had to stride to keep up with her; and he said little until they got there, for she was too excited to listen. She was very like her mother again; but it was not the man who never came that she went in search of--it was a lost child. I have not the heart to tell of the pitiful scenes in the Den while Grizel searched for her child. They always ended in those two walking silently home, and for a day or two Grizel would be ill, and Tommy tended her, so that she was soon able to hasten to the Den again, holding out her arms as she ran.

"She makes no progress," David said.

"I can keep her from slipping back," Tommy still replied. The doctor marvelled, but even he did not know the half of all her husband did for Grizel. None could know half who was not there by night. Here, at least, was one day ending placidly, they might say when she was in a tractable mood,--so tractable that she seemed to be one of themselves,--and Tommy assented brightly, though he knew, and he alone, that you could never be sure the long day had ended till the next began.

Often the happiest beginning had the most painful ending. The greatest pleasure he could give her was to take her to see Elspeth's baby girl, or that sturdy rogue, young Shiach, who could now count with ease up to seven, but swayed at eight, and toppled over on his way to ten; or their mothers brought them to her, and Grizel understood quite well who her visitors were, sometimes even called Elspeth by her right name, and did the honours of her house irreproachably, and presided at the tea-table, and was rapture personified when she held the baby Jean (called after Tommy's mother), and sat gaily on the floor, ready to catch little Corp when he would not stop at seven. But Tommy, whom nothing escaped,

knew with what depression she might pay for her joy when they had gone. Despite all his efforts, she might sit talking to herself, at first of pleasant things and then of things less pleasant. Or she stared at her reflection in the long mirror and said: "Isn't she sweet!" or "She is not really sweet, and she did so want to be good!" Or instead of that she would suddenly go upon her knees and say, with clasped hands, the childish prayer, "Save me from masterful men," which Jean Myles had told Tommy to teach Elspeth. No one could have looked less masterful at those times than Tommy, but Grizel did not seem to think so. And probably they had that night once more to search the Den.

"The children do her harm; she must not see them again," he decided.

"They give her pleasure at the time," David said. "It lightens your task now and then."

"It is the future I am thinking of, Gemmell. If she cannot progress, she shall not fall back. As for me, never mind me."

"Elspeth is in a sad state about you, though! And you can get through so little work."

"Enough for all our wants." (He was writing magazine papers only.)

"The public will forget you."

"They have forgotten me."

David was openly sorry for him now. "If only your manuscript had been saved!"

"Yes; I never thought the little gods would treat me so scurvily as that."

"Who?"

"Did I never tell you of my little gods? I so often emerged triumphant from my troubles, and so undeservedly, that I thought I was especially looked after by certain tricky spirits in return for the entertainment I gave them. My little gods, I called them, and we had quite a bowing acquaintance. But you see at the critical moment they flew away laughing."

He always knew that the lost manuscript was his great work. "My seventh wave," he called it; "and though all the conditions were

favourable," he said, "I know that I could run to nothing more than little waves at present. As for rewriting that book, I can't; I have tried."

Yet he was not asking for commiseration. "Tell Elspeth not to worry about me. If I have no big ideas just now, I have some very passable little ones, and one in particular that--" He drew a great breath. "If only Grizel were better," that breath said, "I think Tommy Sandys could find a way of making the public remember him again."

So David interpreted it, and though he had been about to say, "How changed you are!" he did not say it.

And Tommy, who had been keeping an eye on her all this time, returned to Grizel. As she had been through that long year, so she was during the first half of the next; and day by day and night by night he tended her, and still the same scenes were enacted in infinite variety, and still he would not give in. Everything seemed to change with the seasons, except Grizel, and Tommy's devotion to her.

Yet you know that she recovered, ever afterwards to be herself again; and though it seemed to come in the end as suddenly as the sight may be restored by the removal of a bandage, I suppose it had been going on all the time, and that her reason was given back to her on the day she had strength to make use of it. Tommy was the instrument of her recovery. He had fought against her slipping backward so that she could not do it; it was as if he had built a wall behind her, and in time her mind accepted that wall as impregnable and took a forward movement. And with every step she took he pushed the wall after her, so that still if she moved it must be forward. Thus Grizel progressed imperceptibly as along a dark corridor towards the door that shut out the light, and on a day in early spring the door fell.

Many of them had cried for a shock as her only chance. But it came most quietly. She had lain down on the sofa that afternoon to rest, and when she woke she was Grizel again. At first she was not surprised to find herself in that room, nor to see that man nodding and smiling reassuringly; they had come out of the long dream with her, to make the awakening less abrupt.

He did not know what had happened. When he knew, a terror that this could not last seized him. He was concealing it while he answered her

puzzled questions. All the time he was telling her how they came to be there, he was watching in agony for the change.

She remembered everything up to her return to Thrums; then she walked into a mist.

"The truth," she begged of him, when he would have led her off by pretending that she had been ill only. Surely it was the real Grizel who begged for the truth. She took his hand and held it when he told her of their marriage. She cried softly, because she feared that she might again become as she had been; but he said that was impossible, and smiled confidently, and all the time he was watching in agony for the change.

"Do you forgive me, Grizel? I have always had a dread that when you recovered you would cease to care for me." He knew that this would please her if she was the real Grizel, and he was so anxious to make her happy for evermore.

She put his hand to her lips and smiled at him through her tears. Hers was a love that could never change. Suddenly she sat up. "Whose baby was it?" she asked.

"I don't know what you mean, Grizel," he said uneasily.

"I remember vaguely," she told him, "a baby in white whom I seemed to chase, but I could never catch her. Was it a dream only?"

"You are thinking of Elspeth's little girl, perhaps. She was often brought to see you."

"Has Elspeth a baby?" She rose to go exultantly to Elspeth.

"But too small a baby, Grizel, to run from you, even if she wanted to."

"What is she like?"

"She is always laughing."

"The sweet!" Grizel rocked her arms in rapture and smiled her crooked smile at the thought of a child who was always laughing. "But I don't remember her," she said. "It was a sad little baby I seemed to see."