

CHAPTER II - BUT THE OTHER GETS IN

To Tommy, a swaggerer, came Shovel sour-visaged; having now no cap of his own, he exchanged with Tommy, would also have bled the blooming mouth of him, but knew of a revenge that saves the knuckles: announced, with jeers and offensive finger exercise, that "it" had come.

Shovel was a liar. If he only knowed what Tommy knowed!

If Tommy only heard what Shovel had heard!

Tommy was of opinion that Shovel hadn't not heard anything.

Shovel believed as Tommy didn't know nuthin.

Tommy wouldn't listen to what Shovel had heard.

Neither would Shovel listen to what Tommy knew.

If Shovel would tell what he had heard, Tommy would tell what he knew.

Well, then, Shovel had listened at the door, and heard it mewling.

Tommy knowed it well, and it never mewled.

How could Tommy know it?

'Cos he had been with it a long time.

Gosh! Why, it had only comed a minute ago.

This made Tommy uneasy, and he asked a leading question cunningly. A boy, wasn't it?

No, Shovel's old woman had been up helping to hold it, and she said it were a girl.

Shutting his mouth tightly; which was never natural to him, the startled Tommy mounted the stair, listened and was convinced. He did not enter his dishonored home. He had no intention of ever entering it again. With one salt tear he renounced--a child, a mother.

On his way downstairs he was received by Shovel and party, who planted their arrows neatly. Kids cried steadily, he was told, for the first year. A

boy one was bad enough, but a girl one was oh lawks. He must never again expect to get playing with blokes like what they was. Already she had got round his old gal who would care for him no more. What would they say about this in Thrums?

Shovel even insisted on returning him his cap, and for some queer reason, this cut deepest. Tommy about to charge, with his head down, now walked away so quietly that Shovel, who could not help liking the funny little cuss, felt a twinge of remorse, and nearly followed him with a magnanimous offer: to treat him as if he were still respectable.

Tommy lay down on a distant stair, one of the very stairs where she had sat with him. Ladies, don't you dare to pity him now, for he won't stand it. Rage was what he felt, and a man in a rage (as you may know if you are married) is only to be soothed by the sight of all womankind in terror of him. But you may look upon your handiwork, and gloat, an you will, on the wreck you have made. A young gentleman trusted one of you; behold the result. O! O! O! O! now do you understand why we men cannot abide you?

If she had told him flat that his mother, and his alone, she would have, and so there was an end of it. Ah, catch them taking a straight road. But to put on those airs of helplessness, to wave him that gay good-by, and then the moment his back was turned, to be off through the air on--perhaps on her muff, to the home he had thought to lure her from. In a word, to be diddled by a girl when one flatters himself he is diddling! S'death, a dashing fellow finds it hard to bear. Nevertheless, he has to bear it, for oh, Tommy, Tommy, 'tis the common lot of man.

His hand sought his pocket for the penny that had brought him comfort in dark hours before now; but, alack, she had deprived him even of it. Never again should his pinkie finger go through that warm hole, and at the thought a sense of his forlornness choked him and he cried. You may pity him a little now.

Darkness came and hid him even from himself. He is not found again until a time of the night that is not marked on ornamental clocks, but has an hour to itself on the watch which a hundred thousand or so of London women carry in their breasts; the hour when men steal homewards trickling at the mouth and drawing back from their own shadows to the wives they once went a-maying with, or the mothers who had such travail at the bearing of them, as if for great ends. Out of this,

the drunkard's hour, rose the wan face of Tommy, who had waked up somewhere clammy cold and quaking, and he was a very little boy, so he ran to his mother.

Such a shabby dark room it was, but it was home, such a weary worn woman in the bed, but he was her son, and she had been wringing her hands because he was so long in coming, and do you think he hurt her when he pressed his head on her poor breast, and do you think she grudged the heat his cold hands drew from her warm face? He squeezed her with a violence that put more heat into her blood than he took out of it.

And he was very considerate, too: not a word of reproach in him, though he knew very well what that bundle in the back of the bed was.

She guessed that he had heard the news and stayed away through jealousy of his sister, and by and by she said, with a faint smile, "I have a present for you, laddie." In the great world without, she used few Thrums words now; you would have known she was Scotch by her accent only, but when she and Tommy were together in that room, with the door shut, she always spoke as if her window still looked out on the bonny Marywellbrae. It is not really bonny, it is gey an' mean an' bleak, and you must not come to see it. It is just a steep wind-swept street, old and wrinkled, like your mother's face.

She had a present for him, she said, and Tommy replied, "I knows," with averted face.

"Such a bonny thing."

"Bonny enough," he said bitterly.

"Look at her, laddie."

But he shrank from the ordeal, crying, "No, no, keep her covered up!"

The little traitor seemed to be asleep, and so he ventured to say, eagerly, "It wouldn't not take long to carry all our things to another house, would it? Me and Shovel could near do it ourselves."

"And that's God's truth," the woman said, with a look round the room. "But what for should we do that?"

"Do you no see, mother?" he whispered excitedly. "Then you and me could slip away, and--and leave her--in the press."

The feeble smile with which his mother received this he interpreted thus, "Wherever we go'd to she would be there before us."

"The little besom!" he cried helplessly.

His mother saw that mischievous boys had been mounting him on his horse, which needed only one slap to make it go a mile; but she was a spiritless woman, and replied indifferently, "You're a funny litlin."

Presently a dry sob broke from her, and thinking the child was the cause, soft-hearted Tommy said, "It can't not be helped, mother; don't cry, mother, I'm fond on yer yet, mother; I--I took her away. I found another woman--but she would come."

"She's God's gift, man," his mother said, but she added, in a different tone, "Ay, but he hasna sent her keep."

"God's gift!" Tommy shuddered, but he said sourly, "I wish he would take her back. Do you wish that, too, mother?"

The weary woman almost said she did, but her arms--they gripped the baby as if frightened that he had sent for it. Jealous Tommy, suddenly deprived of his mother's hand, cried, "It's true what Shovel says, you don't not love me never again; you jest loves that little limmer!"

"Na, na," the mother answered, passionate at last, "she can never be to me what you hae been, my laddie, for you came to me when my hame was in hell, and we tholed it thegither, you and me."

This bewildered though it comforted him. He thought his mother might be speaking about the room in which they had lived until six months ago, when his father was put into the black box, but when he asked her if this were so, she told him to sleep, for she was dog-tired. She always evaded him in this way when he questioned her about his past, but at times his mind would wander backwards unbidden to those distant days, and then he saw flitting dimly through them the elusive form of a child.

He knew it was himself, and for moments he could see it clearly, but when he moved a step nearer it was not there. So does the child we once were play hide and seek with us among the mists of infancy, until one

day he trips and falls into the daylight. Then we seize him, and with that touch we two are one. It is the birth of self-consciousness.

Hitherto he had slept at the back of his mother's bed, but to-night she could not have him there, the place being occupied, and rather sulkily he consented to lie crosswise at her feet, undressing by the feeble fire and taking care, as he got into bed, not to look at the usurper. His mother watched him furtively, and was relieved to read in his face that he had no recollection of ever having slept at the foot of a bed before. But soon after he fell asleep he awoke, and was afraid to move lest his father should kick him. He opened his eyes stealthily, and this was neither the room nor the bed he had expected to see.

The floor was bare save for a sheepskin beside the bed. Tommy always stood on the sheepskin while he was dressing because it was warm to the feet, though risky, as your toes sometimes caught in knots in it. There was a deal table in the middle of the floor with some dirty crockery on it and a kettle that would leave a mark, but they had been left there by Shovel's old girl, for Mrs. Sandys usually kept her house clean. The chairs were of the commonest, and the press door would not remain shut unless you stuck a knife between its halves; but there, was a gay blue wardrobe, spotted white where Tommy's mother had scraped off the mud that had once bespattered it during a lengthy sojourn at the door of a shop; and on the mantelpiece was a clock in a little brown and yellow house, and on the clock a Bible that had been in Thrums. But what Tommy was proudest of was his mother's kist, to which the chests of Londoners are not to be compared, though like it in appearance. On the inside of the lid of this kist was pasted, after a Thrums custom, something that his mother called her marriage lines, which she forced Shovel's mother to come up and look at one day, when that lady had made an innuendo Tommy did not understand, and Shovel's mother had looked, and though she could not read, was convinced, knowing them by the shape.

Tommy lay at the foot of the bed looking at this room, which was his home now, and trying to think of the other one, and by and by the fire helped him by falling to ashes, when darkness came in, and packing the furniture in grotesque cloths, removed it piece by piece, all but the clock. Then the room took a new shape. The fireplace was over there instead of here, the torn yellow blind gave way to one made of spars of green wood, that were bunched up at one side, like a lady out for a walk. On a round

table there was a beautiful blue cloth, with very few gravy marks, and here a man ate beef when a woman and a boy ate bread, and near the fire was the man's big soft chair, out of which you could pull hairs, just as if it were Shovel's sister.

Of this man who was his father he could get no hold. He could feel his presence, but never see him. Yet he had a face. It sometimes pressed Tommy's face against it in order to hurt him, which it could do, being all short needles at the chin.

Once in those days Tommy and his mother ran away and hid from some one. He did not know from whom nor for how long, though it was but for a week, and it left only two impressions on his mind, the one that he often asked, "Is this starving now, mother?" the other that before turning a corner she always peered round it fearfully. Then they went back again to the man and he laughed when he saw them, but did not take his feet off the mantelpiece. There came a time when the man was always in bed, but still Tommy could not see his face. What he did see was the man's clothes lying on the large chair just as he had placed them there when he undressed for the last time. The black coat and worsted waistcoat which he could take off together were on the seat, and the light trousers hung over the side, the legs on the hearthrug, with the red socks still sticking in them: a man without a body.

But the boy had one vivid recollection of how his mother received the news of his father's death. An old man with a white beard and gentle ways, who often came to give the invalid physic, was standing at the bedside, and Tommy and his mother were sitting on the fender. The old man came to her and said, "It is all over," and put her softly into the big chair. She covered her face with her hands, and he must have thought she was crying, for he tried to comfort her. But as soon as he was gone she rose, with such a queer face, and went on tiptoe to the bed, and looked intently at her husband, and then she clapped her hands joyously three times.

At last Tommy fell asleep with his mouth open, which is the most important thing that has been told of him as yet, and while he slept day came and restored the furniture that night had stolen. But when the boy woke he did not even notice the change; his brain traversed the hours it had lost since he lay down as quickly as you may put on a stopped clock, and with his first tick he was thinking of nothing but the deceiver in the

back of the bed. He raised his head, but could only see that she had crawled under the coverlet to escape his wrath. His mother was asleep. Tommy sat up and peeped over the edge of the bed, then he let his eyes wander round the room; he was looking for the girl's clothes, but they were nowhere to be seen. It is distressing to have to tell that what was in his mind was merely the recovery of his penny. Perhaps as they were Sunday clothes she had hung them up in the wardrobe? He slipped on to the floor and crossed to the wardrobe, but not even the muff could he find. Had she been tired, and gone to bed in them? Very softly he crawled over his mother, and pulling the coverlet off the child's face, got the great shock of his childhood.

It was another one!