

CHAPTER III - SHOWING HOW TOMMY WAS SUDDENLY TRANSFORMED INTO A YOUNG GENTLEMAN

It would have fared ill with Mrs. Sandys now, had her standoffishness to her neighbors been repaid in the same coin, but they were full of sympathy, especially Shovel's old girl, from whom she had often drawn back offensively on the stair, but who nevertheless waddled up several times a day with savory messes, explaining, when Mrs. Sandys sniffed, that it was not the tapiocar but merely the cup that smelt of gin. When Tommy returned the cups she noticed not only that they were suspiciously clean, but that minute particles of the mess were adhering to his nose and chin (perched there like shipwrecked mariners on a rock, just out of reach of the devouring element), and after this discovery she brought two cupfuls at a time. She was an Irish, woman who could have led the House of Commons, and in walking she seldom raised her carpet shoes from the ground, perhaps because of her weight, for she had an expansive figure that bulged in all directions, and there were always bits of her here and there that she had forgotten to lace. Round the corner was a delightful eating-house, through whose window you were allowed to gaze at the great sweating dumplings, and Tommy thought Shovel's mother was rather like a dumpling that had not been a complete success. If he ever knew her name he forgot it. Shovel, who probably had another name also, called her his old girl or his old woman or his old lady, and it was a sight to see her chasing him across the street when she was in liquor, and boastful was Shovel of the way she could lay on, and he was partial to her too, and once when she was giving it to him pretty strong with the tongs, his father (who followed many professions, among them that of finding lost dogs), had struck her and told her to drop it, and then Shovel sauced his father for interfering, saying she should lick him as long as she blooming well liked, which made his father go for him with a dog-collar; and that was how Shovel lost his eye.

For reasons less unselfish than his old girl's Shovel also was willing to make up to Tommy at this humiliating time. It might be said of these two boys that Shovel knew everything but Tommy knew other things, and as the other things are best worth hearing of Shovel liked to listen to them, even when they were about Thrums, as they usually were. The very first time Tommy told him of the wondrous spot, Shovel had drawn a great breath, and said, thoughtfully:

"I allers knowed as there were sich a beauty place, but I didn't jest know its name."

"How could yer know?" Tommy asked jealously.

"I ain't sure," said Shovel, "p'raps I dreamed on it."

"That's it," Tommy cried. "I tell yer, everybody dreams on it!" and Tommy was right; everybody dreams of it, though not all call it Thrums.

On the whole, then, the coming of the kid, who turned out to be called Elspeth, did not ostracize Tommy, but he wished that he had let the other girl in, for he never doubted that her admittance would have kept this one out. He told neither his mother nor his friend of the other girl, fearing that his mother would be angry with him when she learned what she had missed, and that Shovel would crow over his blundering, but occasionally he took a side glance at the victorious infant, and a poorer affair, he thought, he had never set eyes on. Sometimes it was she who looked at him, and then her chuckle of triumph was hard to bear. As long as his mother was there, however, he endured in silence, but the first day she went out in a vain search for work (it is about as difficult to get washing as to get into the Cabinet), he gave the infant a piece of his mind, poking up her head with a stick so that she was bound to listen.

"You thinks as it was clever on you, does yer? Oh, if I had been on the stair!

"You needn't not try to get round me. I likes the other one five times better; yes, three times better.

"Thievey, thievey, thief, that's her place you is lying in. What?

"If you puts out your tongue at me again--! What do yer say?

"She was twice bigger than you. You ain't got no hair, nor yet no teeth. You're the littlest I ever seed. Eh? Don't not speak then, sulks!"

Prudence had kept him away from the other girl, but he was feeling a great want: someone to applaud him. When we grow older we call it sympathy. How Reddy (as he called her because she had beautiful red-brown hair) had appreciated him! She had a way he liked of opening her eyes very wide when she looked at him. Oh, what a difference from that thing in the back of the bed!

Not the mere selfish desire to see her again, however, would take him in quest of Reddy. He was one of those superior characters, was Tommy, who got his pleasure in giving it, and therefore gave it. Now, Reddy was a worthy girl. In suspecting her of overreaching him he had maligned her: she had taken what he offered, and been thankful. It was fitting that he should give her a treat: let her see him again.

His mother was at last re-engaged by her old employers, her supplanter having proved unsatisfactory, and as the work lay in a distant street, she usually took the kid with her, thus leaving no one to spy on Tammy's movements. Reddy's reward for not playing him false, however, did not reach her as soon as doubtless she would have liked, because the first two or three times he saw her she was walking with the lady of his choice, and of course he was not such a fool as to show himself. But he walked behind them and noted with satisfaction that the lady seemed to be reconciled to her lot and inclined to let bygones be bygones; when at length Reddy and her patron met, Tommy thought this a good sign too, that Ma-ma (as she would call the lady) had told her not to go farther away than the lamp-post, lest she should get lost again. So evidently she had got lost once already, and the lady had been sorry. He asked Reddy many shrewd questions about how Ma-ma treated her, and if she got the top of the Sunday egg and had the licking of the pan and wore flannel underneath and slept at the back; and the more he inquired, the more clearly he saw that he had got her one of the right kind.

Tommy arranged with her that she should always be on the outlook for him at the window, and he would come sometimes, and after that they met frequently, and she proved a credit to him, gurgling with mirth at his tales of Thrums, and pinching him when he had finished, to make sure that he was really made just like common human beings. He was a thin, pale boy, while she looked like a baby rose full blown in a night because her time was short; and his movements were sluggish, but if she was not walking she must be dancing, and sometimes when there were few people in the street, the little armful of delight that she was jumped up and down like a ball, while Tommy kept the time, singing "Thrummy, Thrummy, Thrum Thrum Thrummy." They must have seemed a quaint pair to the lady as she sat at her window watching them and beckoning to Tommy to come in.

One day he went in, but only because she had come up behind and taken his hand before he could run. Then did Tommy quake, for he knew

from Reddy how the day after the mother-making episode, Ma-ma and she had sought in vain for his door, and he saw that the object had been to call down curses on his head. So that head was hanging limply now.

You think that Tommy is to be worsted at last, but don't be too sure; you just wait and see. Ma-ma and Reddy (who was clucking rather heartlessly) first took him into a room prettier even than the one he had lived in long ago (but there was no bed in it), and then, because someone they were in search of was not there, into another room without a bed (where on earth did they sleep?) whose walls were lined with books. Never having seen rows of books before except on sale in the streets, Tommy at once looked about him for the barrow. The table was strewn with sheets of paper of the size that they roll a quarter of butter in, and it was an amazing thick table, a solid square of wood, save for a narrow lane down the centre for the man to put his legs in--if he had legs, which unfortunately there was reason to doubt. He was a formidable man, whose beard licked the table while he wrote, and he wore something like a brown blanket, with a rope tied round it at the middle. Even more uncanny than himself were three busts on a shelf, which Tommy took to be deaders, and he feared the blanket might blow open and show that the man also ended at the waist. But he did not, for presently he turned round to see who had come in (the seat of his chair turning with him in the most startling way) and then Tommy was relieved to notice two big feet far away at the end of him.

"This is the boy, dear," the lady said. "I had to bring him in by force."

Tommy raised his arm instinctively to protect his face, this being the kind of man who could hit hard. But presently he was confused, and also, alas, leering a little. You may remember that Reddy had told him she must not go beyond the lamp-post, lest she should be lost again. She had given him no details of the adventure, but he learned now from Ma-ma and Papa (the man's name was Papa) that she had strayed when Ma-ma was in a shop and that some good kind boy had found her and brought her home; and what do you say to this, they thought Tommy was that boy! In his amazement he very nearly blurted out that he was the other boy, but just then the lady asked Papa if he had a shilling, and this abruptly closed Tommy's mouth. Ever afterwards he remembered Papa as the man that was not sure whether he had a shilling until he felt his pockets--a new kind of mortal to Tommy, who grabbed the shilling when it was offered to him, and then looked at Reddy imploringly, he was

so afraid she would tell. But she behaved splendidly, and never even shook her head at him. After this, as hardly need be told, his one desire was to get out of the house with his shilling before they discovered their mistake, and it was well that they were unsuspicious people, for he was making strange hissing sounds in his throat, the result of trying hard to keep his sniggers under control.

There were many ways in which Tommy could have disposed of his shilling. He might have been a good boy and returned it next day to Papa. He might have given Reddy half of it for not telling. It could have carried him over the winter. He might have stalked with it into the shop where the greasy puddings were and come rolling out hours afterwards. Some of these schemes did cross his little mind, but he decided to spend the whole shilling on a present to his mother, and it was to be something useful. He devoted much thought to what she was most in need of, and at last he bought her a colored picture of Lord Byron swimming the Hellespont.

He told her that he got his shilling from two toffs for playing with a little girl, and the explanation satisfied her; but she could have cried at the waste of the money, which would have been such a God-send to her. He cried altogether, however, at sight of her face, having expected it to look so pleased, and then she told him, with caresses, that the picture was the one thing she had been longing for ever since she came to London. How had he known this, she asked, and he clapped his hands gleefully, and said he just knowed when he saw it in the shop window.

"It was noble of you," she said, "to spend all your siller on me."

"Wasn't it, mother?" he crowed "I'm thinking there ain't many as noble as I is!"

He did not say why he had been so good to her, but it was because she had written no letters to Thrums since the intrusion of Elspeth; a strange reason for a boy whose greatest glory at one time had been to sit on the fender and exultingly watch his mother write down words that would be read aloud in the wonderful place. She was a long time in writing a letter, but that only made the whole evening romantic, and he found an arduous employment in keeping his tongue wet in preparation for the licking of the stamp.

But she could not write to the Thrums folk now without telling them of Elspeth, who was at present sleeping the sleep of the shameless in the hollow of the bed, and so for his sake, Tommy thought, she meant to write no more. For his sake, mark you, not for her own. She had often told him that some day he should go to Thrums, but not with her; she would be far away from him then in a dark place she was awid to be lying in. Thus it seemed, to Tommy that she denied herself the pleasure of writing to Thrums lest the sorry news of Elspeth's advent should spoil his reception when he went north.

So grateful Tommy gave her the picture, hoping that it would fill the void. But it did not. She put it on the mantelpiece so that she might just sit and look at it, she said, and he grinned at it from every part of the room, but when he returned to her, he saw that she was neither looking at it nor thinking of it. She was looking straight before her, and sometimes her lips twitched, and then she drew them into her mouth to keep them still. It is a kind of dry weeping that sometimes comes to miserable ones when their minds stray into the happy past, and Tommy sat and watched her silently for a long time, never doubting that the cause of all her woe was that she could not write to Thrums.

He had seldom seen tears on his mother's face, but he saw one now. They had been reluctant to come for many a day, and this one formed itself beneath her eye and sat there like a blob of blood.

His own began to come more freely. But she needn't not expect him to tell her to write nor to say that he didn't care what Thrums thought of him so long as she was happy.

The tear rolled down his mother's thin cheek and fell on the grey shawl that had come from Thrums.

She did not hear her boy as he dragged a chair to the press and standing on it got something down from the top shelf. She had forgotten him, and she started when presently the pen was slipped into her hand and Tommy said, "You can do it, mother, I wants yer to do it, mother, I won't not greet, mother!"

When she saw what he wanted her to do she patted his face approvingly, but without realizing the extent of his sacrifice. She knew that he had some maggot in his head that made him regard Elspeth as a sore on the family honor, but ascribing his views to jealousy she had never tried

seriously to change them. Her main reason for sending no news to Thrums of late had been but the cost of the stamp, though she was also a little conscience-stricken at the kind of letters she wrote, and the sight of the materials lying ready for her proved sufficient to draw her to the table.

"Is it to your grandmother you is writing the letter?" Tommy asked, for her grandmother had brought Mrs. Sandys up and was her only surviving relative. This was all Tommy knew of his mother's life in Thrums, though she had told him much about other Thrums folk, and not till long afterwards did he see that there must be something queer about herself, which she was hiding from him.

This letter was not for her granny, however, and Tommy asked next, "Is it to Aaron Latta?" which so startled her that she dropped the pen.

"Whaur heard you that name?" she said sharply. "I never spoke it to you."

"I've heard you saying it when you was sleeping, mother."

"Did I say anything but the name? Quick, tell me."

"You said, 'Oh, Aaron Latta, oh, Aaron, little did we think, Aaron,' and things like that. Are you angry with me, mother?"

"No," she said, relieved, but it was some time before the desire to write came back to her. Then she told him "The letter is to a woman that was gey cruel to me," adding, with a complacent pursing of her lips, the curious remark, "That's the kind I like to write to best."

The pen went scrape, scrape, but Tommy did not weary, though he often sighed, because his mother would never read aloud to him what she wrote. The Thrums people never answered her letters, for the reason, she said, that those she wrote to could not write, which seemed to simple Tommy to be a sufficient explanation. So he had never heard the inside of a letter talking, though a postman lived in the house, and even Shovel's old girl got letters; once when her uncle died she got a telegram, which Shovel proudly wheeled up and down the street in a barrow, other blokes keeping guard at the side. To give a letter to a woman who had been cruel to you struck Tommy as the height of nobility.

"She'll be uplifted when she gets it!" he cried.

"She'll be mad when she gets it," answered his mother, without looking up.

This was the letter:--

"MY DEAR ESTHER,--I send you these few scrapes to let you see I have not forgot you, though my way is now grand by yours. A spleet new black silk, Esther, being the second in a twelvemonth, as I'm a living woman. The other is no none tashed yet, but my gudeman fair insisted on buying a new one, for says he 'Rich folk like as can afford to be mislaird, and nothing's ower braw for my bonny Jean.' Tell Aaron Latta that. When I'm sailing in my silks, Esther, I sometimes picture you turning your wincey again, for I'se uphaud that's all the new frock you've ha'en the year. I dinna want to give you a scunner of your man, Esther, more by token they said if your mither had not took him in hand you would never have kent the color of his nightcap, but when you are wraxing ower your kail-pot in a plot of heat, just picture me ringing the bell for my servant, and saying, with a wave of my hand, 'Servant, lay the dinner.' And ony bonny afternoon when your man is cleaning out stables and you're at the tub in a short gown, picture my man taking me and the children out a ride in a carriage, and I sair doubt your bairns was never in nothing more genteel than a coal cart. For bairns is yours, Esther, and children is mine, and that's a burn without a brig till't.

"Deary me, Esther, what with one thing and another, namely buying a sofa, thirty shillings as I'm a sinner, I have forgot to tell you about my second, and it's a girl this time, my man saying he would like a change. We have christened her Elspeth after my grandmamma, and if my auld granny's aye living, you can tell her that's her. My man is terrible windy of his two beautiful children, but he says he would have been the happiest gentleman in London though he had just had me, and really his fondness for me, it cows, Esther, sitting aside me on the bed, two pounds without the blankets, about the time Elspeth was born, and feeding me with the fat of the land, namely, tapiocas and sherry wine. Tell Aaron Latta that.

"I pity you from the bottom of my heart, Esther, for having to bide in Thrums, but you have never seen no better, your man having neither the siller nor the desire to take yon jaunts, and I'm thinking that is just as well, for if you saw how the like of me lives it might disgust you with your own bit house. I often laugh, Esther, to think that I was once like you,

and looked upon Thrums as a bonny place. How is the old hole? My son makes grand sport of the onfortunate bairns as has to bide in Thrums, and I see him doing it the now to his favorite companion, which is a young gentleman of ladylike manners, as bides in our terrace. So no more at present, for my man is sitting ganting for my society, and I daresay yours is crying to you to darn his old socks. Mind and tell Aaron Latta."

This letter was posted next day by Tommy, with the assistance of Shovel, who seems to have been the young gentleman of ladylike manners referred to in the text.