

## CHAPTER IV - THE END OF AN IDYLL

Tommy never saw Reddy again owing to a fright he got about this time, for which she was really to blame, though a woman who lived in his house was the instrument.

It is, perhaps, idle to attempt a summary of those who lived in that house, as one at least will be off, and another in his place, while we are giving them a line apiece. They were usually this kind who lived through the wall from Mrs. Sandys, but beneath her were the two rooms of Hankey, the postman, and his lodger, the dreariest of middle-aged clerks except when telling wistfully of his ambition, which was to get out of the tea department into the coffee department, where there is an easier way of counting up the figures. Shovel and family were also on this floor, and in the rooms under them was a newly married couple. When the husband was away at his work, his wife would make some change in the furniture, taking the picture from this wall, for instance, and hanging it on that wall, or wheeling the funny chair she had lain in before she could walk without a crutch, to the other side of the fireplace, or putting a skirt of yellow paper round the flower pot, and when he returned he always jumped back in wonder and exclaimed: "What an immense improvement!" These two were so fond of one another that Tommy asked them the reason, and they gave it by pointing to the chair with the wheels, which seemed to him to be no reason at all. What was this young husband's trade Tommy never knew, but he was the only prettily dressed man in the house, and he could be heard roaring in his sleep, "And the next article?" The meanest looking man lived next door to him. Every morning this man put on a clean white shirt, which sounds like a splendid beginning, but his other clothes were of the seediest, and he came and went shivering, raising his shoulders to his ears and spreading his hands over his chest as if anxious to hide his shirt rather than to display it. He and the happy husband were nicknamed Before and After, they were so like the pictorial advertisement of Man before and after he has tried Someone's lozenges. But it is rash to judge by outsides; Tommy and Shovel one day tracked Before to his place of business, and it proved to be a palatial eating-house, long, narrow, padded with red cushions; through the door they saw the once despised, now in beautiful black clothes, the waistcoat a mere nothing, as if to give his shirt a chance at last, a towel over his arm, and to and fro he darted, saying

"Yessirquitesosir" to the toffs on the seats, shouting "Twovegonebeef--onebeeronetartinahurry" to someone invisible, and pocketing twopences all day long, just like a lord. On the same floor as Before and After lived the large family of little Pikes, who quarrelled at night for the middle place in the bed, and then chips of ceiling fell into the room below, tenant Jim Ricketts and parents, lodger the young woman we have been trying all these doors for. Her the police snapped up on a charge; that made Tommy want to hide himself--child-desertion.

Shovel was the person best worth listening to on the subject (observe him, the centre of half a dozen boys), and at first he was for the defence, being a great stickler for the rights of mothers. But when the case against the girl leaked out, she need not look to him for help. The police had found the child in a basket down an area, and being knowing ones they pinched it to make it cry, and then they pretended to go away. Soon the mother, who was watching hard by to see if it fell into kind hands, stole to her baby to comfort it, "and just as she were a kissing on it and blubbering, the perlice copped her."

"The slut!" said disgusted Shovel, "what did she hang about for?" and in answer to a trembling question from Tommy he replied, decisively, "Six months hard."

"Next case" was probably called immediately, but Tommy vanished, as if he had been sentenced and removed to the cells.

Never again, unless he wanted six months hard, must he go near Reddy's home, and so he now frequently accompanied his mother to the place where she worked. The little room had a funny fireplace called a stove, on which his mother made tea and the girls roasted chestnuts, and it had no other ordinary furniture except a long form. But the walls were mysterious. Three of them were covered with long white cloths, which went to the side when you tugged them, and then you could see on rails dozens of garments that looked like nightgowns. Beneath the form were scores of little shoes, most of them white or brown. In this house Tommy's mother spent eight hours daily, but not all of them in this room. When she arrived the first thing she did was to put Elspeth on the floor, because you cannot fall off a floor; then she went upstairs with a bucket and a broom to a large bare room, where she stayed so long that Tommy nearly forgot what she was like.

While his mother was upstairs Tommy would give Elspeth two or three shoes to eat to keep her quiet, and then he played with the others, pretending to be able to count them, arranging them in designs, shooting them, swimming among them, saying "bow-wow" at them and then turning sharply to see who had said it. Soon Elspeth dropped her shoes and gazed in admiration at him, but more often than not she laughed in the wrong place, and then he said ironically: "Oh, in course I can't do nothin'; jest let's see you doing of it, then, cocky!"

By the time the girls began to arrive, singly or in twos and threes, his mother was back in the little room, making tea for herself or sewing bits of them that had been torn as they stepped out of a cab, or helping them to put on the nightgowns, or pretending to listen pleasantly to their chatter and hating them all the time. There was every kind of them, gorgeous ones and shabby ones, old tired ones and dashing young ones, but whether they were the Honorable Mrs. Something or only Jane Anything, they all came to that room for the same purpose: to get a little gown and a pair of shoes. Then they went upstairs and danced to a stout little lady, called the Sylph, who bobbed about like a ball at the end of a piece of elastic. What Tommy never forgot was that while they danced the Sylph kept saying, "One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four," which they did not seem to mind, but when she said "One, two, three, four, picture!" they all stopped and stood motionless, though it might be with one foot as high as their head and their arms stretched out toward the floor, as if they had suddenly seen a halfpenny there.

In the waiting-room, how they joked and pirouetted and gossiped, and hugged and scorned each other, and what slang they spoke and how pretty they often looked next moment, and how they denounced the one that had just gone out as a cat with whom you could not get in a word edgeways, and oh, how prompt they were to give a slice of their earnings to any "cat" who was hard up! But still, they said, she had talent, but no genius. How they pitied people without genius.

Have you ever tasted an encore or a reception? Tommy never had his teeth in one, but he heard much about them in that room, and concluded that they were some sort of cake. It was not the girls who danced in groups, but those who danced alone, that spoke of their encores and receptions, and sometimes they had got them last night, sometimes years ago. Two girls met in the room, one of whom had stolen the other's reception, and--but it was too dreadful to write about. Most of

them carried newspaper cuttings in their purses and read them aloud to the others, who would not listen. Tommy listened, however, and as it was all about how one house had risen at the girls and they had brought another down, he thought they led the most adventurous lives.

Occasionally they sent him out to buy newspapers or chestnuts, and then he had to keep a sharp eye on the police lest they knew about Reddy. It was a point of honor with all the boys he knew to pretend that the policeman was after them. To gull the policeman into thinking all was well they blackened their faces and wore their jackets inside out; their occupation was a constant state of readiness to fly from him, and when he tramped out of sight, unconscious of their existence, they emerged from dark places and spoke in exultant whispers. Tommy had been proud to join them, but he now resented their going on in this way; he felt that he alone had the right to fly from the law. And once at least while he was flying something happened to him that he was to remember better, far better, than his mother's face.

What set him running on this occasion (he had been sent out to get one of the girls' shoes soled) was the grandest sight to be seen in London--an endless row of policemen walking in single file, all with the right leg in the air at the same time, then the left leg. Seeing at once that they were after him, Tommy ran, ran, ran until in turning a corner he found himself wedged between two legs. He was of just sufficient size to fill the aperture, but after a momentary look he squeezed through, and they proved to be the gate into an enchanted land.

The magic began at once. "Dagont, you sacket!" cried some wizard.

A policeman's hand on his shoulder could not have taken the wind out of Tommy more quickly. In the act of starting a-running again he brought down his hind foot with a thud and stood stock still. Can any one wonder? It was the Thrums tongue, and this the first time he had heard it except from his mother.

It was a dull day, and all the walls were dripping wet, this being the part of London where the fogs are kept. Many men and women were passing to and fro, and Tommy, with a wild exultation in his breast, peered up at the face of this one and that; but no, they were only ordinary people, and he played rub-a-dub with his feet on the pavement, so furious was he with them for moving on as if nothing had happened. Draw up, ye

carters; pedestrians, stand still; London, silence for a moment, and let Tommy Sandys listen!

Being but a frail plant in the way of a flood, Tommy was rooted up and borne onward, but he did not feel the buffeting. In a passion of grief he dug his fists in his eyes, for the glory had been his for but a moment. It can be compared to nothing save the parcel (attached to a concealed string) which Shovel and he once placed on the stair for Billy Hankey to find, and then whipped away from him just as he had got it under his arm. But so near the crying, Tommy did not cry, for even while the tears were rushing to his aid he tripped on the step of a shop, and immediately, as if that had rung the magic bell again, a voice, a woman's voice this time, said shrilly, "Threepence ha'penny, and them jimply as big as a bantam's! Na, na, but I'll gi'e you five bawbees."

Tommy sat down flop on the step, feeling queer in the head. Was it--was it--was it Thrums? He knew he had been running a long time.

The woman, or fairy, or whatever you choose to call her, came out of the shop and had to push Tommy aside to get past. Oh, what a sweet foot to be kicked by. At the time, he thought she was dressed not unlike the women of his own stair, but this defect in his vision he mended afterward, as you may hear. Of course, he rose and trotted by her side like a dog, looking up at her as if she were a cathedral; but she mistook his awe for impudence and sent him sprawling, with the words, "Tak that, you glowering partan!"

Do you think Tommy resented this? On the contrary he screamed from where he lay, "Say it again! say it again!"

She was gone, however, but only, as it were, to let a window open, from which came the cry, "Davit, have you seen my man?"

A male fairy roared back from some invisible place, "He has gone yont to Petey's wi' the dambrod."

"I'll dambrod him!" said the female fairy, and the window shut.

Tommy was now staggering like one intoxicated, but he had still some sense left him, and he walked up and down in front of this house, as if to take care of it. In the middle of the street some boys were very busy at a game, carts and lorries passing over them occasionally. They came to the

pavement to play marbles, and then Tommy noticed that one of them wore what was probably a glengarry bonnet. Could he be a Thrums boy?

At first he played in the stupid London way, but by and by he had to make a new ring, and he did it by whirling round on one foot. Tommy knew from his mother that it is only done in this way in Thrums. Oho! Oho!

By this time he was prancing round his discovery, saying, "I'm one, too--so am I--dagont, does yer hear? dagont!" which so alarmed the boy that he picked up his marble and fled, Tommy, of course, after him. Alas! he must have been some mischievous sprite, for he lured his pursuer back into London and then vanished, and Tommy, searching in vain for the enchanted street, found his own door instead.

His mother pooh-poohed his tale, though he described the street exactly as it struck him on reflection, and it bore a curious resemblance to the palace of Aladdin that Reddy had told him about, leaving his imagination to fill in the details, which it promptly did, with a square, a town-house, some outside stairs, and an auld licht kirk. There was no such street, however, his mother assured him; he had been dreaming. But if this were so, why was she so anxious to make him promise never to look for the place again?

He did go in search of it again, daily for a time, always keeping a look-out for bow-legs, and the moment he saw them, he dived recklessly between, hoping to come out into fairyland on the other side. For though he had lost the street, he knew that this was the way in.

Shovel had never heard of the street, nor had Bob. But Bob gave him something that almost made him forget it for a time. Bob was his favorite among the dancing girls, and she--or should it be he? The odd thing about these girls was that a number of them were really boys--or at least were boys at Christmas-time, which seemed to Tommy to be even stranger than if they had been boys all the year round. A friend of Bob's remarked to her one day, "You are to be a girl next winter, ain't you, Bob?" and Bob shook her head scornfully.

"Do you see any green in my eye, my dear?" she inquired.

Her friend did not look, but Tommy looked, and there was none. He assured her of this so earnestly that Bob fell in love with him on the spot,

and chucked him under the chin, first with her thumb and then with her toe, which feat was duly reported to Shovel, who could do it by the end of the week.

Did Tommy, Bob wanted to know, still think her a mere woman?

No, he withdrew the charge, but--but--She was wearing her outdoor garments, and he pointed to them, "Why does yer wear them, then?" he demanded.

"For the matter of that," she replied, pointing at his frock, "why do you wear them?" Whereupon Tommy began to cry.

"I ain't not got no right ones," he blubbered. Harum-scarum Bob, who was a trump, had him in her motherly arms immediately, and the upshot of it was that a blue suit she had worn when she was Sam Something changed owners. Mrs. Sandys "made it up," and that is how Tommy got into trousers.

Many contingencies were considered in the making, but the suit would fit Tommy by and by if he grew, or it shrunk, and they did not pass each other in the night. When proud Tommy first put on his suit the most unexpected shyness overcame him, and having set off vaingloriously he stuck on the stair and wanted to hide. Shovel, who had been having an argument with his old girl, came, all boastful bumps, to him, and Tommy just stood still with a self-conscious simper on his face. And Shovel, who could have damped him considerably, behaved in the most honorable manner, initiating him gravely into the higher life, much as you show the new member round your club.

It was very risky to go back to Reddy, whom he had not seen for many weeks; but in trousers! He could not help it. He only meant to walk up and down her street, so that she might see him from the window, and know that this splendid thing was he; but though he went several times into the street, Reddy never came to the window.

The reason he had to wait in vain at Reddy's door was that she was dead; she had been dead for quite a long time when Tommy came back to look for her. You mothers who have lost your babies, I should be a sorry knave were I to ask you to cry now over the death of another woman's child. Reddy had been lent to two people for a very little while, just as your babies were, and when the time was up she blew a kiss to them and

ran gleefully back to God, just as your babies did. The gates of heaven are so easily found when we are little, and they are always standing open to let children wander in.

But though Reddy was gone away forever, mamma still lived in that house, and on a day she opened the door to come out, Tommy was standing there--she saw him there waiting for Reddy. Dry-eyed this sorrowful woman had heard the sentence pronounced, dry eyed she had followed the little coffin to its grave; tears had not come even when waking from illusive dreams she put out her hand in bed to a child who was not there; but when she saw Tommy waiting at the door for Reddy, who had been dead for a month, her bosom moved and she could cry again.

Those tears were sweet to her husband, and it was he who took Tommy on his knee in the room where the books were, and told him that there was no Reddy now. When Tommy knew that Reddy was a deader he cried bitterly, and the man said, very gently, "I am glad you were so fond of her."

"'T ain't that," Tommy answered with a knuckle in his eye, "'t ain't that as makes me cry." He looked down at his trousers and in a fresh outburst of childish grief he wailed, "It's them!"

Papa did not understand, but the boy explained. "She can't not never see them now," he sobbed, "and I wants her to see them, and they has pockets!"

It had come to the man unexpectedly. He put Tommy down almost roughly, and raised his hand to his head as if he felt a sudden pain there.

But Tommy, you know, was only a little boy.