

CHAPTER V - THE GIRL WITH TWO MOTHERS

Elspeth at last did something to win Tommy's respect; she fell ill of an ailment called in Thrums the croop. When Tommy first heard his mother call it croop, he thought she was merely humoring Elspeth, and that it was nothing more distinguished than London whooping-cough, but on learning that it was genuine croop, he began to survey the ambitious little creature with a new interest.

This was well for Elspeth, as she had now to spend most of the day at home with him, their mother, whose health was failing through frequent attacks of bronchitis, being no longer able to carry her through the streets. Of course Elspeth took to repaying his attentions by loving him, and he soon suspected it, and then gloomily admitted it to himself, but never to Shovel. Being but an Englishman, Shovel saw no reason why relatives should conceal their affection for each other, but he played on this Scottish weakness of Tommy's with cruel enjoyment.

"She's fond on yer!" he would say severely.

"You's a liar."

"Gar long! I believe as you're fond on her!"

"You jest take care, Shovel."

"Ain't yer?"

"Na-o!"

"Will yer swear?"

"So I will swear."

"Let's hear yer."

"Dagont!"

So for a time the truth was kept hidden, and Shovel retired, casting aspersions, and offering to eat all the hair on Elspeth's head for a penny.

This hair was white at present, which made Tommy uneasy about her future, but on the whole he thought he might make something of her if

she was only longer. Sometimes he stretched her on the floor, pulling her legs out straight, for she had a silly way of doubling them up, and then he measured her carefully with his mother's old boots. Her growth proved to be distressingly irregular, as one day she seemed to have grown an inch since last night, and then next day she had shrunk two inches.

After her day's work Mrs. Sandys was now so listless that, had not Tommy interfered, Elspeth would have been a backward child. Reddy had been able to walk from the first day, and so of course had he, but this little slow-coach's legs wobbled at the joints, like the blade of a knife without a spring. The question of questions was How to keep her on end?

Tommy sat on the fender revolving this problem, his head resting on his hand: that favorite position of mighty intellects when about to be photographed, Elspeth lay on her stomach on the floor, gazing earnestly at him, as if she knew she was in his thoughts for some stupendous purpose. Thus the apple may have looked at Newton before it fell.

Hankey, the postman, compelled the flowers in his window to stand erect by tying them to sticks, so Tommy took two sticks from a bundle of firewood, and splicing Elspeth's legs to them, held her upright against the door with one hand. All he asked of her to-day was to remain in this position after he said "One, two, three, four, picture!" and withdrew his hand, but down she flopped every time, and he said, with scorn,

"You ain't got no genius: you has just talent."

But he had her in bed with the scratches nicely covered up before his mother came home.

He tried another plan with more success. Lost dogs, it may be remembered, had a habit of following Shovel's father, and he not only took the wanderers in, but taught them how to beg and shake hands and walk on two legs. Tommy had sometimes been present at these agreeable exercises, and being an inventive boy he--But as Elspeth was a nice girl, let it suffice to pause here and add shyly, that in time she could walk.

He also taught her to speak, and if you need to be told with what luscious word he enticed her into language you are sentenced to re-read the first pages of his life.

"Thrums," he would say persuasively, "Thrums, Thrums. You opens your mouth like this, and shuts it like this, and that's it." Yet when he had coaxed her thus for many days, what does she do but break her long silence with the word "Tommy!" The recoil knocked her over.

Soon afterward she brought down a bigger bird. No Londoner can say "Auld licht," and Tommy had often crowed over Shovel's "Ol likt." When the testing of Elspeth could be deferred no longer, he eyed her with the look a hen gives the green egg on which she has been sitting twenty days, but Elspeth triumphed, saying the words modestly even, as if nothing inside her told her she had that day done something which would have baffled Shakespeare, not to speak of most of the gentlemen who sit for Scotch constituencies.

"Reddy couldn't say it!" Tommy cried exultantly, and from that great hour he had no more fears for Elspeth.

Next the alphabet knocked for admission; and entered first M and P, which had prominence in the only poster visible from the window. Mrs. Sandys had taught Tommy his letters, but he had got into words by studying posters.

Elspeth being able now to make the perilous descent of the stairs, Tommy guided her through the streets (letting go hurriedly if Shovel hove in sight), and here she bagged new letters daily. With Catlings something, which is the best, she got into capital Cs; ys are found easily when you know where to look for them (they hang on behind); Ns are never found singly, but often three at a time; Q is so aristocratic that even Tommy had only heard of it, doubtless it was there, but indistinguishable among the masses like a celebrity in a crowd; on the other hand, big A and little e were so dirt cheap, that these two scholars passed them with something very like a sneer.

The printing-press is either the greatest blessing or the greatest curse of modern times, one sometimes forgets which. Elspeth's faith in it was absolute, and as it only spoke to her from placards, here was her religion, at the age of four:

"PRAY WITHOUT CEASING. HAPPY ARE THEY WHO NEEDING KNOW THE PAINLESS POROUS PLASTER."

Of religion, Tommy had said many fine things to her, embellishments on the simple doctrine taught him by his mother before the miseries of this world made her indifferent to the next. But the meaning of "Pray without ceasing," Elspeth, who was God's child always, seemed to find out for herself, and it cured all her troubles. She prayed promptly for every one she saw doing wrong, including Shovel, who occasionally had words with Tommy on the subject, and she not only prayed for her mother, but proposed to Tommy that they should buy her a porous plaster. Mrs. Sandys had been down with bronchitis again.

Tommy raised the monetary difficulty.

Elspeth knew where there was some money, and it was her very own.

Tommy knew where there was money, and it was his very own.

Elspeth would not tell how much she had, and it was twopence halfpenny.

Neither would Tommy tell, and it was twopence.

Tommy would get a surprise on his birthday.

So would Elspeth get a surprise on her birthday.

Elspeth would not tell what the surprise was to be, and it was to be a gun.

Tommy also must remain mute, and it was to be a box of dominoes.

Elspeth did not want dominoes.

Tommy knew that, but he wanted them.

Elspeth discovered that guns cost fourpence, and dominoes threepence halfpenny; it seemed to her, therefore, that Tommy was defrauding her of a halfpenny.

Tommy liked her cheek. You got the dominoes for threepence halfpenny, but the price on the box is fivepence, so that Elspeth would really owe him a penny.

This led to an agonizing scene in which Elspeth wept while Tommy told her sternly about Reddy. It had become his custom to tell the tale of Reddy when Elspeth was obstreperous.

Then followed a scene in which Tommy called himself a scoundrel for frightening his dear Elspeth, and swore that he loved none but her. Result: reconciliation, and agreed, that instead of a gun and dominoes, they should buy a porous plaster. You know the shops where the plasters are to be obtained by great colored bottles in their windows, and, as it was advisable to find the very best shop, Tommy and Elspeth in their wanderings came under the influence of the bottles, red, yellow, green, and blue, and color entered into their lives, giving them many delicious thrills. These bottles are the first poem known to the London child, and you chemists who are beginning to do without them in your windows should be told that it is a shame.

In the glamour, then, of the romantic battles walked Tommy and Elspeth hand in hand, meeting so many novelties that they might have spared a tear for the unfortunate children who sit in nurseries surrounded by all they ask for, and if the adventures of these two frequently ended in the middle, they had probably begun another while the sailor-suit boy was still holding up his leg to let the nurse put on his little sock. While they wandered, they drew near unwittingly to the enchanted street, to which the bottles are a colored way, and at last they were in it, but Tommy recognized it not; he did not even feel that he was near it, for there were no outside stairs, no fairies strolling about, it was a short street as shabby as his own.

But someone had shouted "Dinna haver, lassie; you're blethering!"

Tommy whispered to Elspeth, "Be still; don't speak," and he gripped her hand tighter and stared at the speaker. He was a boy of ten, dressed like a Londoner, and his companion had disappeared. Tommy never doubting but that he was the sprite of long ago, gripped him by the sleeve. All the savings of Elspeth and himself were in his pocket, and yielding to impulse, as was his way, he thrust the fivepence halfpenny into James Gloag's hand. The new millionaire gaped, but not at his patron, for the why and wherefore of this gift were trifles to James beside the tremendous fact that he had fivepence halfpenny. "Almighty me!" he cried and bolted. Presently he returned, having deposited his money in a safe place, and his first remark was perhaps the meanest on record. He held out his hand and said greedily, "Have you ony mair?"

This, you feel certain, must have been the most important event of that evening, but strange to say, it was not. Before Tommy could answer

James's question, a woman in a shawl had pounced upon him and hurried him and Elspeth out of the street. She had been standing at a corner looking wistfully at the window blinds behind which folk from Thrums passed to and fro, hiding her face from people in the street, but gazing eagerly after them. It was Tommy's mother, whose first free act on coming to London had been to find out that street, and many a time since then she had skulked through it or watched it from dark places, never daring to disclose herself, but sometimes recognizing familiar faces, sometimes hearing a few words in the old tongue that is harsh and ungracious to you, but was so sweet to her, and bearing them away with her beneath her shawl as if they were something warm to lay over her cold heart.

For a time she upbraided Tommy passionately for not keeping away from this street, but soon her hunger for news of Thrums overcame her prudence, and she consented to let him go back if he promised never to tell that his mother came from Thrums. "And if ony-body wants to ken your name, say it's Tommy, but dinna let on that it's Tommy Sandys."

"Elspeth," Tommy whispered that night, "I'm near sure there's something queer about my mother and me and you." But he did not trouble himself with wondering what the something queer might be, so engrossed was he in the new and exciting life that had suddenly opened to him.