

CHAPTER VII - COMIC OVERTURE TO A TRAGEDY

"Jean Myles bides in London" was the next remarkable news brought by Tommy from Thrums Street. "And that ain't all, Magerful Tam is her man; and that ain't all, she has a laddie called Tommy and that ain't all, Petey and the rest has never seen her in London, but she writes letters to Thrums folks and they writes to Petey and tells him what she said. That ain't all neither, they canna find out what street she bides in, but it's on the bonny side of London, and it's grand, and she wears silk clothes, and her Tommy has velvet trousers, and they have a servant as calls him 'sir.' Oh, I would just like to kick him! They often looks for her in the grand streets, but they're angry at her getting on so well, and Martha Scrymgeour said it were enough to make good women like her stop going reg'lar to the kirk."

"Martha said that!" exclaimed his mother, highly pleased. "Heard you anything of a woman called Esther Auld? Her man does the orra work at the Tappit Hen public in Thrums."

"He's head man at the Tappit Hen public now," answered Tommy; "and she wishes she could find out where Jean Myles bides, so as she could write and tell her that she is grand too, and has six hair-bottomed chairs."

"She'll never get the satisfaction," said his mother triumphantly. "Tell me more about her."

"She has a laddie called Francie, and he has yellow curls, and she nearly greets because she canna tell Jean Myles that he goes to a school for the children of gentlemen only. She is so mad when she gets a letter from Jean Myles that she takes to her bed."

"Yea, yea!" said Mrs. Sandys cheerily.

"But they think Jean Myles has been brought low at last," continued Tommy, "because she hasna wrote for a long time to Thrums, and Esther Auld said that if she knowed for certain as Jean Myles had been brought low, she would put a threepenny bit in the kirk plate."

"I'm glad you've telled me that, laddie," said Mrs. Sandys, and next day, unknown to her children, she wrote another letter. She knew she ran a

risk of discovery, yet it was probable that Tommy would only hear her referred to in Thrums Street by her maiden name, which he had never heard from her, and as for her husband he had been Magerful Tam to everyone. The risk was great, but the pleasure--

Unsuspecting Tommy soon had news of another letter from Jean Myles, which had sent Esther Auld to bed again.

"Instead of being brought low," he announced, "Jean Myles is grander than ever. Her Tommy has a governess."

"That would be a doush of water in Esther's face?" his mother said, smiling.

"She wrote to Martha Scrymgeour," said Tommy, "that it ain't no pleasure to her now to boast as her laddie is at a school for gentlemen's children only. But what made her maddest was a bit in Jean Myles's letter about chairs. Jean Myles has give all her hair-bottomed chairs to a poor woman and buyed a new kind, because hair-bottomed ones ain't fashionable now. So Esther Auld can't not bear the sight of her chairs now, though she were windy of them till the letter went to Thrums."

"Poor Esther!" said Mrs. Sandys gaily.

"Oh, and I forgot this, mother. Jean Myles's reason for not telling where she bides in London is that she's so grand that she thinks if auld Petey and the rest knowed where the place was they would visit her and boast as they was her friends. Auld Petey stamped wi' rage when he heard that, and Martha Scrymgeour said, 'Oh, the pridefu' limmer!'"

"Ay, Martha," muttered Mrs. Sandys, "you and Jean Myles is evens now."

But the passage that had made them all wince the most was one giving Jean's reasons for making no calls in Thrums Street. "You can break it to Martha Scrymgeour's father and mither," the letter said, "and to Petey Whamond's sisters and the rest as has friends in London, that I have seen no Thrums faces here, the low part where they bide not being for the like of me to file my feet in. Forby that, I could not let my son mix with their bairns for fear they should teach him the vulgar Thrums words and clarty his blue-velvet suit. I'm thinking you have to dress your laddie in corduroy, Esther, but you see that would not do for mine. So no more at present, and we all join in compliments, and my little velvets says he wishes I would send some of his toys to your little corduroys. And so

maybe I will, Esther, if you'll tell Aaron Latta how rich and happy I am, and if you're feared to say it to his face, tell it to the roaring farmer of Double Dykes, and he'll pass it on."

"Did you ever hear of such a woman?" Tommy said indignantly, when he had repeated as much of this insult to Thrums as he could remember.

But it was information his mother wanted.

"What said they to that bit?" she asked.

At first, it appears, they limited their comments to "Losh, losh," "keeps a'," "it cows," "my eertie," "ay, ay," "sal, tal," "dagont" (the meaning of which is obvious). But by and by they recovered their breath, and then Baker Lamsden said, wonderingly:

"Wha that was at her marriage could have thought it would turn out so weel? It was an eerie marriage that, Petey!"

"Ay, man, you may say so," old Petey answered. "I was there; I was one o' them as went in ahint Aaron Latta, and I'm no' likely to forget it."

"I wasna there," said the baker, "but I was standing at the door, and I saw the hearse drive up."

"What did they mean, mother?" Tommy asked, but she shuddered and replied, evasively, "Did Martha Scrymgeour say anything?"

"She said such a lot," he had to confess, "that I dinna mind none on it. But I mind what her father in Thrums wrote to her; he wrote to her that if she saw a carriage go by, she was to keep her eyes on the ground, for likely as not Jean Myles would be in it, and she thought as they was all dirt beneath her feet. But Kirsty Ross--who is she?"

"She's Martha's mother. What about her?"

"She wrote at the end of the letter that Martha was to hang on ahint the carriage and find out where Jean Myles bides."

"Laddie, that was like Kirsty! Heard you what the roaring farmer o' Double Dykes said?"

No, Tommy had not heard him mentioned. And indeed the roaring farmer of Double Dykes had said nothing. He was already lying very quiet on the south side of the cemetery.

Tommy's mother's next question cost her a painful effort. "Did you hear," she asked, "whether they telled Aaron Latta about the letter?"

"Yes, they telled him," Tommy replied, "and he said a queer thing; he said, 'Jean Myles is dead, I was at her coffining.' That's what he aye says when they tell him there's another letter. I wonder what he means, mother?"

"I wonder!" she echoed, faintly. The only pleasure left her was to raise the envy of those who had hooted her from Thrums, but she paid a price for it. Many a stab she had got from the unwitting Tommy as he repeated the gossip of his new friends, and she only won their envy at the cost of their increased ill-will. They thought she was lording it in London, and so they were merciless; had they known how poor she was and how ill, they would have forgotten everything save that she was a Thrummy like themselves, and there were few but would have shared their all with her. But she did not believe this, and therefore you may pity her, for the hour was drawing near, and she knew it, when she must appeal to some one for her children's sake, not for her own.

No, not for her own. When Tommy was wandering the pretty parts of London with James Gloag and other boys from Thrums Street in search of Jean Myles, whom they were to know by her carriage and her silk dress and her son in blue velvet, his mother was in bed with bronchitis in the wretched room we know of, or creeping to the dancing school, coughing all the way.

Some of the fits of coughing were very near being her last, but she wrestled with her trouble, seeming at times to stifle it, and then for weeks she managed to go to her work, which was still hers, because Shovel's old girl did it for her when the bronchitis would not be defied. Shovel's old slattern gave this service unasked and without payment; if she was thanked it was ungraciously, but she continued to do all she could when there was need; she smelled of gin, but she continued to do all she could.

The wardrobe had been put upon its back on the floor, and so converted into a bed for Tommy and Elspeth, who were sometimes wakened in the night by a loud noise, which alarmed them until they learned that it was only the man in the next room knocking angrily on the wall because their mother's cough kept him from sleeping.

Tommy knew what death was now, and Elspeth knew its name, and both were vaguely aware that it was looking for their mother; but if she could only hold out till Hogmanay, Tommy said, they would fleg it out of the house. Hogmanay is the mighty winter festival of Thrums, and when it came round these two were to give their mother a present that would make her strong. It was not to be a porous plaster. Tommy knew now of something better than that.

"And I knows too!" Elspeth gurgled, "and I has threepence a'ready, I has."

"Whisht!" said Tommy, in an agony of dread, "she hears you, and she'll guess. We ain't speaking of nothing to give to you at Hogmanay," he said to his mother with great cunning. Then he winked at Elspeth and said, with his hand over his mouth, "I hinna twopence!" and Elspeth, about to cry in fright, "Have you spended it?" saw the joke and crowed instead, "Nor yet has I threepence!"

They smirked together, until Tommy saw a change come over Elspeth's face, which made him run her outside the door.

"You was a-going to pray!" he said, severely.

"Cos it was a lie, Tommy. I does have threepence."

"Well, you ain't a-going to get praying about it. She would hear yer."

"I would do it low, Tommy."

"She would see yer."

"Oh, Tommy, let me. God is angry with me."

Tommy looked down the stair, and no one was in sight. "I'll let yer pray here," he whispered, "and you can say I have twopence. But be quick, and do it standing."

Perhaps Mrs. Sandys had been thinking that when Hogmanay came her children might have no mother to bring presents to, for on their return to the room her eyes followed them woefully, and a shudder of apprehension shook her torn frame. Tommy gave Elspeth a look that meant "I'm sure there's something queer about her."

There was also something queer about himself, which at this time had the strangest gallop. It began one day with a series of morning calls from

Shovel, who suddenly popped his head over the top of the door (he was standing on the handle), roared "Roastbeef!" in the manner of a railway porter announcing the name of a station, and then at once withdrew.

He returned presently to say that vain must be all attempts to wheedle his secret from him, and yet again to ask irritably why Tommy was not coming out to hear all about it. Then did Tommy desert Elspeth, and on the stair Shovel showed him a yellow card with this printed on it: "S.R.J.C.--Supper Ticket;" and written beneath, in a lady's hand: "Admit Joseph Salt." The letters, Shovel explained, meant Society for the somethink of Juvenile Criminals, and the toffs what ran it got hold of you when you came out of quod. Then if you was willing to repent they wrote down your name and the place what you lived at in a book, and one of them came to see yer and give yer a ticket for the blow-out night. This was blow-out night, and that were Shovel's ticket. He had bought it from Hump Salt for fourpence. What you get at the blow-out was roast-beef, plum-duff, and an orange; but when Hump saw the fourpence he could not wait.

A favor was asked of Tommy. Shovel had been told by Hump that it was the custom of the toffs to sit beside you and question you about your crimes, and lacking the imagination that made Tommy such an ornament to the house, the chances were that he would flounder in his answers and be ejected. Hump had pointed this out to him after pocketing the fourpence. Would Tommy, therefore, make up things for him to say; reward, the orange.

This was a proud moment for Tommy, as Shovel's knowledge of crime was much more extensive than his own, though they had both studied it in the pictures of a lively newspaper subscribed to by Shovel, senior. He became patronizing at once and rejected the orange as insufficient.

Then suppose, after he got into the hall, Shovel dropped his ticket out at the window; Tommy could pick it up, and then it would admit him also.

Tommy liked this, but foresaw a danger: the ticket might be taken from Shovel at the door, just as they took them from you at that singing thing in the church he had attended with young Petey.

So help Shovel's davy, there was no fear of this. They were superior toffs, what trusted to your honor.

Would Shovel swear to this?

He would.

But would he swear dagont?

He swore dagont; and then Tommy had him. As he was so sure of it, he could not object to Tommy's being the one who dropped the ticket out at the window?

Shovel did object for a time, but after a wrangle he gave up the ticket, intending to take it from Tommy when primed with the necessary tale. So they parted until evening, and Tommy returned to Elspeth, secretive but elated. For the rest of the day he was in thought, now wagging his head smugly over some dark, unutterable design and again looking a little scared. In growing alarm she watched his face, and at last she slipped upon her knees, but he had her up at once and said, reproachfully:

"It were me as teached yer to pray, and now yer prays for me! That's fine treatment!"

Nevertheless, after his mother's return, just before he stole out to join Shovel, he took Elspeth aside and whispered to her, nervously:

"You can pray for me if you like, for, oh, Elspeth; I'm thinking as I'll need it sore!" And sore he needed it before the night was out.