

CHAPTER VIII - THE BOY WITH TWO MOTHERS

"I love my dear father and my dear mother and all the dear little kids at 'ome. You are a kind laidy or gentleman. I love yer. I will never do it again, so help me bob. Amen."

This was what Shovel muttered to himself again and again as the two boys made their way across the lamp-lit Hungerford Bridge, and Tommy asked him what it meant.

"My old gal learned me that; she's deep," Shovel said, wiping the words off his mouth with his sleeve.

"But you got no kids at 'ome!" remonstrated Tommy. (Ameliar was now in service.)

Shovel turned on him with the fury of a mother protecting her young. "Don't you try for to knock none on it out," he cried, and again fell a-mumbling.

Said Tommy, scornfully: "If you says it all out at one bang you'll be done at the start."

Shovel sighed.

"And you should blubber when yer says it," added Tommy, who could laugh or cry merely because other people were laughing or crying, or even with less reason, and so naturally that he found it more difficult to stop than to begin. Shovel was the taller by half a head, and irresistible with his fists, but to-night Tommy was master.

"You jest stick to me, Shovel," he said airily. "Keep a grip on my hand, same as if yer was Elspeth."

"But what was we copped for, Tommy?" entreated humble Shovel.

Tommy asked him if he knew what a butler was, and Shovel remembered, confusedly, that there had been a portrait of a butler in his father's news-sheet.

"Well, then," said Tommy, inspired by this same source, "there's a room a butler has, and it is a pantry, so you and me we crawled through the

winder and we opened the door to the gang. You and me was copped. They caught you below the table and me stabbing the butler."

"It was me what stabbed the butler," Shovel interposed, jealously.

"How could you do it, Shovel?"

"With a knife, I tell yer!"

"Why, you didn't have no knife," said Tommy, impatiently.

This crushed Shovel, but he growled sulkily:

"Well, I bit him in the leg."

"Not you," said selfish Tommy. "You forgets about repenting, and if I let yer bite him, you would brag about it. It's safer without, Shovel."

Perhaps it was. "How long did I get in quod, then, Tommy?"

"Fourteen days."

"So did you?" Shovel said, with quick anxiety.

"I got a month," replied Tommy, firmly.

Shovel roared a word that would never have admitted him to the hall. Then, "I'm as game as you, and gamer," he whined.

"But I'm better at repenting. I tell yer, I'll cry when I'm repenting." Tommy's face lit up, and Shovel could not help saying, with a curious look at it:

"You--you ain't like any other cove I knows," to which Tommy replied, also in an awe-struck voice:

"I'm so queer, Shovel, that when I thinks 'bout myself I'm--I'm sometimes near feared."

"What makes your face for to shine like that? Is it thinking about the blow-out?"

No, it was hardly that, but Tommy could not tell what it was. He and the saying about art for art's sake were in the streets that night, looking for each other.

The splendor of the brightly lighted hall, which was situated in one of the meanest streets of perhaps the most densely populated quarter in London, broke upon the two boys suddenly and hit each in his vital part, tapping an invitation on Tommy's brain-pan and taking Shovel coquettishly in the stomach. Now was the moment when Shovel meant to strip Tommy of the ticket, but the spectacle in front dazed him, and he stopped to tell a vegetable barrow how he loved his dear father and his dear mother, and all the dear kids at home. Then Tommy darted forward and was immediately lost in the crowd surging round the steps of the hall.

Several gentlemen in evening dress stood framed in the lighted doorway, shouting: "Have your tickets in your hands and give them up as you pass in." They were fine fellows, helping in a splendid work, and their society did much good, though it was not so well organized as others that have followed in its steps; but Shovel, you may believe, was in no mood to attend to them. He had but one thought: that the traitor Tommy was doubtless at that moment boring his way toward them, underground, as it were, and "holding his ticket in his hand." Shovel dived into the rabble and was flung back upside down. Falling with his arms round a full-grown man, he immediately ran up him as if he had been a lamp-post, and was aloft just sufficiently long to see Tommy give up the ticket and saunter into the hall.

The crowd tried at intervals to rush the door. It was mainly composed of ragged boys, but here and there were men, women, and girls, who came into view for a moment under the lights as the mob heaved and went round and round like a boiling potful. Two policemen joined the ticket-collectors, and though it was a good-humored gathering, the air was thick with such cries as these:

"I lorst my ticket, ain't I telling yer? Gar on, guv'nor, lemme in!"

"Oh, crumpets, look at Jimmy! Jimmy never done nothink, your honor; he's a himposter"

"I'm the boy what kicked the peeler. Hie, you toff with the choker, ain't I to step up?"

"Tell yer, I'm a genooine criminal, I am. If yer don't lemme in I'll have the lawr on you."

"Let a poor cove in as his father drowned hisself for his country."

"What air yer torking about? Warn't I in larst year, and the cuss as runs the show, he says to me, 'Allers welcome,' he says. None on your sarse, Bobby. I demands to see the cuss what runs--"

"Jest keeping on me out 'cos I ain't done nothin'. Ho, this is a encouragement to honesty, I don't think."

Mighty in tongue and knee and elbow was an unknown knight, ever conspicuous; it might be but by a leg waving for one brief moment in the air. He did not want to go in, would not go in though they went on their blooming knees to him; he was after a viper of the name of Tommy. Half an hour had not tired him, and he was leading another assault, when a magnificent lady, such as you see in wax-works, appeared in the vestibule and made some remark to a policeman, who then shouted:

"If so there be hany lad here called Shovel, he can step forrard."

A dozen lads stepped forward at once, but a flail drove them right and left, and the unknown knight had mounted the parapet amid a shower of execrations. "If you are the real Shovel," the lady said to him, "you can tell me how this proceeds, 'I love my dear father and my dear mother--' Go on."

Shovel obeyed, tremblingly. "And all the dear little kids at 'ome. You are a kind laidy or gentleman. I love yer. I will never do it again, so help me bob. Amen."

"Charming!" chirped the lady, and down pleasant-smelling aisles she led him, pausing to drop an observation about Tommy to a clergyman: "So glad I came; I have discovered the most delightful little monster called Tommy." The clergyman looked after her half in sadness, half sarcastically; he was thinking that he had discovered a monster also.

At present the body of the hall was empty, but its sides were lively with gorging boys, among whom ladies moved, carrying platefuls of good things. Most of them were sweet women, fighting bravely for these boys, and not at all like Shovel's patroness, who had come for a sensation. Tommy falling into her hands, she got it.

Tommy, who had a corner to himself, was lolling in it like a little king, and he not only ordered roast-beef for the awe-struck Shovel, but sent

the lady back for salt. Then he whispered, exultantly: "Quick, Shovel, feel my pocket" (it bulged with two oranges), "now the inside pocket" (plum-duff), "now my waistcoat pocket" (threepence); "look in my mouth" (chocolates).

When Shovel found speech he began excitedly: "I love my dear father and my dear--"

"Gach!" said Tommy, interrupting him contemptuously. "Repenting ain't no go, Shovel. Look at them other coves; none of them has got no money, nor full pockets, and I tell you, it's 'cos they has repented."

"Gar on!"

"It's true, I tells you. That lady as is my one, she's called her ladyship, and she don't care a cuss for boys as has repented," which of course was a libel, her ladyship being celebrated wherever paragraphs penetrate for having knitted a pair of stockings for the deserving poor.

"When I saw that," Tommy continued, brazenly, "I bragged 'stead of repenting, and the wuss I says I am, she jest says, 'You little monster,' and gives me another orange."

"Then I'm done for," Shovel moaned, "for I rolled off that 'bout loving my dear father and my dear mother, blast 'em, soon as I seen her."

He need not let that depress him. Tommy had told her he would say it, but that it was all flam.

Shovel thought the ideal arrangement would be for him to eat and leave the torking to Tommy. Tommy nodded. "I'm full, at any rate," he said, struggling with his waistcoat. "Oh, Shovel, I am full!"

Her ladyship returned, and the boys held by their contract, but of the dark character Tommy seems to have been, let not these pages bear the record. Do you wonder that her ladyship believed him? On this point we must fight for our Tommy. You would have believed him. Even Shovel, who knew, between the bites, that it was all whoppers, listened as to his father reading aloud. This was because another boy present half believed it for the moment also. When he described the eerie darkness of the butler's pantry, he shivered involuntarily, and he shut his eyes once--ugh!--that was because he saw the blood spouting out of the butler. He was turning up his trousers to show the mark of the butler's boot on his

leg when the lady was called away, and then Shovel shook him, saying: "Darn yer, doesn't yer know as it's all your eye?" which brought Tommy to his senses with a jerk.

"Sure's death, Shovel," he whispered, in awe, "I was thinking I done it, every bit!"

Had her ladyship come back she would have found him a different boy. He remembered now that Elspeth, for whom he had filled his pockets, was praying for him; he could see her on her knees, saying, "Oh, God, I'se praying for Tommy," and remorse took hold of him and shook him on his seat. He broke into one hysterical laugh and then immediately began to sob. This was the moment when Shovel should have got him quietly out of the hall.

Members of the society discussing him afterwards with bated breath said that never till they died could they forget her ladyship's face while he did it. "But did you notice the boy's own face? It was positively angelic." "Angelic, indeed; the little horror was intoxicated." No, there was a doctor present, and according to him it was the meal that had gone to the boy's head; he looked half starved. As for the clergyman, he only said: "We shall lose her subscription; I am glad of it."

Yes, Tommy was intoxicated, but with a beverage not recognized by the faculty. What happened was this: Supper being finished, the time had come for what Shovel called the jawing, and the boys were now mustered in the body of the hall. The limited audience had gone to the gallery, and unluckily all eyes except Shovel's were turned to the platform. Shovel was apprehensive about Tommy, who was not exactly sobbing now; but strange, uncontrollable sounds not unlike the winding up of a clock proceeded from his throat; his face had flushed; there was a purposeful look in his usually unreadable eye; his fingers were fidgeting on the board in front of him, and he seemed to keep his seat with difficulty.

The personage who was to address the boys sat on the platform with clergymen, members of committee, and some ladies, one of them Tommy's patroness. Her ladyship saw Tommy and smiled to him, but obtained no response. She had taken a front seat, a choice that she must have regretted presently.

The chairman rose and announced that the Rev. Mr. ----would open the proceedings with prayer. The Rev. Mr. ---- rose to pray in a loud voice for

the waifs in the body of the hall. At the same moment rose Tommy, and began to pray in a squeaky voice for the people on the platform.

He had many Biblical phrases, mostly picked up in Thrums Street, and what he said was distinctly heard in the stillness, the clergyman being suddenly bereft of speech. "Oh," he cried, "look down on them ones there, for, oh, they are unworthy of Thy mercy, and, oh, the worst sinner is her ladyship, her sitting there so brazen in the black frock with yellow stripes, and the worse I said I were the better pleased were she. Oh, make her think shame for tempting of a poor boy, for getting suffer little children, oh, why cumbereth she the ground, oh--"

He was in full swing before any one could act. Shovel having failed to hold him in his seat, had done what was perhaps the next best thing, got beneath it himself. The arm of the petrified clergyman was still extended, as if blessing his brother's remarks; the chairman seemed to be trying to fling his right hand at the culprit; but her ladyship, after the first stab, never moved a muscle. Thus for nearly half a minute, when the officials woke up, and squeezing past many knees, seized Tommy by the neck and ran him out of the building. All down the aisle he prayed hysterically, and for some time afterwards, to Shovel, who had been cast forth along with him.

At an hour of that night when their mother was asleep, and it is to be hoped they were the only two children awake in London, Tommy sat up softly in the wardrobe to discover whether Elspeth was still praying for him. He knew that she was on the floor in a night-gown some twelve sizes too large for her, but the room was as silent and black as the world he had just left by taking his fingers from his ears and the blankets off his face.

"I see you," he said mendaciously, and in a guarded voice, so as not to waken his mother, from whom he had kept his escapade. This had not the desired effect of drawing a reply from Elspeth, and he tried bluster.

"You needna think as I'll repent, you brat, so there! What?"

"I wish I hadna told you about it!" Indeed, he had endeavored not to do so, but pride in his achievement had eventually conquered prudence.

"Reddy would have laughed, she would, and said as I was a wonder. Reddy was the kind I like. What?"

"You ate up the oranges quick, and the plum-duff too, so you should pray for yoursel' as well as for me. It's easy to say as you didna know how I got them till after you eated them, but you should have found out. What?"

"Do you think it was for my own self as I done it? I jest done it to get the oranges and plum-duff to you, I did, and the threepence too. Eh? Speak, you little besom.

"I tell you as I did repent in the hall. I was greeting, and I never knowed I put up that prayer till Shovel told me on it. We was sitting in the street by that time."

This was true. On leaving the hall Tommy had soon dropped to the cold ground and squatted there till he came to, when he remembered nothing of what had led to his expulsion. Like a stream that has run into a pond and only finds itself again when it gets out, he was but a continuation of the boy who when last conscious of himself was in the corner crying remorsefully over his misdeed; and in this humility he would have returned to Elspeth had no one told him of his prayer. Shovel, however, was at hand, not only to tell him all about it, but to applaud, and home strutted Tommy chuckling.

"I am sleeping," he next said to Elspeth, "so you may as well come to your bed."

He imitated the breathing of a sleeper, but it was the only sound to be heard in London, and he desisted fearfully. "Come away, Elspeth," he said, coaxingly, for he was very fond of her and could not sleep while she was cold and miserable.

Still getting no response he pulled his body inch by inch out of the bed-clothes, and holding his breath, found the floor with his feet stealthily, as if to cheat the wardrobe into thinking that he was still in it. But his reason was to discover whether Elspeth had fallen asleep on her knees without her learning that he cared to know. Almost noiselessly he worked himself along the floor, but when he stopped to bring his face nearer hers, there was such a creaking of his joints that if Elspeth did not hear it she--she must be dead! His knees played whack on the floor.

Elspeth only gasped once, but he heard, and remained beside her for a minute, so that she might hug him if such was her desire; and she put

out her hand in the darkness so that his should not have far to travel alone if it chanced to be on the way to her. Thus they sat on their knees, each aghast at the hard-heartedness of the other.

Tommy put the blankets over the kneeling figure, and presently announced from the wardrobe that if he died of cold before repenting the blame of keeping him out of heaven would be Elspeth's. But the last word was muffled, for the blankets were tucked about him as he spoke, and two motherly little arms gave him the embrace they wanted to withhold. Foiled again, he kicked off the bed-clothes and said: "I tell yer I wants to die!"

This terrified both of them, and he added, quickly:

"Oh, God, if I was sure I were to die to-night I would repent at once." It is the commonest prayer in all languages, but down on her knees slipped Elspeth again, and Tommy, who felt that it had done him good, said indignantly: "Surely that is religion. What?"

He lay on his face until he was frightened by a noise louder than thunder in the daytime--the scraping of his eyelashes on the pillow. Then he sat up in the wardrobe and fired his three last shots.

"Elspeth Sandys, I'm done with yer forever, I am. I'll take care on yer, but I'll never kiss yer no more.

"When yer boasts as I'm your brother I'll say you ain't. I'll tell my mother about Reddy the morn, and syne she'll put you to the door smart.

"When you are a grown woman I'll buy a house to yer, but you'll have jest to bide in it by your lonely self, and I'll come once a year to speir how you are, but I won't come in, I won't--I'll jest cry up the stair."

The effect of this was even greater than he had expected, for now two were in tears instead of one, and Tommy's grief was the more heartrending, he was so much better at everything than Elspeth. He jumped out of the wardrobe and ran to her, calling her name, and he put his arms round her cold body, and the dear mite, forgetting how cruelly he had used her, cried, "Oh, tighter, Tommy, tighter; you didn't not mean it, did yer? Oh, you is terrible fond on me, ain't yer? And you won't not tell my mother 'bout Reddy, will yer, and you is no done wi' me forever, is yer? and you won't not put me in a house by myself, will yer? Oh, Tommy, is that the tightest you can do?"

And Tommy made it tighter, vowing, "I never meant it; I was a bad un to say it. If Reddy were to come back wanting for to squeeze you out, I would send her packing quick, I would. I tell yer what, I'll kiss you with folk looking on, I will, and no be ashamed to do it, and if Shovel is one of them what sees me, and he puts his finger to his nose, I'll blood the mouth of him, I will, dagont!"

Then he prayed for forgiveness, and he could always pray more beautifully than Elspeth. Even she was satisfied with the way he did it, and so, alack, was he.

"But you forgot to tell," she said fondly, when once more they were in the wardrobe together--"you forgot to tell as you filled your pockets wif things to me."

"I didn't forget," Tommy replied modestly. "I missed it out, on purpose, I did, 'cos I was sure God knows on it without my telling him, and I thought he would be pleased if I didn't let on as I knowed it was good of me."

"Oh, Tommy," cried Elspeth, worshipping him, "I couldn't have doned that, I couldn't!" She was barely six, and easily taken in, but she would save him from himself if she could.