

CHAPTER IX - AULD LANG SYNE

What to do with her ladyship's threepence? Tommy finally decided to drop it into the charity-box that had once contained his penny. They held it over the slit together, Elspeth almost in tears because it was such a large sum to give away, but Tommy looking noble he was so proud of himself; and when he said "Three!" they let go.

There followed days of excitement centred round their money-box. Shovel introduced Tommy to a boy what said as after a bit you forget how much money was in your box, and then when you opened it, oh, Lor'! there is more than you thought, so he and Elspeth gave this plan a week's trial, affecting not to know how much they had gathered, but when they unlocked it, the sum was still only eightpence; so then Tommy told the liar to come on, and they fought while the horrified Elspeth prayed, and Tommy licked him, a result due to one of the famous Thrums left-handers then on exhibition in that street for the first time, as taught the victor by Petey Whamond the younger, late of Tillyloss.

The money did come in, once in spate (twopence from Bob in twenty-four hours), but usually so slowly that they saw it resting on the way, and then, when they listened intently, they could hear the thud of Hogmanay. The last halfpenny was a special aggravation, strolling about, just out of reach, with all the swagger of sixpence, but at last Elspeth had it, and after that, the sooner Hogmanay came the better.

They concealed their excitement under too many wrappings, but their mother suspected nothing. When she was dressing on the morning of Hogmanay, her stockings happened to be at the other side of the room, and they were such a long way off that she rested on the way to them. At the meagre breakfast she said what a heavy teapot that was, and Tommy thought this funny, but the salt had gone from the joke when he remembered it afterwards. And when she was ready to go off to her work she hesitated at the door, looking at her bed and from it to her children as if in two minds, and then went quietly downstairs.

The distance seems greater than ever to-day, poor woman, and you stop longer at the corners, where rude men jeer at you. Scarcely can you push open the door of the dancing-school or lift the pail; the fire has gone out, you must again go on your knees before it, and again the smoke makes

you cough. Gaunt slattern, fighting to bring up the phlegm, was it really you for whom another woman gave her life, and thought it a rich reward to get dressing you once in your long clothes, when she called you her beautiful, and smiled, and smiling, died? Well, well; but take courage, Jean Myles. The long road still lies straight up hill, but your climbing is near an end. Shrink from the rude men no more, they are soon to forget you, so soon! It is a heavy door, but soon you will have pushed it open for the last time. The girls will babble still, but not to you, not of you. Cheer up, the work is nearly done. Her beautiful! Come, beautiful, strength for a few more days, and then you can leave the key of the leaden door behind you, and on your way home you may kiss your hand joyously to the weary streets, for you are going to die.

Tommy and Elspeth had been to the foot of the stair many times to look for her before their mother came back that evening, yet when she re-entered her home, behold, they were sitting calmly on the fender as if this were a day like yesterday or to-morrow, as if Tommy had not been on a business visit to Thrums Street, as if the hump on the bed did not mean that a glorious something was hidden under the coverlet. True, Elspeth would look at Tommy imploringly every few minutes, meaning that she could not keep it in much longer, and then Tommy would mutter the one word "Bell" to remind her that it was against the rules to begin before the Thrums eight-o'clock bell rang. They also wiled away the time of waiting by inviting each other to conferences at the window where these whispers passed--

"She ain't got a notion, Tommy."

"Dinna look so often at the bed."

"If I could jest get one more peep at it!"

"No, no; but you can put your hand on the top of it as you go by."

The artfulness of Tommy lured his unsuspecting mother into telling how they would be holding Hogmanay in Thrums to-night, how cartloads of kebbock cheeses had been rolling into the town all the livelong day ("Do you hear them, Elspeth?"), and in dark closes the children were already gathering, with smeared faces and in eccentric dress, to sally forth as guisers at the clap of eight, when the ringing of a bell lets Hogmanay loose. ("You see, Elspeth?") Inside the houses men and women were preparing (though not by fasting, which would have been such a good

way that it is surprising no one ever thought of it) for a series of visits, at every one of which they would be offered a dram and kebbock and bannock, and in the grander houses "bridies," which are a sublime kind of pie.

Tommy had the audacity to ask what bridies were like. And he could not dress up and be a guiser, could he, mother, for the guisers sang a song, and he did not know the words? What a pity they could not get bridies to buy in London, and learn the song and sing it. But of course they could not! ("Elspeth, if you tumble off the fender again, she'll guess.")

Such is a sample of Tommy, but Elspeth was sly also, if in a smaller way, and it was she who said: "There ain't nothin' in the bed, is there, Tommy!" This duplicity made her uneasy, and she added, behind her teeth, "Maybe there is," and then, "O God, I knows as there is."

But as the great moment drew near there were no more questions; two children were staring at the clock and listening intently for the peal of a bell nearly five hundred miles away.

The clock struck. "Whisht! It's time, Elspeth! They've begun! Come on!"

A few minutes afterwards Mrs. Sandys was roused by a knock at the door, followed by the entrance of two mysterious figures. The female wore a boy's jacket turned outside in, the male a woman's bonnet and a shawl, and to make his disguise the more impenetrable he carried a poker in his right hand. They stopped in the middle of the floor and began to recite, rather tremulously,

Get up, good wife, and binna sweir, And deal your bread to them that's here. For the time will come when you'll be dead, And then you'll need neither ale nor bread.

Mrs. Sandys had started, and then turned piteously from them; but when they were done she tried to smile, and said, with forced gayety, that she saw they were guisers, and it was a fine night, and would they take a chair. The male stranger did so at once, but the female said, rather anxiously: "You are sure as you don't know who we is?" Their hostess shook her head, and then he of the poker offered her three guesses, a daring thing to do, but all went well, for her first guess was Shovel and his old girl; second guess, Before and After; third guess, Napoleon Buonaparte and the Auld Licht minister. At each guess the

smaller of the intruders clapped her hands gleefully, but when, with the third, she was unmuzzled, she putted with her head at Mrs. Sandys and hugged her, screaming, "It ain't none on them; it's jest me, mother, it's Elspeth!" and even while their astounded hostess was asking could it be true, the male conspirator dropped his poker noisily (to draw attention to himself) and stood revealed as Thomas Sandys.

Wasn't it just like Thrums, wasn't it just the very, very same? Ah, it was wonderful, their mother said, but, alas, there was one thing wanting: she had no Hogmanay to give the guisers.

Had she not? What a pity, Elspeth! What a pity, Tommy! What might that be in the bed, Elspeth? It couldn't not be their Hogmanay, could it, Tommy? If Tommy was his mother he would look and see. If Elspeth was her mother she would look and see.

Her curiosity thus cunningly aroused, Mrs. Sandys raised the coverlet of the bed and--there were three bridies, an oatmeal cake, and a hunk of kebbock. "And they comed from Thrums!" cried Elspeth, while Tommy cried, "Petey and the others got a lot sent from Thrums, and I bought the bridies from them, and they gave me the bannock and the kebbock for nuthin'!" Their mother did not utter the cry of rapture which Tommy expected so confidently that he could have done it for her; instead, she pulled her two children toward her, and the great moment was like to be a tearful rather than an ecstatic one, for Elspeth had begun to whimper, and even Tommy--but by a supreme effort he shouldered reality to the door.

"Is this my Hogmanay, guidwife?" he asked in the nick of time, and the situation thus being saved, the luscious feast was partaken of, the guisers listening solemnly as each bite went down. They also took care to address their hostess as "guidwife" or "mistress," affecting not to have met her lately, and inquiring genially after the health of herself and family. "How many have you?" was Tommy's masterpiece, and she answered in the proper spirit, but all the time she was hiding great part of her bridie beneath her apron, Hogmanay having come too late for her.

Everything was to be done exactly as they were doing it in Thrums Street, and so presently Tommy made a speech; it was the speech of old Petey, who had rehearsed it several times before him. "Here's a toast," said Tommy, standing up and waving his arms, "here's a toast that we'll drink in silence, one that maun have sad thoughts at the back o't to

some of us, but one, my friends, that keeps the hearts of Thrums folk green and ties us all thegither, like as it were wi' twine. It's to all them, wherever they may be the night, wha' have sat as lads and lasses at the Cuttle Well."

To one of the listeners it was such an unexpected ending that a faint cry broke from her, which startled the children, and they sat in silence looking at her. She had turned her face from them, but her arm was extended as if entreating Tommy to stop.

"That was the end," he said, at length, in a tone of expostulation; "it's auld Petey's speech."

"Are you sure," his mother asked wistfully, "that Petey was to say all them as have sat at the Cuttle Well? He made no exception, did he?"

Tommy did not know what exception was, but he assured her that he had repeated the speech, word for word. For the remainder of the evening she sat apart by the fire, while her children gambled for crack-nuts, young Petey having made a teetotum for Tommy and taught him what the letters on it meant. Their mirth rang faintly in her ear, and they scarcely heard her fits of coughing; she was as much engrossed in her own thoughts as they in theirs, but hers were sad and theirs were jocund--Hogmanay, like all festivals, being but a bank from which we can only draw what we put in. So an hour or more passed, after which Tommy whispered to Elspeth: "Now's the time; they're at it now," and each took a hand of their mother, and she woke from her reverie to find that they had pulled her from her chair and were jumping up and down, shouting, excitedly, "For Auld Lang Syne, my dear, for Auld Lang Syne, Auld Lang Syne, my dear, Auld Lang Syne." She tried to sing the words with her children, tried to dance round with them, tried to smile, but--

It was Tommy who dropped her hand first. "Mother," he cried, "your face is wet, you're greeting sair, and you said you had forgot the way."

"I mind it now, man, I mind it now," she said, standing helplessly in the middle of the room.

Elspeth nestled against her, crying, "My mother was thinking about Thrums, wasn't she, Tommy?"

"I was thinking about the part o't I'm most awid to be in," the poor woman said, sinking back into her chair.

"It's the Den," Tommy told Elspeth.

"It's the Square," Elspeth told Tommy.

"No, it's Monypenny."

"No, it's the Commonty."

But it was none of these places. "It's the cemetery," the woman said, "it's the hamely, quiet cemetery on the hillside. Oh, there's mony a bonny place in my nain bonny toon, but there's nain so hamely like as the cemetery." She sat shaking in the chair, and they thought she was to say no more, but presently she rose excitedly, and with a vehemence that made them shrink from her she cried: "I winna lie in London! tell Aaron Latta that; I winna lie in London!"

For a few more days she trudged to her work, and after that she seldom left her bed. She had no longer strength to coax up the phlegm, and a doctor brought in by Shovel's mother warned her that her days were near an end. Then she wrote her last letter to Thrums, Tommy and Elspeth standing by to pick up the pen when it fell from her feeble hand, and in the intervals she told them that she was Jean Myles.

"And if I die and Aaron hasna come," she said, "you maun just gang to auld Petey and tell him wha you are."

"But how can you be Jean Myles?" asked astounded Tommy. "You ain't a grand lady and--"

His mother looked at Elspeth. "No' afore her," she besought him; but before he set off to post the letter she said: "Come canny into my bed the night, when Elspeth 's sleeping, and syne I'll tell you all there is to tell about Jean Myles."

"Tell me now whether the letter is to Aaron Latta?"

"It's for him," she said, "but it's no' to him. I'm feared he might burn it without opening it if he saw my write on the cover, so I've wrote it to a friend of his wha will read it to him."

"And what's inside, mother?" the boy begged, inquisitively. "It must be queer things if they'll bring Aaron Latta all the way from Thrums."

"There's but little in it, man," she said, pressing her hand hard upon her chest. "It's no muckle mair than 'Auld Lang Syne, my dear, for Auld Lang Syne."