CHAPTER XXV - MR. T. SANDYS HAS RETURNED TO TOWN

It is disquieting to reflect that we have devoted so much paper (this is the third shilling's worth) to telling what a real biographer would almost certainly have summed up in a few pages. "Caring nothing for glory, engrossed in his work alone, Mr. Sandys, soon after the publication of the 'Letters,' sought the peace of his mother's native village, and there, alike undisturbing and undisturbed, he gave his life, as ever, to laborious days and quiet contemplation. The one vital fact in these six months of lofty endeavour is that he was making progress with the new book. Fishing and other distractions were occasionally indulged in, but merely that he might rise fresher next morning to a book which absorbed," etc.

One can see exactly how it should be done, it has been done so often before. And there is a deal to be said for this method. His book was what he had been at during nearly the whole of that time; comparatively speaking, the fishing and "other distractions" (a neat phrase) had got an occasional hour only. But while we admire, we can't do it in that way. We seem fated to go on taking it for granted that you know the "vital facts" about Tommy, and devoting our attention to the things that the real biographer leaves out.

Tommy arrived in London with little more than ten pounds in his pockets. All the rest he had spent on Elspeth.

He looked for furnished chambers in a fashionable quarter, and they were much too expensive. But the young lady who showed them to him asked if it was the Mr. Sandys, and he at once took the rooms. Her mother subsequently said that she understood he wrote books, and would he deposit five pounds?

Such are the ups and downs of the literary calling.

The book, of course, was "Unrequited Love," and the true story of how it was not given to the world by his first publishers has never been told. They had the chance, but they weighed the manuscript in their hands as if it were butter, and said it was very small.

"If you knew how much time I have spent in making it smaller," replied Tommy, haughtily.

The madmen asked if he could not add a few chapters, whereupon, with a shudder, he tucked baby under his wing and flew away. That is how Goldie & Goldie got the book.

For one who had left London a glittering star, it was wonderful how little he brightened it by returning. At the club they did not know that he had been away. In society they seemed to have forgotten to expect him back.

He had an eye for them--with a touch of red in it; but he bided his time. It was one of the terrible things about Tommy that he could bide his time. Pym was the only person he called upon. He took Pym out to dinner and conducted him home again. His kindness to Pym, the delicacy with which he pretended not to see that poor old Pym was degraded and done for--they would have been pretty even in a woman, and we treat Tommy unfairly in passing them by with a bow.

Pym had the manuscript to read, and you may be as sure he kept sober that night as that Tommy lay awake. For when literature had to be judged, who could be so grim a critic as this usually lenient toper? He could forgive much, could Pym. You had run away without paying your rent, was it? Well, well, come in and have a drink. Broken your wife's heart, have you? Poor chap, but you will soon get over it. But if it was a split infinitive, "Go to the devil, sir."

"Into a cocked hat," was the verdict of Pym, meaning thereby that thus did Tommy's second work beat his first. Tommy broke down and wept.

Presently Pym waxed sentimental and confided to Tommy that he, too, had once loved in vain. The sad case of those who love in vain, you remember, is the subject of the book. The saddest of autobiographies, it has been called.

An odd thing, this, I think. Tearing home (for the more he was engrossed in mind the quicker he walked), Tommy was not revelling in Pym's praise; he was neither blanching nor smiling at the thought that he of all people had written as one who was unloved; he was not wondering what Grizel would say to it; he had even forgotten to sigh over his own coming dissolution (indeed, about this time the flower-pot began to fade from his memory). What made him cut his way so excitedly through the streets was this: Pym had questioned his use of the word "untimely" in chapter eight. And Tommy had always been uneasy about that word.

He glared at every person he passed, and ran into perambulators. He rushed past his chambers like one who no longer had a home. He was in the park now, and did not even notice that the Row was empty, that mighty round a deserted circus; management, riders, clowns, all the performers gone on their provincial tour, or nearly all, for a lady on horseback sees him, remembers to some extent who he is, and gives chase. It is our dear Mrs. Jerry.

"You wretch," she said, "to compel me to pursue you! Nothing could have induced me to do anything so unwomanly except that you are the only man in town."

She shook her whip so prettily at him that it was as seductive as a smile. It was also a way of gaining time while she tried to remember what it was he was famous for.

"I believe you don't know me!" she said, with a little shriek, for Tommy had looked bewildered. "That would be too mortifying. Please pretend you do!"

Her look of appeal, the way in which she put her plump little hands together, as if about to say her prayers, brought it all back to Tommy. The one thing he was not certain of was whether he had proposed to her.

It was the one thing of which she was certain.

"You think I can forget so soon," he replied reproachfully, but carefully.

"Then tell me my name," said she; she thought it might lead to his mentioning his own.

"I don't know what it is now. It was Mrs. Jerry once."

"It is Mrs. Jerry still."

"Then you did not marry him, after all?"

No wild joy had surged to his face, but when she answered yes, he nodded his head with gentle melancholy three times. He had not the smallest desire to deceive the lady; he was simply an actor who had got his cue and liked his part.

"But my friends still call me Mrs. Jerry," she said softly. "I suppose it suits me somehow."

"You will always be Mrs. Jerry to me," he replied huskily. Ah, those meetings with old loves!

"If you minded so much," Mrs. Jerry said, a little tremulously (she had the softest heart, though her memory was a trifle defective), "you might have discovered whether I had married him or not."

"Was there no reason why I should not seek to discover it?" Tommy asked with tremendous irony, but not knowing in the least what he meant.

It confused Mrs. Jerry. They always confused her when they were fierce, and yet she liked them to be fierce when she re-met them, so few of them were.

But she said the proper thing. "I am glad you have got over it."

Tommy maintained a masterly silence. No wonder he was a power with women.

"I say I am glad you have got over it," murmured Mrs. Jerry again. Has it ever been noticed that the proper remark does not always gain in propriety with repetition?

It is splendid to know that right feeling still kept Tommy silent.

Yet she went on briskly as if he had told her something: "Am I detaining you? You were walking so quickly that I thought you were in pursuit of someone."

It brought Tommy back to earth, and he could accept her now as an old friend he was glad to meet again. "You could not guess what I was in pursuit of, Mrs. Jerry," he assured her, and with confidence, for words are not usually chased down the Row.

But, though he made the sound of laughter, that terrible face which Mrs. Jerry remembered so well, but could not give a name to, took no part in the revelry; he was as puzzling to her as those irritating authors who print their jokes without a note of exclamation at the end of them. Poor Mrs. Jerry thought it must be a laugh of horrid bitterness, and that he was referring to his dead self or something dreadful of that sort, for which she was responsible.

"Please don't tell me," she said, in such obvious alarm that again he laughed that awful laugh. He promised, with a profound sigh, to carry his secret unspoken to the grave, also to come to her "At Home" if she sent him a card.

He told her his address, but not his name, and she could not send the card to "Occupier."

"Now tell me about yourself," said Mrs. Jerry, with charming cunning. "Did you go away?"

"I came back a few days ago only."

"Had you any shooting?" (They nearly always threatened to make for a distant land where there was big game.)

Tommy smiled. He had never "had any shooting" except once in his boyhood, when he and Corp acted as beaters, and he had wept passionately over the first bird killed, and harangued the murderer.

"No," he replied; "I was at work all the time."

This, at least, told her that his work was of a kind which could be done out of London. An inventor?

"When are we to see the result?" asked artful Mrs. Jerry.

"Very soon. Everything comes out about this time. It is our season, you know."

Mrs. Jerry pondered while she said: "How too entrancing!" What did come out this month? Oh, plays! And whose season was it? The actor's, of course! He could not be an actor with that beard, but--ah, she remembered now!

"Are they really clever this time?" she asked roguishly--"for you must admit that they are usually sticks."

Tommy blinked at this. "I really believe, Mrs. Jerry," he said slowly, "it is you who don't know who I am!"

"You prepare the aristocracy for the stage, don't you?" she said plaintively.

"I!" he thundered.

"He had a beard," she said, in self-defence.

"Who?"

"Oh, I don't know! Please forgive me! I do remember, of course, who you are--I remember too well!" said Mrs. Jerry, generously.

"What is my name?" Tommy demanded.

She put her hands together again, beseechingly. "Please, please!" she said. "I have such a dreadful memory for names, but--oh, please!"

"What am I?" he insisted.

"You are the--the man who invents those delightful thingumbobs," she cried with an inspiration.

"I never invented anything, except two books," said Tommy, looking at her reproachfully.

"I know them by heart," she cried.

"One of them is not published yet," he informed her.

"I am looking forward to it so excitedly," she said at once.

"And my name is Sandys," said he.

"Thomas Sandys," she said, correcting him triumphantly. "How is that dear, darling little Agnes--Elspeth?"

"You have me at last," he admitted.

"'Sandys on Woman!'" exclaimed Mrs. Jerry, all rippling smiles once more. "Can I ever forget it!"

"I shall never pretend to know anything about women again," Tommy answered dolefully, but with a creditable absence of vindictiveness.

"Please, please!" said the little hands again.

"It is a nasty jar, Mrs. Jerry."

"Please!"

"Oh that I could forget so quickly!"

"Please!"

"I forgive you, if that is what you want."

She waved her whip. "And you will come and see me?"

"When I have got over this. It needs--a little time." He really said this to please her.

"You shall talk to me of the new book," she said, confident that this would fetch him, for he was not her first author. "By the way, what is it about?"

"Can you ask, Mrs. Jerry?" replied Tommy, passionately. "Oh, woman, woman, can you ask?"

This puzzled her at the time, but she understood what he had meant when the book came out, dedicated to Pym. "Goodness gracious!" she said to herself as she went from chapter to chapter, and she was very self-conscious when she heard the book discussed in society, which was not quite as soon as it came out, for at first the ladies seemed to have forgotten their Tommy.

But the journals made ample amends. He had invented, they said, something new in literature, a story that was yet not a story, told in the form of essays which were no mere essays. There was no character mentioned by name, there was not a line of dialogue, essays only, they might say, were the net result, yet a human heart was laid bare, and surely that was fiction in its highest form. Fiction founded on fact, no doubt (for it would be ostrich-like to deny that such a work must be the outcome of a painful personal experience), but in those wise and penetrating pages Mr. Sandys called no one's attention to himself; his subject was an experience common to humanity, to be borne this way or that; and without vainglory he showed how it should be borne, so that those looking into the deep waters of the book (made clear by his pellucid style) might see, not the author, but themselves.

A few of the critics said that if the book added nothing to his reputation, it detracted nothing from it, but probably their pen added this mechanically when they were away. What annoyed him more was the two or three who stated that, much as they liked "Unrequited Love," they liked the "Letters" still better. He could not endure hearing a good word said for the "Letters" now.

The great public, I believe, always preferred the "Letters," but among important sections of it the new book was a delight, and for various reasons. For instance, it was no mere story. That got the thoughtful public. Its style, again, got the public which knows it is the only public that counts.

Society still held aloof (there was an African traveller on view that year), but otherwise everything was going on well, when the bolt came, as ever, from the quarter whence it was least expected. It came in a letter from Grizel, so direct as to be almost as direct as this: "I think it is a horrid book. The more beautifully it is written the more horrid it seems. No one was ever loved more truly than you. You can know nothing about unrequited love. Then why do you pretend to know? I see why you always avoided telling me anything about the book, even its title. It was because you knew what I should say. It is nothing but sentiment. You were on your wings all the time you were writing it. That is why you could treat me as you did. Even to the last moment you deceived me. I suppose you deceived yourself also. Had I known what was in the manuscript I would not have kissed it, I would have asked you to burn it. Had you not had the strength, and you would not, I should have burned it for you. It would have been a proof of my love. I have ceased to care whether you are a famous man or not. I want you to be a real man. But you will not let me help you. I have cried all day. GRIZEL."

Fury. Dejection. The heroic. They came in that order.

"This is too much!" he cried at first, "I can stand a good deal, Grizel, but there was once a worm that turned at last, you know. Take care, madam, take care. Oh, but you are a charming lady; you can decide everything for everybody, can't you! What delicious letters you write, something unexpected in everyone of them! There are poor dogs of men, Grizel, who open their letters from their loves knowing exactly what will be inside--words of cheer, words of love, of confidence, of admiration, which help them as they sit into the night at their work, fighting for fame that they may lay it at their loved one's feet. Discouragement, obloquy, scorn, they get in plenty from others, but they are always sure of her,--do you hear, my original Grizel?--those other dogs are always sure of her. Hurrah! Grizel, I was happy, I was actually honoured, it was helping me to do better and better, when you quickly put an end to all that. Hurrah, hurrah!"

I feel rather sorry for him. If he had not told her about his book it was because she did not and never could understand what compels a man to write one book instead of another. "I had no say in the matter; the thing demanded of me that I should do it, and I had to do it. Some must write from their own experience, they can make nothing of anything else; but it is to me like a chariot that won't budge; I have to assume a character, Grizel, and then away we go. I don't attempt to explain how I write, I hate to discuss it; all I know is that those who know how it should be done can never do it. London is overrun with such, and everyone of them is as cock-sure as you. You have taken everything else, Grizel; surely you might leave me my books."

Yes, everything else, or nearly so. He put upon the table all the feathers he had extracted since his return to London, and they did make some little show, if less than it seemed to him. That little adventure in the park; well, if it started wrongly, it but helped to show the change in him, for he had determinedly kept away from Mrs. Jerry's house. He had met her once since the book came out, and she had blushed exquisitely when referring to it, and said: "How you have suffered! I blame myself dreadfully." Yes, and there was an unoccupied sofa near by, and he had not sat down on it with her and continued the conversation. Was not that a feather? And there were other ladies, and, without going into particulars, they were several feathers between them. How doggedly, to punish himself, he had stuck to the company of men, a sex that never interested him!

"But all that is nothing. I am beyond the pale, I did so monstrous a thing that I must die for it. What was this dreadful thing? When I saw you with that glove I knew you loved me, and that you thought I loved you, and I had not the heart to dash your joy. You don't know it, but that was the crime for which I must be exterminated, fiend that I am!"

Gusts of fury came at intervals all the morning. He wrote her appalling letters and destroyed them. He shook his fist and snapped his fingers at her, and went out for drink (having none in the house), and called a hansom to take him to Mrs. Jerry's, and tore round the park again and glared at everybody. He rushed on and on. "But the one thing you shall never do, Grizel, is to interfere with my work; I swear it, do you hear? In all else I am yours to mangle at your will, but touch it, and I am a beast at bay."

And still saying such things, he drew near the publishing offices of Goldie & Goldie, and circled round them, less like a beast at bay than a bird that is taking a long way to its nest. And about four of the afternoon what does this odd beast or bird or fish do but stalk into Goldie & Goldie's and order "Unrequited Love" to be withdrawn from circulation.

"Madam, I have carried out your wishes, and the man is hanged."

Not thus, but in words to that effect, did Tommy announce his deed to Grizel.

"I think you have done the right thing," she wrote back, "and I admire you for it." But he thought she did not admire him sufficiently for it, and he did not answer her letter, so it was the last that passed between them.

Such is the true explanation (now first published) of an affair that at the time created no small stir. "Why withdraw the book?" Goldie & Goldie asked of Tommy, but he would give no reason. "Why?" the public asked of Goldie & Goldie, and they had to invent several. The public invented the others. The silliest were those you could know only by belonging to a club.

I swear that Tommy had not foreseen the result. Quite unwittingly the favoured of the gods had found a way again. The talk about his incomprehensible action was the turning-point in the fortunes of the book. There were already a few thousand copies in circulation, and now many thousand people wanted them. Sandys, Sandys, Sandys! where had the ladies heard that name before? Society woke up, Sandys was again its hero; the traveller had to go lecturing in the provinces.

The ladies! Yes, and their friends, the men. There was a Tommy society in Mayfair that winter, nearly all of the members eminent or beautiful, and they held each other's hands. Both sexes were eligible, married or single, and the one rule was something about sympathy. It afterwards became the Souls, but those in the know still call them the Tommies.

They blackballed Mrs. Jerry (she was rather plump), but her married stepdaughter, Lady Pippinworth (who had been a Miss Ridge-Fulton), was one of them. Indeed, the Ridge-Fultons are among the thinnest families in the country.

T. Sandys was invited to join the society, but declined, and thus never quite knew what they did, nor can any outsider know, there being a

regulation among the Tommies against telling. I believe, however, that they were a brotherhood, with sisters. You had to pass an examination in unrequited love, showing how you had suffered, and after that either the men or the women (I forget which) dressed in white to the throat, and then each got some other's old love's hand to hold, and you all sat on the floor and thought hard. There may have been even more in it than this, for one got to know Tommies at sight by a sort of careworn halo round the brow, and it is said that the House of Commons was several times nearly counted out because so many of its middle-aged members were holding the floor in another place.

Of course there were also the Anti-Tommies, who called themselves (rather vulgarly) the Tummies. Many of them were that shape. They held that, though you had loved in vain, it was no such mighty matter to boast of; but they were poor in argument, and their only really strong card was that Mr. Sandys was stoutish himself.

Their organs in the press said that he was a man of true genius, and slightly inclined to embonpoint.

This maddened him, but on the whole his return was a triumph, and despite thoughts of Grizel he was very, very happy, for he was at play again. He was a boy, and all the ladies were girls. Perhaps the lady he saw most frequently was Mrs. Jerry's stepdaughter. Lady Pippinworth was a friend of Lady Rintoul, and had several times visited her at the Spittal, but that was not the sole reason why Tommy so frequently drank tea with her. They had met first at a country house, where, one night after the ladies had retired to rest, Lady Pippinworth came stealing into the smoking-room with the tidings that there were burglars in the house. As she approached her room she had heard whispers, and then, her door being ajar, she had peeped upon the miscreants. She had also seen a pile of her jewellery on the table, and a pistol keeping guard on top of it. There were several men in the house, but that pistol cowed all of them save Tommy. "If we could lock them in!" someone suggested, but the key was on the wrong side of the door. "I shall put it on the right side," Tommy said pluckily, "if you others will prevent their escaping by the window"; and with characteristic courage he set off for her Ladyship's room. His intention was to insert his hand, whip out the key, and lock the door on the outside, a sufficiently hazardous enterprise; but what does he do instead? Locks the door on the inside, and goes for the burglars with his fists! A happy recollection of Corp's famous one from

the shoulder disposed at once of the man who had seized the pistol; with the other gentleman Tommy had a stand-up fight in which both of them took and gave, but when support arrived, one burglar was senseless on the floor and T. Sandys was sitting on the other. Courageous of Tommy, was it not? But observe the end. He was left in the dining-room to take charge of his captives until morning, and by and by he was exhorting them in such noble language to mend their ways that they took the measure of him, and so touching were their family histories that Tommy wept and untied their cords and showed them out at the front door and gave them ten shillings each, and the one who begged for the honour of shaking hands with him also took his watch. Thus did Tommy and Lady Pippinworth become friends, but it was not this that sent him so often to her house to tea. She was a beautiful woman, with a reputation for having broken many hearts without damaging her own. He thought it an interesting case.