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Sentimental Tommy

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The Story of His Boyhood

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CHAPTER I
TOMMY CONTRIVES TO KEEP ONE OUT

The celebrated Tommy first comes into view on a dirty London stair, and he was in sexless garments, which were all he had, and he was five, and so though we are looking at him, we must do it sideways, lest he sit down hurriedly to hide them. That inscrutable face, which made the clubmen of his later days uneasy and even puzzled the ladies while he was making love to them, was already his, except when he smiled at one of his pretty thoughts or stopped at an open door to sniff a potful. On his way up and down the stair he often paused to sniff, but he never asked for anything; his mother had warned him against it, and he carried out her injunction with almost unnecessary spirit, declining offers before they were made, as when passing a room, whence came the smell of fried fish, he might call in, "I don't not want none of your fish," or "My mother says I don't not want the littlest bit," or wistfully, "I ain't hungry," or more wistfully still, "My mother says I ain't hungry." His mother heard of this and was angry, crying that he had let the neighbors know something she was anxious to conceal, but what he had revealed to them Tommy could not make out, and when he questioned her artlessly, she took him with sudden passion to her flat breast, and often after that she looked at him long and woefully and wrung her hands.

The only other pleasant smell known to Tommy was when the water-carts passed the mouth of his little street. His street, which ended in a dead wall, was near the river, but on the doleful south side of it, opening off a longer street where the cabs of Waterloo station sometimes found themselves when they took the wrong turning; his home was at the top of a house of four floors, each with accommodation for at least two families, and here he had lived with his mother since his father's death six months ago. There was oil-cloth on the stair as far as the second floor; there had been oil-cloth between the second floor and the third—Tommy could point out pieces of it still adhering to the wood like remnants of a plaster.

This stair was nursery to all the children whose homes opened on it, not so safe as nurseries in the part of London that is chiefly inhabited by boys in sailor suits, but preferable as a centre of adventure, and here on an afternoon sat two. They were very busy boasting, but only the smaller had imagination, and as he used it recklessly, their positions soon changed; sexless garments was now prone on a step, breeches sitting on him.

Shovel, a man of seven, had said, "None on your lip. You weren't never at Thrums yourself."

Tommy's reply was, "Ain't my mother a Thrums woman?"

Shovel, who had but one eye, and that bloodshot, fixed it on him threateningly.

"The Thames is in London," he said.

"'Cos they wouldn't not have it in Thrums," replied Tommy.

"'Amstead 'Eath's in London, I tell yer," Shovel said.

"The cemetery is in Thrums," said Tommy.

"There ain't no queens in Thrums, anyhow."

"There's the auld licht minister."

"Well, then, if you jest seed Trafalgar Square!"

"If you jest seed the Thrums town-house!"

"St. Paul's ain't in Thrums."

"It would like to be."

After reflecting, Shovel said in desperation, "Well, then, my father were once at a hanging."

Tommy replied instantly, "It were my father what was hanged."

There was no possible answer to this save a knock-down blow, but though Tommy was vanquished in body, his spirit remained stanch; he raised his head and gasped, "You should see how they knock down in Thrums!" It was then that Shovel sat on him.

Such was their position when an odd figure in that house, a gentleman, passed them without a word, so desirous was he to make a breath taken at the foot of the close stair last him to the top. Tommy merely gaped after this fine sight, but Shovel had experience, and "It's a kid or a coffin." he said sharply, knowing that only birth or death brought a doctor here.

Watching the doctor's ascent, the two boys strained their necks over the rickety banisters, which had been polished black by trousers of the past, and sometimes they lost him, and then they saw his legs again.

"Hello, it's your old woman!" cried Shovel. "Is she a deader?" he asked, brightening, for funerals made a pleasant stir on the stair.

The question had no meaning for bewildered Tommy, but he saw that if his mother was a deader, whatever that might be, he had grown great in his companion's eye. So he hoped she was a deader.

"If it's only a kid," Shovel began, with such scorn that Tommy at once screamed, "It ain't!" and, cross-examined, he swore eagerly that his mother was in bed when he left her in the morning, that she was still in bed at dinner-time, also that the sheet was over her face, also that she was cold.

Then she was a deader and had attained distinction in the only way possible in that street. Shovel did not shake Tommy's hand warmly, the forms of congratulation varying in different parts of London, but he looked his admiration so plainly that Tommy's head waggled proudly. Evidently, whatever his mother had done redounded to his glory as well as to hers, and somehow he had become a boy of mark. He said from his elevation that he hoped Shovel would believe his tales about Thrums now, and Shovel, who had often cuffed Tommy for sticking to him so closely, cringed in the most snobbish manner, craving permission to be seen in his company for the next three days. Tommy, the upstart, did not see his way to grant this favor for nothing, and Shovel offered a knife, but did not have it with him; it was his sister Ameliar's knife, and he would take it from her, help his davy. Tommy would wait there till Shovel fetched it. Shovel, baffled, wanted to know what Tommy was putting on hairs for. Tommy smiled, and asked whose mother was a deader. Then Shovel collapsed, and his wind passed into Tommy.

The reign of Thomas Sandys, nevertheless, was among the shortest, for with this question was he overthrown: "How did yer know she were cold?"

"Because," replied Tommy, triumphantly, "she tell me herself."

Shovel only looked at him, but one eye can be so much more terrible than two, that plop, plop, plop came the balloon softly down the steps of the throne and at the foot shrank pitifully, as if with Ameliar's knife in it.

"It's only a kid arter all!" screamed Shovel, furiously. Disappointment gave him eloquence, and Tommy cowered under his sneers, not understanding them, but they seemed to amount to this, that in having a baby he had disgraced the house.

"But I think," he said, with diffidence, "I think I were once one."

Then all Shovel could say was that he had better keep it dark on that stair.

Tommy squeezed his fist into one eye, and the tears came out at the other. A good-natured impulse was about to make Shovel say that though kids are undoubtedly humiliations, mothers and boys get used to them in time, and go on as brazenly as before, but it was checked by Tommy's unfortunate question, "Shovel, when will it come?"

Shovel, speaking from local experience, replied truthfully that they usually came very soon after the doctor, and at times before him.

"It ain't come before him," Tommy said, confidently.

"How do yer know?"

"'Cos it weren't there at dinner-time, and I been here since dinner-time."

The words meant that Tommy thought it could only enter by way of the stair, and Shovel quivered with delight. "H'st!" he cried, dramatically, and to his joy Tommy looked anxiously down the stair, instead of up it.

"Did you hear it?" Tommy whispered.

Before he could control himself Shovel blurted out: "Do you think as they come on their feet?"

"How then?" demanded Tommy; but Shovel had exhausted his knowledge of the subject. Tommy, who had begun to descend to hold the door, turned and climbed upwards, and his tears were now but the drop left in a cup too hurriedly dried. Where was he off to? Shovel called after him; and he answered, in a determined whisper: "To shove of it out if it tries to come in at the winder."

This was enough for the more knowing urchin, now so full of good things that with another added he must spill, and away he ran for an audience, which could also help him to bait Tommy, that being a game most sportive when there are several to fling at once. At the door he knocked over, and was done with, a laughing little girl who had strayed from a more fashionable street. She rose solemnly, and kissing her muff, to reassure it if it had got a fright, toddled in at the first open door to be out of the way of unmannerly boys.

Tommy, climbing courageously, heard the door slam, and looking down he saw—a strange child. He climbed no higher. It had come.

After a long time he was one flight of stairs nearer it. It was making itself at home on the bottom step; resting, doubtless, before it came hopping up. Another dozen steps, and—It was beautifully dressed in one piece of yellow and brown that reached almost to its feet, with a bit left at the top to form a hood, out of which its pert face peeped impudently; oho, so they came in their Sunday clothes. He drew so near that he could hear it cooing: thought itself as good as upstairs, did it!

He bounced upon her sharply, thinking to carry all with a high hand.
"Out you go!" he cried, with the action of one heaving coals.

She whisked round, and, "Oo boy or oo girl?" she inquired, puzzled by his dress.

"None of your cheek!" roared insulted manhood.

"Oo boy," she said, decisively.

With the effrontery of them when they are young, she made room for him on her step, but he declined the invitation, knowing that her design was to skip up the stair the moment he was off his guard.

"You don't needn't think as we'll have you," he announced, firmly. "You had best go away to—go to—" His imagination failed him. "You had best go back," he said.

She did not budge, however, and his next attempt was craftier. "My mother," he assured her, "ain't living here now;" but mother was a new word to the girl, and she asked gleefully, "Oo have mother?" expecting him to produce it from his pocket. To coax him to give her a sight of it she said, plaintively, "Me no have mother."

"You won't not get mine," replied Tommy doggedly.

She pretended not to understand what was troubling him, and it passed through his head that she had to wait there till the doctor came down for her. He might come at any moment.

A boy does not put his hand into his pocket until every other means of gaining his end has failed, but to that extremity had Tommy now come. For months his only splendid possession had been a penny despised by trade because of a large round hole in it, as if (to quote Shovel) some previous owner had cut a farthing out of it. To tell the escapades of this penny (there are no adventurers like coin of the realm) would be one way of exhibiting Tommy to the curious, but it would be a hard-hearted way. At present the penny was doubly dear to him, having been long lost and lately found. In a noble moment he had dropped it into a charity box hanging forlorn against the wall of a shop, where it lay very lonely by itself, so that when Tommy was that way he could hear it respond if he shook the box, as acquaintances give each other the time of day in passing. Thus at comparatively small outlay did he spread his benevolence over weeks and feel a glow therefrom, until the glow went, when he and Shovel recaptured the penny with a thread and a bent pin.

This treasure he sadly presented to the girl, and she accepted it with glee, putting it on her finger, as if it were a ring, but instead of saying that she would go now she asked him, coolly,

"Oo know tories?"

"Stories!" he exclaimed, "I'll—I'll tell you about Thrums," and was about to do it for love, but stopped in time. "This ain't a good stair for stories," he said, cunningly. "I can't not tell stories on this stair, but I—I know a good stair for stories."

The ninny of a girl was completely hoodwinked; and see, there they go, each with a hand in the muff, the one leering, oh, so triumphantly; the other trusting and gleeful. There was an exuberance of vitality about her as if she lived too quickly in her gladness, which you may remember in some child who visited the earth for but a little while.

How superbly Tommy had done it! It had been another keen brain pitted against his, and at first he was not winning. Then up came Thrums, and—But the thing has happened before; in a word, Blücher. Nevertheless, Tommy just managed it, for he got the girl out of the street and on to another stair no more than in time to escape a ragged rabble, headed by Shovel, who, finding their quarry gone, turned on their leader viciously, and had gloomy views of life till his cap was kicked down a sewer, which made the world bright again.

Of the tales told by Tommy that day in words Scotch and cockney, of Thrums, home of heroes and the arts, where the lamps are lit by a magician called Leerie-leerie-licht-the-lamps (but he is also friendly, and you can fling stones at him), and the merest children are allowed to set the spinning-wheels a-whirling, and dagont is the swear, and the stairs are so fine that the houses wear them outside for show, and you drop a pail at the end of a rope down a hole, and sometimes it comes up full of water, and sometimes full of fairies—of these and other wonders, if you would know, ask not a dull historian, nor even go to Thrums, but to those rather who have been boys and girls there and now are exiles. Such a one Tommy knows, an unhappy woman, foolish, not very lovable, flung like a stone out of the red quarry upon a land where it cannot grip, and tearing her heart for a sight of the home she shall see no more. From her Tommy had his pictures, and he colored them rarely.

Never before had he such a listener. "Oh, dagont, dagont!" he would cry in ecstasy over these fair scenes, and she, awed or gurgling with mirth according to the nature of the last, demanded "'Nother, 'nother!" whereat he remembered who and what she was, and showing her a morsel of the new one, drew her to more distant parts, until they were so far from his street that he thought she would never be able to find the way back.

His intention had been, on reaching such a spot, to desert her promptly, but she gave him her hand in the muff so confidingly that against his judgment he fell a-pitying the trustful mite who was wandering the world in search of a mother, and so easily diddled on the whole that the chances were against her finding one before morning. Almost unconsciously he began to look about him for a suitable one.

They were now in a street much nearer to his own home than the spurts from spot to spot had led him to suppose. It was new to him, but he recognized it as the acme of fashion by those two sure signs; railings with most of their spikes in place, and cards scored with, the word "Apartments." He had discovered such streets as this before when in Shovel's company, and they had watched the toffs go out and in, and it was a lordly sight, for first the toff waggled a rail that was loose at the top and then a girl, called the servant, peeped at him from below, and then he pulled the rail again, and then the door opened from the inside, and you had a glimpse of wonder-land with a place for hanging hats on. He had not contemplated doing anything so handsome for the girl as this, but why should he not establish her here? There were many possible mothers in view, and thrilling with a sense of his generosity he had almost fixed on one but mistrusted the glint in her eye and on another when she saved herself by tripping and showing an undarned heel.

He was still of an open mind when the girl of a sudden cried, gleefully, "Ma-ma, ma-ma!" and pointed, with her muff, across the street. The word was as meaningless to Tommy as mother had been to her, but he saw that she was drawing his attention to a woman some thirty yards away.

"Man—man!" he echoed, chiding her ignorance; "no, no, you blether, that ain't a man, that's a woman; that's woman—woman."

"Ooman—ooman," the girl repeated, docilely, but when she looked again, "Ma-ma, ma-ma," she insisted, and this was Tommy's first lesson that however young you catch them they will never listen to reason.

She seemed of a mind to trip off to this woman, and as long as his own mother was safe, it did not greatly matter to Tommy whom she chose, but if it was this one, she was going the wrong way about it. You cannot snap them up in the street.

The proper course was to track her to her house, which he proceeded to do, and his quarry, who was looking about her anxiously, as if she had lost something, gave him but a short chase. In the next street to the one in which they had first seen her, a street so like it that Tommy might have admired her for knowing the difference, she opened the door with a key and entered, shutting the door behind her. Odd to tell, the child had pointed to this door as the one she would stop at, which surprised Tommy very much.

On the steps he gave her his final instructions, and she dimpled and gurgled, obviously full of admiration for him, which was a thing he approved of, but he would have liked to see her a little more serious.

"That is the door. Well, then, I'll waggle the rail as makes the bell ring, and then I'll run."

That was all, and he wished she had not giggled most of the time. She was sniggering, as if she thought him a very funny boy, even when he rang the bell and bolted.

From a safe place he watched the opening of the door, and saw the frivolous thing lose a valuable second in waving the muff to him. "In you go!" he screamed beneath his breath. Then she entered and the door closed. He waited an hour, or two minutes, or thereabout, and she had not been ejected. Triumph!

With a drum beating inside him Tommy strutted home, where, alas, a boy was waiting to put his foot through it.

CHAPTER II
BUT THE OTHER GETS IN

To Tommy, a swaggerer, came Shovel sour-visaged; having now no cap of his own, he exchanged with Tommy, would also have bled the blooming mouth of him, but knew of a revenge that saves the knuckles: announced, with jeers and offensive finger exercise, that "it" had come.

Shovel was a liar. If he only knowed what Tommy knowed!

If Tommy only heard what Shovel had heard!

Tommy was of opinion that Shovel hadn't not heard anything.

Shovel believed as Tommy didn't know nuthin.

Tommy wouldn't listen to what Shovel had heard.

Neither would Shovel listen to what Tommy knew.

If Shovel would tell what he had heard, Tommy would tell what he knew.

Well, then, Shovel had listened at the door, and heard it mewling.

Tommy knowed it well, and it never mewled.

How could Tommy know it?

'Cos he had been with it a long time.

Gosh! Why, it had only comed a minute ago.

This made Tommy uneasy, and he asked a leading question cunningly. A boy, wasn't it?

No, Shovel's old woman had been up helping to hold it, and she said it were a girl.

Shutting his mouth tightly; which was never natural to him, the startled Tommy mounted the stair, listened and was convinced. He did not enter his dishonored home. He had no intention of ever entering it again. With one salt tear he renounced—a child, a mother.

On his way downstairs he was received by Shovel and party, who planted their arrows neatly. Kids cried steadily, he was told, for the first year. A boy one was bad enough, but a girl one was oh lawks. He must never again expect to get playing with blokes like what they was. Already she had got round his old gal who would care for him no more. What would they say about this in Thrums?

Shovel even insisted on returning him his cap, and for some queer reason, this cut deepest. Tommy about to charge, with his head down, now walked away so quietly that Shovel, who could not help liking the funny little cuss, felt a twinge of remorse, and nearly followed him with a magnanimous offer: to treat him as if he were still respectable.

Tommy lay down on a distant stair, one of the very stairs where *she* had sat with him. Ladies, don't you dare to pity him now, for he won't stand it. Rage was what he felt, and a man in a rage (as you may know if you are married) is only to be soothed by the sight of all womankind in terror of him. But you may look upon your handiwork, and gloat, an you will, on the wreck you have made. A young gentleman trusted one of you; behold the result. O! O! O! O! now do you understand why we men cannot abide you?

If she had told him flat that his mother, and his alone, she would have, and so there was an end of it. Ah, catch them taking a straight road. But to put on those airs of helplessness, to wave him that gay good-by, and then the moment his back was turned, to be off through the air on—perhaps on her muff, to the home he had thought to lure her from. In a word, to be diddled by a girl when one flatters himself he is diddling! S'death, a dashing fellow finds it hard to bear. Nevertheless, he has to bear it, for oh, Tommy, Tommy, 'tis the common lot of man.

His hand sought his pocket for the penny that had brought him comfort in dark hours before now; but, alack, she had deprived him even of it. Never again should his pinkie finger go through that warm hole, and at the thought a sense of his forlornness choked him and he cried. You may pity him a little now.

Darkness came and hid him even from himself. He is not found again until a time of the night that is not marked on ornamental clocks, but has an hour to itself on the watch which a hundred thousand or so of London women carry in their breasts; the hour when men steal homewards trickling at the mouth and drawing back from their own shadows to the wives they once went a-maying with, or

the mothers who had such travail at the bearing of them, as if for great ends. Out of this, the drunkard's hour, rose the wan face of Tommy, who had waked up somewhere clammy cold and quaking, and he was a very little boy, so he ran to his mother.

Such a shabby dark room it was, but it was home, such a weary worn woman in the bed, but he was her son, and she had been wringing her hands because he was so long in coming, and do you think he hurt her when he pressed his head on her poor breast, and do you think she grudged the heat his cold hands drew from her warm face? He squeezed her with a violence that put more heat into her blood than he took out of it.

And he was very considerate, too: not a word of reproach in him, though he knew very well what that bundle in the back of the bed was.

She guessed that he had heard the news and stayed away through jealousy of his sister, and by and by she said, with a faint smile, "I have a present for you, laddie." In the great world without, she used few Thrums words now; you would have known she was Scotch by her accent only, but when she and Tommy were together in that room, with the door shut, she always spoke as if her window still looked out on the bonny Marywellbrae. It is not really bonny, it is gey an' mean an' bleak, and you must not come to see it. It is just a steep wind-swept street, old and wrinkled, like your mother's face.

She had a present for him, she said, and Tommy replied, "I knows," with averted face.

"Such a bonny thing."

"Bonny enough," he said bitterly.

"Look at her, laddie."

But he shrank from the ordeal, crying, "No, no, keep her covered up!"

The little traitor seemed to be asleep, and so he ventured to say, eagerly, "It wouldn't not take long to carry all our things to another house, would it? Me and Shovel could near do it ourselves."

"And that's God's truth," the woman said, with a look round the room.
"But what for should we do that?"

"Do you no see, mother?" he whispered excitedly. "Then you and me could slip away, and—and leave her—in the press."

The feeble smile with which his mother received this he interpreted thus, "Wherever we go'd to she would be there before us."

"The little besom!" he cried helplessly.

His mother saw that mischievous boys had been mounting him on his horse, which needed only one slap to make it go a mile; but she was a spiritless woman, and replied indifferently, "You're a funny litlin."

Presently a dry sob broke from her, and thinking the child was the cause, soft-hearted Tommy said, "It can't not be helped, mother; don't cry, mother, I'm fond on yer yet, mother; I—I took her away. I found another woman—but she would come."

"She's God's gift, man," his mother said, but she added, in a different tone, "Ay, but he hasna sent her keep."

"God's gift!" Tommy shuddered, but he said sourly, "I wish he would take her back. Do you wish that, too, mother?"

The weary woman almost said she did, but her arms—they gripped the baby as if frightened that he had sent for it. Jealous Tommy, suddenly deprived of his mother's hand, cried, "It's true what Shovel says, you don't not love me never again; you jest loves that little limmer!"

"Na, na," the mother answered, passionate at last, "she can never be to me what you hae been, my laddie, for you came to me when my hame was in hell, and we tholed it thegither, you and me."'

This bewildered though it comforted him. He thought his mother might be speaking about the room in which they had lived until six months ago, when his father was put into the black box, but when he asked her if this were so, she told him to sleep, for she was dog-tired. She always evaded him in this way when he questioned her about his past, but at times his mind would wander backwards unbidden to those distant days, and then he saw flitting dimly through them the elusive form of a child. He knew it was himself, and for moments he could see it clearly, but when he moved a step nearer it was not there. So does the child we once were play hide and seek with us among the mists of infancy, until one day he trips and falls into the daylight. Then we seize him, and with that touch we two are one. It is the birth of self-consciousness.

Hitherto he had slept at the back of his mother's bed, but to-night she could not have him there, the place being occupied, and

rather sulkily he consented to lie crosswise at her feet, undressing by the feeble fire and taking care, as he got into bed, not to look at the usurper. His mother watched him furtively, and was relieved to read in his face that he had no recollection of ever having slept at the foot of a bed before. But soon after he fell asleep he awoke, and was afraid to move lest his father should kick him. He opened his eyes stealthily, and this was neither the room nor the bed he had expected to see.

The floor was bare save for a sheepskin beside the bed. Tommy always stood on the sheepskin while he was dressing because it was warm to the feet, though risky, as your toes sometimes caught in knots in it. There was a deal table in the middle of the floor with some dirty crockery on it and a kettle that would leave a mark, but they had been left there by Shovel's old girl, for Mrs. Sandys usually kept her house clean. The chairs were of the commonest, and the press door would not remain shut unless you stuck a knife between its halves; but there, was a gay blue wardrobe, spotted white where Tommy's mother had scraped off the mud that had once bespattered it during a lengthy sojourn at the door of a shop; and on the mantelpiece was a clock in a little brown and yellow house, and on the clock a Bible that had been in Thrums. But what Tommy was proudest of was his mother's kist, to which the chests of Londoners are not to be compared, though like it in appearance. On the inside of the lid of this kist was pasted, after a Thrums custom, something that his mother called her marriage lines, which she forced Shovel's mother to come up and look at one day, when that lady had made an innuendo Tommy did not understand, and Shovel's mother had looked, and though she could not read, was convinced, knowing them by the shape.

Tommy lay at the foot of the bed looking at this room, which was his home now, and trying to think of the other one, and by and by the fire helped him by falling to ashes, when darkness came in, and packing the furniture in grotesque cloths, removed it piece by piece, all but the clock. Then the room took a new shape. The fireplace was over there instead of here, the torn yellow blind gave way to one made of spars of green wood, that were bunched up at one side, like a lady out for a walk. On a round table there was a beautiful blue cloth, with very few gravy marks, and here a man ate beef when a woman and a boy ate bread, and near the fire was the man's big soft chair, out of which you could pull hairs, just as if it were Shovel's sister.

Of this man who was his father he could get no hold. He could feel his presence, but never see him. Yet he had a face. It sometimes pressed Tommy's face against it in order to hurt him, which it could do, being all short needles at the chin.

Once in those days Tommy and his mother ran away and hid from some one. He did not know from whom nor for how long, though it was but for a week, and it left only two impressions on his mind, the one that he often asked, "Is this starving now, mother?" the other that before turning a corner she always peered round it fearfully. Then they went back again to the man and he laughed when he saw them, but did not take his feet off the mantelpiece. There came a time when the man was always in bed, but still Tommy could not see his face. What he did see was the man's clothes lying on the large chair just as he had placed them there when he undressed for the last time. The black coat and worsted waistcoat which he could take off together were on the seat, and the light trousers hung over the side, the legs on the hearthrug, with the red socks still sticking in them: a man without a body.

But the boy had one vivid recollection of how his mother received the news of his father's death. An old man with a white beard and gentle ways, who often came to give the invalid physic, was standing at the bedside, and Tommy and his mother were sitting on the fender. The old man came to her and said, "It is all over," and put her softly into the big chair. She covered her face with her hands, and he must have thought she was crying, for he tried to comfort her. But as soon as he was gone she rose, with such a queer face, and went on tiptoe to the bed, and looked intently at her husband, and then she clapped her hands joyously three times.

At last Tommy fell asleep with his mouth open, which is the most important thing that has been told of him as yet, and while he slept day came and restored the furniture that night had stolen. But when the boy woke he did not even notice the change; his brain traversed the hours it had lost since he lay down as quickly as you may put on a stopped clock, and with his first tick he was thinking of nothing but the deceiver in the back of the bed. He raised his head, but could only see that she had crawled under the coverlet to escape his wrath. His mother was asleep. Tommy sat up and peeped over the edge of the bed, then he let his eyes wander round the room; he was looking for the girl's clothes, but they were nowhere to be seen. It is distressing to have to tell that what was in his mind was merely the recovery of his penny. Perhaps as they were Sunday clothes she had hung them up in the wardrobe? He slipped on to the floor and crossed to the wardrobe, but not even the muff could he find. Had she been tired, and gone to bed in them? Very softly he crawled over his mother, and pulling the coverlet off the child's face, got the great shock of his childhood.

It was another one!

CHAPTER III
SHOWING HOW TOMMY WAS SUDDENLY TRANSFORMED INTO A YOUNG GENTLEMAN

It would have fared ill with Mrs. Sandys now, had her standoffishness to her neighbors been repaid in the same coin, but they were full of sympathy, especially Shovel's old girl, from whom she had often drawn back offensively on the stair, but who nevertheless waddled up several times a day with savory messes, explaining, when Mrs. Sandys sniffed, that it was not the tapiocar but merely the cup that smelt of gin. When Tommy returned the cups she noticed not only that they were suspiciously clean, but that minute particles of the mess were adhering to his nose and chin (perched there like shipwrecked mariners on a rock, just out of reach of the devouring element), and after this discovery she brought two cupfuls at a time. She was an Irish, woman who could have led the House of Commons, and in walking she seldom raised her carpet shoes from the ground, perhaps because of her weight, for she had an expansive figure that bulged in all directions, and there were always bits of her here and there that she had forgotten to lace. Round the corner was a delightful eating-house, through whose window you were allowed to gaze at the great sweating dumplings, and Tommy thought Shovel's mother was rather like a dumpling that had not been a complete success. If he ever knew her name he forgot

it. Shovel, who probably had another name also, called her his old girl or his old woman or his old lady, and it was a sight to see her chasing him across the street when she was in liquor, and boastful was Shovel of the way she could lay on, and he was partial to her too, and once when she was giving it to him pretty strong with the tongs, his father (who followed many professions, among them that of finding lost dogs), had struck her and told her to drop it, and then Shovel sauced his father for interfering, saying she should lick him as long as she blooming well liked, which made his father go for him with a dog-collar; and that was how Shovel lost his eye.

For reasons less unselfish than his old girl's Shovel also was willing to make up to Tommy at this humiliating time. It might be said of these two boys that Shovel knew everything but Tommy knew other things, and as the other things are best worth hearing of Shovel liked to listen to them, even when they were about Thrums, as they usually were. The very first time Tommy told him of the wondrous spot, Shovel had drawn a great breath, and said, thoughtfully:

"I allers knowed as there were sich a beauty place, but I didn't jest know its name."

"How could yer know?" Tommy asked jealously.

"I ain't sure," said Shovel, "p'raps I dreamed on it."

"That's it," Tommy cried. "I tell yer, everybody dreams on it!" and
Tommy was right; everybody dreams of it, though not all call it Thrums.

On the whole, then, the coming of the kid, who turned out to be called Elspeth, did not ostracize Tommy, but he wished that he had let the other girl in, for he never doubted that her admittance would have kept this one out. He told neither his mother nor his friend of the other girl, fearing that his mother would be angry with him when she learned what she had missed, and that Shovel would crow over his blundering, but occasionally he took a side glance at the victorious infant, and a poorer affair, he thought, he had never set eyes on. Sometimes it was she who looked at him, and then her chuckle of triumph was hard to bear. As long as his mother was there, however, he endured in silence, but the first day she went out in a vain search for work (it is about as difficult to get washing as to get into the Cabinet), he gave the infant a piece of his mind, poking up her head with a stick so that she was bound to listen.

"You thinks as it was clever on you, does yer? Oh, if I had been on the stair!

"You needn't not try to get round me. I likes the other one five times better; yes, three times better.

"Thievey, thievey, thief, that's her place you is lying in. What?

"If you puts out your tongue at me again—! What do yer say?

"She was twice bigger than you. You ain't got no hair, nor yet no teeth.
You're the littlest I ever seed. Eh? Don't not speak then, sulks!"

Prudence had kept him away from the other girl, but he was feeling a great want: someone to applaud him. When we grow older we call it sympathy. How Reddy (as he called her because she had beautiful red-brown hair) had appreciated him! She had a way he liked of opening her eyes very wide when she looked at him. Oh, what a difference from that thing in the back of the bed!

Not the mere selfish desire to see her again, however, would take him in quest of Reddy. He was one of those superior characters, was Tommy, who got his pleasure in giving it, and therefore gave it. Now, Reddy was a worthy girl. In suspecting her of overreaching him he had maligned her: she had taken what he offered, and been thankful. It was fitting that he should give her a treat: let her see him again.

His mother was at last re-engaged by her old employers, her supplanter having proved unsatisfactory, and as the work lay in a distant street, she usually took the kid with her, thus leaving no one to spy on Tammy's movements. Reddy's reward for not playing him false, however, did not reach her as soon as doubtless she would have liked, because the first two or three times he saw her she was walking with the lady of his choice, and of course he was not such a fool as to show himself. But he walked behind them and noted with satisfaction that the lady seemed to be reconciled to her lot and inclined to let bygones be bygones; when at length Reddy and her patron met, Tommy thought this a good sign too, that Ma-ma (as she would call the lady) had told her not to go farther away than the lamp-post, lest she should get lost again. So evidently she had got lost once already, and the lady had been sorry. He asked Reddy many shrewd questions about how Ma-ma treated her, and if she got the top of the Sunday egg and had the licking of the pan and wore flannel underneath and slept at the back; and the more he inquired, the more clearly he saw that he had got her one of the right kind.

Tommy arranged with her that she should always be on the outlook for him at the window, and he would come sometimes, and after that they met frequently, and she proved a credit to him, gurgling with mirth at his tales of Thrums, and pinching him when he had finished, to make sure that he was really made just like common human beings. He was a thin, pale boy, while she looked like a baby rose full blown in a night because her time was short; and his movements were sluggish, but if she was not walking she must be dancing, and sometimes when there were few people in the street, the little armful of delight that she was jumped up and down like a ball, while Tommy kept the time, singing "Thrummy, Thrummy, Thrum Thrum Thrummy." They must have seemed a quaint pair to the

lady as she sat at her window watching them and beckoning to Tommy to come in.

One day he went in, but only because she had come up behind and taken his hand before he could run. Then did Tommy quake, for he knew from Reddy how the day after the mother-making episode, Ma-ma and she had sought in vain for his door, and he saw that the object had been to call down curses on his head. So that head was hanging limply now.

You think that Tommy is to be worsted at last, but don't be too sure; you just wait and see. Ma-ma and Reddy (who was clucking rather heartlessly) first took him into a room prettier even than the one he had lived in long ago (but there was no bed in it), and then, because someone they were in search of was not there, into another room without a bed (where on earth did they sleep?) whose walls were lined with books. Never having seen rows of books before except on sale in the streets, Tommy at once looked about him for the barrow. The table was strewn with sheets of paper of the size that they roll a quarter of butter in, and it was an amazing thick table, a solid square of wood, save for a narrow lane down the centre for the man to put his legs in—if he had legs, which unfortunately there was reason to doubt. He was a formidable man, whose beard licked the table while he wrote, and he wore something like a brown blanket, with a rope tied round it at the middle. Even more uncanny than himself were three busts on a shelf, which Tommy took to be deaders, and he feared the blanket might blow open and show that the man also ended at the waist. But he did not, for presently he turned round to see who had come in (the seat of his chair turning with him in the most startling way) and then Tommy was relieved to notice two big feet far away at the end of him.

"This is the boy, dear," the lady said. "I had to bring him in by force."

Tommy raised his arm instinctively to protect his face, this being the kind of man who could hit hard. But presently he was confused, and also, alas, leering a little. You may remember that Reddy had told him she must not go beyond the lamp-post, lest she should be lost again. She had given him no details of the adventure, but he learned now from Ma-ma and Papa (the man's name was Papa) that she had strayed when Ma-ma was in a shop and that some good kind boy had found her and brought her home; and what do you say to this, they thought Tommy was that boy! In his amazement he very nearly blurted out that he was the other boy, but just then the lady asked Papa if he had a shilling, and this abruptly closed Tommy's mouth. Ever afterwards he remembered Papa as the man that was not sure whether he had a shilling until he felt his pockets—a new kind of mortal to Tommy, who grabbed the shilling when it was offered to him, and then looked at Reddy imploringly, he was so afraid she would tell. But she behaved splendidly, and never even shook her head at him. After this, as hardly need be told, his one desire was to get out of the house with his shilling before they discovered their mistake, and it was well that they were unsuspicious people, for he was making strange hissing sounds in his throat, the result of trying hard to keep his sniggers under control.

There were many ways in which Tommy could have disposed of his shilling. He might have been a good boy and returned it next day to Papa. He might have given Reddy half of it for not telling. It could have carried him over the winter. He might have stalked with it into the shop where the greasy puddings were and come rolling out hours afterwards. Some of these schemes did cross his little mind, but he decided to spend the whole shilling on a present to his mother, and it was to be something useful. He devoted much thought to what she was most in need of, and at last he bought her a colored picture of Lord Byron swimming the Hellespont.

He told her that he got his shilling from two toffs for playing with a little girl, and the explanation satisfied her; but she could have cried at the waste of the money, which would have been such a God-send to her. He cried altogether, however, at sight of her face, having expected it to look so pleased, and then she told him, with caresses, that the picture was the one thing she had been longing for ever since she came to London. How had he known this, she asked, and he clapped his hands gleefully, and said he just knowed when he saw it in the shop window.

"It was noble of you," she said, "to spend all your siller on me."

"Wasn't it, mother?" he crowed "I'm thinking there ain't many as noble as I is!"

He did not say why he had been so good to her, but it was because she had written no letters to Thrums since the intrusion of Elspeth; a strange reason for a boy whose greatest glory at one time had been to sit on the fender and exultingly watch his mother write down words that would be read aloud in the wonderful place. She was a long time in writing a letter, but that only made the whole evening romantic, and he found an arduous employment in keeping his tongue wet in preparation for the licking of the stamp.

But she could not write to the Thrums folk now without telling them of Elspeth, who was at present sleeping the sleep of the shameless in the hollow of the bed, and so for his sake, Tommy thought, she meant to write no more. For his sake, mark you, not for her own. She had often told him that some day he should go to Thrums, but not with her; she would be far away from him then in a dark place she was awid to be lying in. Thus it seemed, to Tommy that she denied herself the pleasure of writing to Thrums lest the sorry news of Elspeth's advent should spoil his reception when he went north.

So grateful Tommy gave her the picture, hoping that it would fill the void. But it did not. She put it on the mantelpiece so that she might just sit and look at it, she said, and he grinned at it from every part of the room, but when he returned to her, he saw that she was neither looking at it nor thinking of it. She was looking straight before her, and sometimes her lips twitched, and then she drew them into her mouth to keep them still. It is a kind of dry weeping that sometimes comes to miserable ones when their minds stray into the happy past, and Tommy sat and watched her silently for a long time, never doubting that the cause of all her woe was that she could not write to Thrums.

He had seldom seen tears on his mother's face, but he saw one now. They had been reluctant to come for many a day, and this one formed itself beneath her eye and sat there like a blob of blood.

His own began to come more freely. But she needn't not expect him to tell her to write nor to say that he didn't care what Thrums thought of him so long as she was happy.

The tear rolled down his mother's thin cheek and fell on the grey shawl that had come from Thrums.

She did not hear her boy as he dragged a chair to the press and standing on it got something down from the top shelf. She had forgotten him, and she started when presently the pen was slipped into her hand and Tommy said, "You can do it, mother, I wants yer to do it, mother, I won't not greet, mother!"

When she saw what he wanted her to do she patted his face approvingly, but without realizing the extent of his sacrifice. She knew that he had some maggot in his head that made him regard Elspeth as a sore on the family honor, but ascribing his views to jealousy she had never tried seriously to change them. Her main reason for sending no news to Thrums of late had been but the cost of the stamp, though she was also a little conscience-stricken at the kind of letters she wrote, and the sight of the materials lying ready for her proved sufficient to draw her to the table.

"Is it to your grandmother you is writing the letter?" Tommy asked, for her grandmother had brought Mrs. Sandys up and was her only surviving relative. This was all Tommy knew of his mother's life in Thrums, though she had told him much about other Thrums folk, and not till long afterwards did he see that there must be something queer about herself, which she was hiding from him.

This letter was not for her granny, however, and Tommy asked next, "Is it to Aaron Latta?" which so startled her that she dropped the pen.

"Whaur heard you that name?" she said sharply. "I never spoke it to you."

"I've heard you saying it when you was sleeping, mother."

"Did I say onything but the name? Quick, tell me."

"You said, 'Oh, Aaron Latta, oh, Aaron, little did we think, Aaron,' and things like that. Are you angry with me, mother?"

"No," she said, relieved, but it was some time before the desire to write came back to her. Then she told him "The letter is to a woman that was gey cruel to me," adding, with a complacent pursing of her lips, the curious remark, "That's the kind I like to write to best."

The pen went scrape, scrape, but Tommy did not weary, though he often sighed, because his mother would never read aloud to him what she wrote. The Thrums people never answered her letters, for the reason, she said, that those she wrote to could not write, which seemed to simple Tommy to be a sufficient explanation. So he had never heard the inside of a letter talking, though a postman lived in the house, and even Shovel's old girl got letters; once when her uncle died she got a telegram, which Shovel proudly wheeled up and down the street in a barrow, other blokes keeping guard at the side. To give a letter to a woman who had been cruel to you struck Tommy as the height of nobility.

"She'll be uplifted when she gets it!" he cried.

"She'll be mad when she gets it," answered his mother, without looking up.

This was the letter:—

"MY DEAR ESTHER,—I send you these few scrapes to let you see I have not forgot you, though my way is now grand by yours. A spleet new black silk, Esther, being the second in a twelvemonth, as I'm a living woman. The other is no none tashed yet, but my gudeman fair insisted on buying a new one, for says he 'Rich folk like as can afford to be mislaird, and nothing's ower braw for my bonny Jean.' Tell Aaron Latta that. When I'm sailing in my silks, Esther, I sometimes picture you turning your wincey again, for I'se uphaud that's all the new frock you've ha'en the year. I dinna want to give you a scunner of your man, Esther, more by token they said if your mither had not took him in hand you would never have kent the color of his nightcap, but when you are wraxing ower your kail-pot in a plot of heat, just picture me ringing the bell for my servant, and saying, with a wave of my hand, 'Servant, lay the dinner.' And ony bonny afternoon when your man is cleaning out stables and you're at the tub in a short gown, picture my man taking me and the children out a ride in a carriage, and I sair doubt your bairns was never in nothing more genteel than a coal cart. For bairns is yours, Esther, and children is mine, and that's a burn without a brig till't.

"Deary me, Esther, what with one thing and another, namely buying a sofa, thirty shillings as I'm a sinner, I have forgot to tell you about my second, and it's a girl this time, my man saying he would like a change. We have christened her Elspeth after my grandmamma, and if my auld granny's aye living, you can tell her that's her. My man is terrible windy of his two beautiful children, but he says he would have been the happiest gentleman in London though he had just had me, and really his fondness for me, it cows, Esther, sitting aside me on the bed, two pounds without the blankets, about the time Elspeth was born, and feeding me with the fat of

the land, namely, tapiocas and sherry wine. Tell Aaron Latta that.

"I pity you from the bottom of my heart, Esther, for having to bide in Thrums, but you have never seen no better, your man having neither the siller nor the desire to take yon jaunts, and I'm thinking that is just as well, for if you saw how the like of me lives it might disgust you with your own bit house. I often laugh, Esther, to think that I was once like you, and looked upon Thrums as a bonny place. How is the old hole? My son makes grand sport of the onfortunate bairns as has to bide in Thrums, and I see him doing it the now to his favorite companion, which is a young gentleman of ladylike manners, as bides in our terrace. So no more at present, for my man is sitting ganting for my society, and I daresay yours is crying to you to darn his old socks. Mind and tell Aaron Latta."

This letter was posted next day by Tommy, with the assistance of Shovel, who seems to have been the young gentleman of ladylike manners referred to in the text.

CHAPTER IV
THE END OF AN IDYLL

Tommy never saw Reddy again owing to a fright he got about this time, for which she was really to blame, though a woman who lived in his house was the instrument.

It is, perhaps, idle to attempt a summary of those who lived in that house, as one at least will be off, and another in his place, while we are giving them a line apiece. They were usually this kind who lived through the wall from Mrs. Sandys, but beneath her were the two rooms of Hankey, the postman, and his lodger, the dreariest of middle-aged clerks except when telling wistfully of his ambition, which was to get out of the tea department into the coffee department, where there is an easier way of counting up the figures. Shovel and family were also on this floor, and in the rooms under them was a newly married couple. When the husband was away at his work, his wife would make some change in the furniture, taking the picture from this wall, for instance, and hanging it on that wall, or wheeling the funny chair she had lain in before she could walk without a crutch, to the other side of the fireplace, or putting a skirt of yellow paper round the flower pot, and when he returned he always jumped back in wonder and exclaimed: "What an immense improvement!" These two were so fond of one another that Tommy asked them the reason, and they gave it by pointing to the chair with the wheels, which seemed to him to be no reason at all. What was this young husband's trade Tommy never knew, but he was the only prettily dressed man in the house, and he could be heard roaring in his sleep, "*And* the next article?" The meanest looking man lived next door to him. Every morning this man put on a clean white shirt, which sounds like a splendid beginning, but his other clothes were of the seediest, and he came and went shivering, raising his shoulders to his ears and spreading his hands over his chest as if anxious to hide his shirt rather than to display it. He and the happy husband were nicknamed Before and After, they were so like the pictorial advertisement of Man before and after he has tried Someone's lozenges. But it is rash to judge by outsides; Tommy and Shovel one day tracked Before to his place of business, and it proved to be a palatial eating-house, long, narrow, padded with red cushions; through the door they saw the once despised, now in beautiful black clothes, the waistcoat a mere nothing, as if to give his shirt a chance at last, a towel over his arm, and to and fro he darted, saying "Yessirquitesosir" to the toffs on the seats, shouting "Twovegonebeef—onebeeronetartinahurry" to someone invisible, and pocketing twopences all day long, just like a lord. On the same floor as Before and After lived the large family of little Pikes, who quarrelled at night for the middle place in the bed, and then chips of ceiling fell into the room below, tenant Jim Ricketts and parents, lodger the young woman we have been trying all these doors for. Her the police snapped up on a charge; that made Tommy want to hide himself—child-desertion.

Shovel was the person best worth listening to on the subject (observe him, the centre of half a dozen boys), and at first he was for the defence, being a great stickler for the rights of mothers. But when the case against the girl leaked out, she need not look to him for help. The police had found the child in a basket down an area, and being knowing ones they pinched it to make it cry, and then they pretended to go away. Soon the mother, who was watching hard by to see if it fell into kind hands, stole to her baby to comfort it, "and just as she were a kissing on it and blubbering, the perlice copped her."

"The slut!" said disgusted Shovel, "what did she hang about for?" and in answer to a trembling question from Tommy he replied, decisively, "Six months hard."

"Next case" was probably called immediately, but Tommy vanished, as if he had been sentenced and removed to the cells.

Never again, unless he wanted six months hard, must he go near Reddy's home, and so he now frequently accompanied his mother to the place where she worked. The little room had a funny fireplace called a stove, on which his mother made tea and the girls roasted chestnuts, and it had no other ordinary furniture except a long form. But the walls were mysterious. Three of them were covered with long white cloths, which went to the side when you tugged them, and then you could see on rails dozens of garments that looked like nightgowns. Beneath the form were scores of little shoes, most of them white or brown. In this house Tommy's mother spent eight hours daily, but not all of them in this room. When she arrived the first thing she did was to put Elspeth on the floor, because you cannot fall off a floor; then she went upstairs with a bucket and a broom to a large bare room, where she stayed so long that Tommy nearly forgot what she was like.

While his mother was upstairs Tommy would give Elspeth two or three shoes to eat to keep her quiet, and then he played with the others, pretending to be able to count them, arranging them in designs, shooting them, swimming among them, saying "bow-wow" at them and then turning sharply to see who had said it. Soon Elspeth dropped her shoes and gazed in admiration at him, but more often than not she laughed in the wrong place, and then he said ironically: "Oh, in course I can't do nothin'; jest let's see you doing of it, then, cocky!"

By the time the girls began to arrive, singly or in twos and threes, his mother was back in the little room, making tea for herself or sewing bits of them that had been torn as they stepped out of a cab, or helping them to put on the nightgowns, or pretending to listen pleasantly to their chatter and hating them all the time. There was every kind of them, gorgeous ones and shabby ones, old tired ones and dashing young ones, but whether they were the Honorable Mrs. Something or only Jane Anything, they all came to that room for the same purpose: to get a little gown and a pair of shoes. Then they went upstairs and danced to a stout little lady, called the Sylph, who bobbed about like a ball at the end of a piece of elastic. What Tommy never forgot was that while they danced the Sylph kept saying, "One, two, three, four; one, two, three, four," which they did not seem to mind, but when she said "One, two, three, four, *picture*!" they all stopped and stood motionless, though it might be with one foot as high as their head and their arms stretched out toward the floor, as if they had suddenly seen a halfpenny there.

In the waiting-room, how they joked and pirouetted and gossiped, and hugged and scorned each other, and what slang they spoke and how pretty they often looked next moment, and how they denounced the one that had just gone out as a cat with whom you could not get in a word edgeways, and oh, how prompt they were to give a slice of their earnings to any "cat" who was hard up! But still, they said, she had talent, but no genius. How they pitied people without genius.

Have you ever tasted an encore or a reception? Tommy never had his teeth in one, but he heard much about them in that room, and concluded that they were some sort of cake. It was not the girls who danced in groups, but those who danced alone, that spoke of their encores and receptions, and sometimes they had got them last night, sometimes years ago. Two girls met in the room, one of whom had stolen the other's reception, and—but it was too dreadful to write about. Most of them carried newspaper cuttings in their purses and read them aloud to the others, who would not listen. Tommy listened, however, and as it was all about how one house had risen at the girls and they had brought another down, he thought they led the most adventurous lives.

Occasionally they sent him out to buy newspapers or chestnuts, and then he had to keep a sharp eye on the police lest they knew about Reddy. It was a point of honor with all the boys he knew to pretend that the policeman was after them. To gull the policeman into thinking all was well they blackened their faces and wore their jackets inside out; their occupation was a constant state of readiness to fly from him, and when he tramped out of sight, unconscious of their existence, they emerged from dark places and spoke in exultant whispers. Tommy had been proud to join them, but he now resented their going on in this way; he felt that he alone had the right to fly from the law. And once at least while he was flying something happened to him that he was to remember better, far better, than his mother's face.

What set him running on this occasion (he had been sent out to get one of the girls' shoes soled) was the grandest sight to be seen in London—an endless row of policemen walking in single file, all with the right leg in the air at the same time, then the left leg. Seeing at once that they were after him, Tommy ran, ran, ran until in turning a corner he found himself wedged between two legs. He was of just sufficient size to fill the aperture, but after a momentary look he squeezed through, and they proved to be the gate into an enchanted land.