

Sandy the Tinker

By Mrs. Riddell

“Before commencing my story, I wish to state it is perfectly true in every particular.”

“We quite understand that,” said the sceptic of our party, who was wont, in the security of friendly intercourse, to characterise all such prefaces as mere introductions to some tremendously exaggerated tale.

On the occasion in question, however, we had donned our best behaviour, a garment which did not sit ungracefully on some of us; and our host, who was about to draw out from the stores of memory one narrative for our entertainment, was scarcely the person before whom even Jack Hill, the sceptic, would have cared to express his cynical and unbelieving views.

We were seated, an incongruous company of ten persons, in the best room of an old manse among the Scottish hills. Accident had thrown us together, and accident had driven us under the minister’s hospitable roof. Cold, wet and hungry, drenched with rain, sorely beaten by the wind, we had crowded through the door opened by a friendly hand, and now, wet no longer, the pangs of hunger assuaged with smoking rashers of ham, poached eggs, and steaming potatoes, we sat around a blazing fire, drinking toddy out of tumblers, whilst the two ladies who graced the assemblage partook of a modicum of the same beverage from wine glasses.

Everything was eminently comfortable, but conducted upon the most correct principles. Jack could no more have taken it upon himself to shock the minister’s ear with some of the opinions he aired in Fleet Street, than he could have asked for more whisky with his water.

“Yes, it is perfectly true,” continued the minister, looking thoughtfully at the fire. “I can’t explain it, I cannot even try to explain it. I will tell you the story exactly as it occurred, however, and leave you to draw your own deductions from it.”

None of us answered. We fell into listening attitudes instantly, and eighteen eyes fixed themselves by one accord upon our host.

He was an old man, but hale. The weight of eighty winters had whitened his head, but not bowed it. He seemed young as any of us—younger than Jack Hill, who was a reviewer and a newspaper hack, and whose way through life had not been altogether on easy lines.

“Thirty years ago, upon a certain Friday morning in August,” began the minister, “I was sitting at breakfast in the room on the other side of the passage, where you ate your supper, when the servant girl came in with a letter. She said a laddie, all out of breath, had brought it over from Dendeldy Manse. “He was bidden to rin a’ the way,” she went on, “and he’s fairly beaten.”

‘I told her to make the messenger sit down, and put food before him; and then, when she went to do my bidding, proceeded, I must confess with some curiosity, to break the seal of a missive forwarded in such hot haste.

“It was from the minister at Dendeldy, who had been newly chosen to occupy the pulpit his deceased father occupied for a quarter of a century and more.

“The call from the congregation originated rather out of respect to the father’s memory than any extraordinary liking for the son. He had been reared for the most part in England, and was somewhat distant and formal in his manners; and, though full of Greek and Latin and Hebrew, wanted the true Scotch accent, that goes straight to the heart of those accustomed to the broad, honest, tender Scottish tongue.

“His people were proud of him, but they did not like some of his ways. They could remember him a lad running about the whole country-side, and they could not understand, and did not approve of his holding them at arm’s length, and shutting himself up among his books and refusing their hospitality, and sending out word he was busy when maybe some very decent man wanted speech with him. I had taken it upon myself to point out that I thought he was wrong, and that he would alienate his flock from him. Perhaps it was for this very reason, because I was blunt and plain, he took to me kindly, and never got on his high horse, no matter what I said to him.

“Well, to return to the letter. It was written in the wildest haste, and entreated me not to lose a moment in coming to him, as he was in the very *greatest distress* and *anxiety*. ‘Let *nothing* delay you,’ he proceeded. ‘If I cannot speak to you soon I believe I shall go out of my senses.’

“What could be the matter? I thought. What in all the wide earth could have happened?

“I had seen him but a few days before and he was in good health and spirits, getting on better with his people, feeling hopeful of so altering his style of preaching as to touch their hearts more sensibly.

“What could have happened, however, puzzled me sorely. As I made my hurried preparations for setting out I fairly perplexed myself with speculation. I went into the kitchen, where his messenger was eating some breakfast, and asked if Mr. Crawley was ill.

“‘I dinna ken,’ he answered. ‘He mad’ no complaint, but he luiked awful bad, just awful.’

“‘In what way?’ I inquired.

“‘As if he had seen a ghaist,’ was the reply.

“This made me very uneasy, and I jumped to the conclusion the trouble was connected with money matters. Young men will be young men.” Here the minister looked significantly at the callow bird of our company, a youth who had never owed a sixpence in his life or given away a cent; while Jack Hill—no chicken, by the way—was over head and ears in debt, and could not keep a sovereign in his pocket, though spending or bestowing it involved going dinner-less the next day.

“Young men will be young men,” repeated the minister, in his best pulpit manner (“Just as though any one expected them to be young women!” grumbled Jack to me afterwards), “and I feared that now he was settled and comfortably off some old creditor he had been paying as best he could, might have become pressing. I knew nothing of his liabilities, or, beyond the amount of the stipend paid him, the state of his pecuniary affairs; but, having once in my own life made myself responsible for a debt, I was aware of all the trouble putting your arm out further than you can draw it back involves. And I considered that most probably money, which is the root of all evil” (“and all good” Jack’s eyes suggested to me), “was the cause of my young friend’s agony of mind. Blessed with a large family—every one of whom is now alive and doing well, I thank God, out in the world—you may imagine I had not much opportunity for laying by. Still, I had put aside a little for a rainy day, and that little I placed in my pocket-book, hoping even a small sum might prove of use in case of emergency.’

“By the road,” proceeded our host, “Dendeldy is distant from here ten long miles, but by a short cut across the hills it can be reached in something under six. For me it was nothing of a walk, and accordingly I arrived at the manse ere noon.”

He paused, and, though thirty years had elapsed, drew a handkerchief across his forehead before he continued his narrative.

“I had to climb a steep brae to reach the front door, but before I could breast it my friend met me.

“‘Thank God you are come,’ he said, pressing my hand in his. ‘Oh, I am grateful.’

“‘He was trembling with excitement. His face was a ghastly pallor.

His voice was that of a person suffering from some terrible shock, labouring under some awful fear.

“‘What *has* happened, Edward?’ I asked. I had known him since he was a little boy. ‘I am distressed to see you in such a state. Rouse yourself; be a man; whatever may have gone wrong can possibly be righted. I have come over to do all that lies in my power for you. If it is a matter of money—’

“‘No, no; it is not money,’ he interrupted; ‘would that it were!’ and he began to tremble again so violently that really he communicated some part of his nervousness to me, and put me into a state of perfect terror.

“‘Whatever it is, Crawley, out with it,’ I said; ‘have you murdered anybody?’

“‘No, it is worse than that,’ he answered.

“‘But that’s just nonsense,’ I declared. ‘Are you in your right mind, do you think?’

“‘I wish I were not,’ he returned. ‘I’d like to know I was stark staring mad; it would be happier for me—far, far happier.’

“‘If you don’t tell me this minute what is the matter, I shall turn on my heel and tramp my way home again,’ I said, half in anger at what I thought was his folly.

“‘Come into the house,’ he entreated, ‘and try to have patience with me; for indeed, Mr. Morison, I am sorely troubled. I have been through my deep waters, and they have gone clean over my head.’

“‘We went into his little study and sat down. For a while he remained silent, his head resting upon his hand, struggling with some strong emotion; but after about five minutes he asked in a low subdued voice:

“‘Do you believe in dreams?’

“‘What has my belief to do with the matter in hand?’ I inquired.

“‘It is a dream, an awful dream, that is troubling me.’

“‘I rose from my chair.

“‘Do you mean to say,’ I asked, ‘you have brought me from my business and my parish to tell me you have had a bad dream?’

“‘That is just what I do mean to say,’ he answered. ‘At least it was not a dream—it was a vision; no, I don’t mean a vision—I can’t tell you what it was; but nothing I ever went through in actual life was half so real, and I have bound myself to go through it all again. There is no hope for me, Mr. Morison. I sit before you a lost creature, the most miserable man on the face of the whole earth.’

“‘What did you dream?’ I inquired.

“‘A dreadful fit of trembling again seized him; but at last he managed to say: ‘I have been like this ever since, and I shall be like this for evermore, till—till—the end comes.’

“‘When did you have your bad dream?’ I asked.

“‘Last night, or rather this morning,’ he answered. ‘I’ll tell you all about it. I was as well when I went to bed about eleven o’clock as ever I was in my life. I had been considering my sermon and felt satisfied I should be able to deliver a good one next Sunday morning. I had taken nothing after my tea and I lay down in my bed feeling at peace with all mankind, and satisfied with my lot. How long I slept, or what I dreamt about at first, if I dreamt at all, I don’t know; but after a time the mists seemed to clear from before my eyes, to roll away like clouds from a

mountain summit, and I found myself walking on a beautiful summer's evening beside the River Deldy.'

"He paused for a moment, and an irrepressible shudder shook his frame.

" 'Go on,' I said, for I felt afraid of his breaking down again.

"He looked at me pitifully, with a hungry entreaty in his weary eyes, and continued.

" 'It was a lovely evening and I never thought the earth had looked so beautiful before. I walked on and on, till I came to that point where, as you may perhaps remember, the path, growing very narrow, winds round the base of a great crag, and leads the wayfarer suddenly into a little green amphitheatre, bounded on one side by the river, and on the other by rocks, that rise in places sheer to a height of a hundred feet or more.'

" 'I remember it,' I said; 'a little farther on three streams meet and fall with a tremendous roar into the Witches' Cauldron. A fine sight in the winter time, only there is scarce any reaching it from below, as the path you mention and the little green oasis are mostly covered with water.'

" 'I had not been there before since I was a child,' he went on mournfully, 'but I recollected it as one of the most solitary spots possible; and my astonishment was great, to see a man standing in the pathway, with a drawn sword in his hand. He did not stir as I drew near, so I stepped aside on the grass. Instantly he barred my way.

" ' "You can't pass here," he said.

" ' "Why not?" I asked.

" ' "Because I say so," he answered.

" ' "And who are you that say so?" I inquired, looking full at him.

" 'He was like a god. Majesty and power were written on every feature, were expressed in every gesture. But, oh, the awful scorn of his smile, the contempt with which he regarded me! The beams of the setting sun fell full upon him, and seemed to bring out, as in letters of fire, the wickedness and terrible beauty of his face.

" 'I felt afraid; but I managed to say:

" ' "Stand out of my way, the river bank is as free to me as to you."

" ' "Not this part of it," he answered; "this place belongs to me.

" ' "Very well," I agreed, for I did not want to stand there bandying words with him, and a sudden darkness seemed to be falling around. "It is getting late, and so I'll turn round."

" 'He gave a laugh, the like of which never fell on human ear before, and made reply: "You can't turn back—of your own free will you have come on my ground and from it there is no return."

" 'I did not speak; I only just turned round and made as fast as I could for the path at the foot of the crag. He did not pass me, yet before I could reach the point I desired he stood barring my progress, with the scornful smile still on his lips, and his gigantic form assuming tremendous proportions in the narrow way.

" ' "Let me pass," I entreated, "and I will never come here again, never trespass more on your ground."

" 'No, you shall not pass."

" ' "Who are you that takes such power on yourself?" I asked.

" ' "Come closer, and I will tell you," he said.

" 'I drew a step nearer, and he spoke one word. I never heard it before, but, by some extraordinary intuition, I knew what it meant. He was the Evil One. The name seemed to be taken up by the echoes, and repeated from rock to rock and crag to crag. The whole air seemed full of that one word—and then a great horror of darkness came about us, only the place where

we stood remained light. We occupied a small circle walled round with the thick blackness of night.

“ “You must come with me,” he said.

“ I refused and then he threatened me. I implored and entreated and wept, but at last I agreed to do what he wanted if he would promise to let me return. Again he laughed, and said, Yes, I should return—and the rocks and trees and mountains, ay, and the very rivers, seemed to take up the answer and bear it in sobbing whispers away into the darkness.’

“He stopped, and lay back in his chair, shivering like one in an ague fit.

“ ‘Go on,’ I repeated again, ‘it was only a dream, you know.’

“ ‘Was it?’ he murmured, mournfully. ‘Ah, you have not heard the end of it yet.’

“ ‘Let me hear it then,’ I said. ‘What happened afterwards?’

“ ‘The darkness seemed in part to clear away and we walked side by side across the grass in the twilight, straight up to the bare, black wall of rock. With the hilt of his sword he struck a heavy blow, and the solid rock opened as though it were a door. We passed through and it closed behind us with a tremendous clang—yes, it closed behind us’; and at that point he fairly broke down, crying and sobbing as I had never seen a man even in the most frightful grief cry and sob before.”

The minister paused in his narrative. At that moment there came a tremendous blast of wind which shook the windows of the manse, and burst open the hall door, and caused the candles to flicker and the fire to go roaring up the chimney. It is not too much to say that, what with the uncanny story, and the howling storm, we all felt that creeping sort of uneasiness which so often seems like the touch of something from another world—a hand stretched across the boundary-line of time and eternity, the coldness and mystery of which make the stoutest heart tremble.

“I am telling you this tale,” said Mr. Morison, resuming his seat after a brief absence to see that the fastenings of the house were properly attended to, “exactly as I heard it. You must draw your own deductions from the facts I put before you. Part of that great and terrible region in which he found himself, my friend went on to tell me, he penetrated, compelled by a power he could not resist, to see the most awful sights and the most frightful sufferings. There was no form of vice that had not there its representative. As they moved along, his companion told him the special sin for which such horrible punishment was being inflicted. Shuddering, and in mortal agony, he was unable to withdraw his eyes from the dreadful spectacle. The atmosphere grew more unendurable, the sights more and more terrible, the cries, groans, blasphemies more awful and heartrending.

“ ‘I can bear no more,’ he gasped at last; ‘let me go!’

“With a mocking laugh, the Presence beside him answered the appeal; a laugh which was taken up, even by the lost and anguished spirits around.

‘There is no return’ said the pitiless voice.

“ ‘But you promised,’ he cried, ‘you promised me faithfully.’

“ ‘What are promises here?’ and the words were the sound of doom.

“Still he prayed and entreated; he fell on his knees and in his agony spoke words that seemed to cause the purpose of the Evil One to falter.

‘You shall go,’ he said, ‘on one condition: that you agree to return to me on Wednesday next—or send a substitute.’

“ ‘I could not do that,’ said my friend. ‘I could not send any fellow-creature here. Better stop myself than do that.’

“ ‘Then stop,’ said Satan, with the bitterest contempt; and he was turning away when the poor distracted soul asked for a minute more before he made his choice.

“He was in an awful strait: on the one hand, how could he remain himself? on the other, how could he doom another to such fearful torments? Who could he send? Who would come? And then suddenly there flashed into his mind the thought of an old man to whom it could not signify much whether he took up his place in this abode a few days sooner or a few days later. He was travelling to it as fast as he knew how. He was the reprobate of the parish; the sinner without hope that successive ministers had striven in vain to reclaim from the error of his ways; a man marked and doomed—Sandy the Tinker. Sandy, who was mostly drunk and always godless. Sandy, who, it was said, believed in nothing, and gloried in his infidelity. Sandy, whose soul really did not signify much. He would send him. Lifting his eyes, he saw those of his tormentor surveying him scornfully.

“ ‘Well, have you made your choice?’ he asked.

“ ‘Yes, I think I can send a substitute,’ was the hesitating answer. “ ‘See you do then,’ was the reply; ‘for if you do not, and fail to return yourself, *I shall come for you.* Wednesday, remember, before midnight.’ And with these words ringing in his ears he was flung violently through the rock, and found himself in the middle of his bedroom floor, as if he had just been kicked there.

“This is not the end of the story, is it?” asked one of our party, as the minister came to a full stop, and looked earnestly at the fire.

“No,” he answered, “it is not the end; but before proceeding I must ask you to bear carefully in mind the circumstances already recounted. Especially remember the date mentioned—*Wednesday next, before midnight.*”

“Whatever I thought, and you may think, about my friend’s dream, it made the most remarkable impression upon *his* mind. He could not shake off its influence; he passed from one state of nervousness to another. It was in vain I entreated him to exert his common sense, and call all his strength of mind to his assistance. I might as well have spoken to the wind. He implored me not to leave him, and I agreed to remain. Indeed, to leave him in his then frame of mind would have been an act of the greatest cruelty. He wanted me also to preach in his place on the Sunday following; but this I flatly refused.

“ ‘If you do not make an effort now,’ I said, ‘you will never make it. Rouse yourself; get on with your sermon, and if you buckle down to work you will soon forget all about that foolish dream.’

“Well, to cut a long story short, the sermon was somehow composed and Sunday came, and my friend, a little better and getting over his fret, walked up into the pulpit to preach. He looked dreadfully ill; but I thought the worst was over now and that he would go on mending.

“Vain hope! He gave out the text and then looked over the congregation—and the first person on whom his eyes lighted was Sandy the Tinker. Sandy, who had never before been known to enter a place of worship of any sort; Sandy, whom he had mentally chosen as his substitute, and who was *due on the following Wednesday*—sitting just below him, quite sober, and comparatively clean, waiting with a great show of attention for the opening words of the sermon.

“With a terrible cry my friend caught the front of the pulpit, then swayed back and fell down in a fainting fit. He was carried home and a doctor sent for. I said a few words, addressed apparently to the congregation, but really to Sandy, for my heart somehow came into my mouth at the sight of him. And then, after I had dismissed the people, I paced slowly back to the manse, almost afraid of what might meet me.

“Mr. Crawley was not dead; but he was in the most dreadful state of physical exhaustion and mental agitation. It was dreadful to hear him. How could he go himself? How could he send Sandy?— poor old Sandy whose soul, in the sight of God, was just as precious as his own.

“His whole cry was for us to deliver him from the Evil One; to save him from committing a sin which would render him a wretched man for life. He counted the hours and the minutes before he must return to that horrible place.

“ ‘I can’t send Sandy,’ he would moan. ‘I cannot. Oh, I cannot save myself at such a price!’

“And then he would cover his face with the bedclothes, only to start up and wildly entreat me not to leave him; to stand between the enemy and himself, to save him, or, if that were impossible, to give him the courage to do what was right.

“ ‘If this continues,’ said the doctor, ‘Wednesday will find him either dead or a raving lunatic.’

“We talked the matter over, the doctor and I, as we walked to and fro in the meadow behind the manse; and we decided, having to make our choice of two evils, to risk giving him such an opiate as should carry him over the dreaded interval. We knew it was a perilous thing to do even with one in his condition, but, as I said before, we could only take the lesser of two evils.

“What we dreaded most was his awaking before the time expired, so I kept watch beside him. He lay like one dead through the whole of Tuesday night and Wednesday and Wednesday evening. Eight, nine, ten, eleven o’clock came and passed—then twelve. ‘God be thanked!’ I said, as I stooped over him and heard he was breathing quietly.

“ ‘He will do now, I hope,’ said the doctor, who had come in just before midnight, ‘You will stay with him till he wakes?’

“I promised that I would and in the beautiful dawn of a summer’s morning he opened his eyes and smiled. He had no recollection then of what had occurred; he was as weak as an infant and when I bade him try to go to sleep again turned on his pillow and sank to rest once more.

“Worn out with watching, I stepped softly from the room and passed into the fresh, sweet air. I strolled down to the garden—gate, and stood looking at the great mountains and the fair country, and the Deldy wandering like a silver thread through the green fields below.

“All at once my attention was attracted by a group of people coming slowly along the road leading from the hills. I could not at first see that in their midst something was being borne on men’s shoulders; but when at last I made this out, I hurried to meet them and learn what was the matter.

“ ‘Has there been an accident?’ I asked, as I drew near.

“They stopped and one man came towards me.

“ ‘Ay,’ he said, ‘the warst accident that could befa’ him, puir fella. He’s deid.’

“ ‘Who is it?’ I asked, pressing forward; and lifting the cloth they had flung over his face, I saw *Sandy the Tinker!*

“ ‘He had been coming home, I tak’ it,’ remarked one who stood by, ‘puir Sandy, and gaed over the cliff afore he could save himself. We found him just on this side of the Witches’s Caldron, where there’s a bonny strip of green turf, and his cuddy was feeding on the hill—top with the bit cart behind her.’

There was silence for a minute—then one of the ladies said softly, “Poor Sandy.”

“And what became of Mr. Crawley?” asked the other.

“He gave up his parish and went abroad as a missionary. He is still living.”

“What a most extraordinary story!” I remarked.

“Yes, I think so,” said the minister. “If you like to go round by Deldy tomorrow, my son, who now occupies the manse, would show you the scene of the occurrence.”

The next day we all stood looking at the frowning cliff and at the Deldy, swollen by recent rains, rushing on its way.

The youngest of the party went up to the rock and knocked upon it loudly with his cane.

“Oh, don’t do that, pray!” cried both the ladies nervously—the spirit of the weird story still brooded over us.

“What do you think of the coincidence, Jack?” I inquired of my friend, as we talked apart from the others.

“Ask me when we get back to Fleet Street,” he answered.