

THE PIECES OF SILVER - 008

When, at five minutes to ten, the bell started to ring, a pall of silence settled over the noisy playfield.

Reluctantly games of cricket and pickups were abandoned; climbers came slithering down from the old tamarind tree on the school grounds or dropped quickly from its branches, making haste to clear their mouths of the green, acid fruit they had been enjoying.

The school of four hundred odd boys assembled in ranks across the pebbled playfield, waiting for inspection before they could file into the red-walled school. Some glanced apprehensively at their dusty, naked feet, while others tried feverishly to make their nails and hands presentable.

The teachers came from the school-room in a leisurely bunch, laughing and joking in quiet voices as they sauntered towards the boys.

The stout, pompous, acting Headmaster came to the window that opened off his platform on to the playfield, still making an unnecessary clangour with his bell, and looked sternly over the assembled rows of scholars. The smaller boys straightened and stiffened under his cold gaze.

As the teachers passed slowly along the ranks the boys turned their hands back and forth and grinned to show their teeth. A number of boys who failed to pass the teachers' inspection of health were hailed out of the ranks and ordered in to the acting Head. There were three strokes with his cane of plaited tamarind stalks for unclean hands; four for improperly brushed teeth and six for an uncombed head.

After the inspection the boys filed quietly into school and to their different classes. When you could have heard a pin drop the schoolmaster, rapped out the order: “Shun!” The entire school of boys flung their hands to their foreheads and chanted: “Good morning to our teachers.”

The schoolmaster announced a hymn, and emitting an untrue, faltering note, invited the scholars to take it. The boys rendered a rich improvement of the sound, and when the schoolmaster flung his hand up and stamped his foot they tore full-throately into the hymn.

At the conclusion of the hymn the boys sang Amen, bringing their hands up to their faces in an attitude of prayer. The schoolmaster submitted a long, impromptu supplication, rambling and ill-worded, at the end of which the boys said Amen once more. Again the schoolmaster ordered ““Shun!” The boys came to attention, and school was ready to begin.

But this morning the schoolmaster did not order the school to be seated as was the normal custom after prayers. Instead he fixed the school with his cold eyes and said:

“Those who have brought contributions to Mr. Megahey’s purse will give them to their teachers.”

Hands delved into pockets, while, in the lower classes, a number of small, moist fists closed still more tightly over the pieces of silver which had been wrapped in paper and pressed carefully into their palms.

The teachers drew chairs and stools to their respective desks and sat down. Each produced a foolscap sheet on which were recorded the

names of those of his class who had contributed to the purse for the retiring Head, Mr. Megahey.

No commendation seemed due to the donor of threepence. A sixpence was held up between the thumb and forefinger of the receiving teacher and displayed before the class, while the name of the boy who had presented it was repeated some half a dozen times. Still more ado was made of the bestower of a shilling. In addition to being patted on the shoulder and beamed on by his teacher, and basking in the envy of his class, he was sent up to be thanked by the acting Head who shook his hand heartily and showed the gleaming gold of his teeth, and who, with a grave gesture, bestowed upon him the fag-end of a stick of chalk with the injunction that it be not used about the school.

The receipt of the contributions was over, and the last boy had returned to his seat. On the platform the acting Head cleared his throat for attention and said:

“Those who have contributed to our retiring Head’s purse will now sit. Those who have not will remain standing.”

When the scuffling tumult of a school of boys taking their seats had subsided, here and there about the school-room a scattered few stood with downcast eyes.

The acting Head was a squat jug of a man, fierce-eyed and unsmiling. He now sauntered along the edge of his platform and fixed, one after the other, each of the standing boys with a look of complete scorn. Then, mopping his brow, he ordered those who had brought no gifts to come up and mount the platform where the dozen of them were lined up.

Taking a stick of chalk he scrawled an X upon the forehead of each boy, to the huge delight of the rest of the school. When he had imprinted this symbol of shame upon the brow of each unhappy child, he turned to the laughing school, and holding his hand up to check the gusts of merriment, said,

“Look! They bear the symbol of ingratitude!”

The cruel laughter went up to the rafters. The schoolmaster permitted it free swell for a few moments before raising his hand once more.

“Ingratitude,” he went on “ingratitude, more strong than human hand. . . Come, Clement. You’re in the fourth. Step forward and let’s hear Mark Anthony on ingratitude. Surely our old Head would expire if he knew that in his school he harboured so many thankless Brutuses. Come, Clement, let us hear you recite the piece, and well.”

Clement stepped forward, shabby and barefoot, and with eyes downcast, began to recite the passage in a choked, monotonous tone.

Now and again the schoolmaster threatened him with his rod, exhorting him to speak up. The boy would then raise his voice and quicken his words under the threat of the lash, but soon his voice sank back and the recitation resumed its muttered vein.

At last, however, the passage was finished. The acting Headmaster then spent some minutes more making the hapless boys the laughing-stock of their school friends. Only when he thought the school on the verge of becoming unmanageable did he dismiss the tormented boys with the words:

“Now go to your places. But bear in mind: Every morning, until you show some appreciation for your resigning Headmaster, you shall come up here and stand in shame before the whole school.”

It was dusk, and the Dovecots were taking their one substantial meal of the day.

No one could think, looking at their home, that three penny pieces, or even halfpennies, were to be had there for the asking.

The house was a poor, wretched coop of a room, through the black, water-stained shingles of which you could count a dozen blue glimpses of sky. The walls of the shack were papered with old newspapers and magazines, discoloured with age and stained and spotted from roof to floor, torn in a score of places to reveal the rotting, worm-eaten boards beneath. The small room was divided by a threadbare cotton screen depicting seagulls soaring up from a sea of faded blue. In the midst of

this drab poverty the free, scaring seagulls, and the once gay pictures of the magazine pages were an unkind comment.

The Dovecots were a family of four: Dave and his wife Maud, Clement and his older sister Evelina.

Clement sat on the sanded floor of the poor sitting room, his plate of rice between his legs; Evelina lolled over the one battered, depreciated mahogany table, picking at the coarse food with an adolescent discontent; Dave Dovecot, a grizzled, gangling labourer, held his plate in his left hand, while with his right he plied his mouth from a peeling metal spoon; at the propped- open window of the room sat Mrs. Dovecot a long thread of a woman whose bones want had picked like an eagle. Her plate was resting on her lap, and she scraped and pecked and foraged her food like a scratching hen, while she took stock of the passers-by.

When Clement had finished, he took up his empty plate and getting to his feet, went and stowed it away in the dark box of a kitchen. Returning, he slumped down beside his mother's chair and rested his head against her bony thigh.

After a time he said:

"Ma, I could have the threepence I's been asking for Mr. Megahey?"

"Hmn. Wa' threepence boy? Why In de name of de Lord must poor

starving people got to find threepences for Jim Megahey what's got his belly sitting so pretty wi' fat'" parried Mrs. Dovecot, though she knew well enough.

"I's told you and tol you and told you Ma. He's resigning and we've all got to take threepence to give him," explained Clement patiently once more.

"Hmn. Threepence is a lot o' money for us poor folk. Hmn. Go ax your Father. See what he says."-Clement got to his feet reluctantly and moved slowly, over to where his father was sitting, for he knew from experience that, in parting with money, his father was a far harder nut to crack than his mother.

Dave Dovecot utilized the approach of his son by extending his empty plate. Clement took the plate to the kitchen. Then he turned once more to tackle his father.

"Can I have a threepence Papa?" he shouted in his father's ear, for the old man was pretty nigh stone deaf.

"Eh-eh! What's that about a fence, Clement?"

This time Clement put his mouth completely into his father's ear and shouted until his dark face grew darker.

"Eh-eh Don't shout at me," was all he got for his pains.

"Don't you deafen me. What's thet the young varmint says, Maud?"

Mrs. Dovecot came over, and got him to understand after two or three attempts.

“Three pence, Maudie,” he cackled, “three pence! Did yo’ hear thet Maud? Did yo’ ever hear the like? I’ll bet you ain’t never did. Three pence! The lad’ll have money what I’s got to sweat blood for, just to gi to thet Megahey what’s got his bread so well buttered off ‘pon both sides not to mention the middle. Three pence! ha ha!... oh Maudie..... And he broke down once more in helpless laughter. Clement went out and sat under the breadfruit tree that grew before the door, resting his back against the trunk.

Evelina came to him there when the dusk was thick and sat beside him.

There was a close band of understanding and companionship between these two. Clement leaned against her so that he could feel the cheering warmth of her arms, warm as the still warm ground beneath him. Biting his nails he told her of his morning’s shame.

She listened as attentively as a mother, and as she listened, she put her hand around his neck and drew his head gently down upon her young bosom.

When he had finished talking she put her lips down to his harsh, curls, and thought for a long time. Then she said, with a little sigh:

“I know what we’ll do, Clemmie. ‘Member how ‘fore I was took from school we big girls used to go out singing at Christmas? Well we’ll play waits. Only tonight there’ll be only you and me.”

Clement raised his head and gazed into her face in the starlight.

“Oh Eve,” he said, “but it ain’t anyways near Christmas.”

“Never you mind,” she said; “There’s still some who’ll give us a penny or two. You wait. I’ll get our hats and then we’ll be off.”

She got to her feet and slipped quickly into the house. She returned in a few moments carrying his cap in her hand, her own hat of straw on her head. She settled his cap, then produced a comb.

‘When we come to the shop we’ll ask for a piece of bread paper,’ she said; “then you’ll play the sax while I sing.’

They roamed far that night. Evelina’s voice rose clear and true to the accompaniment of the paper and comb, long after the moon came up and laid white hands upon the countryside.

At last Evelina said, jingling the coins which they had earned in the pockets of her dress:

‘Let’s make this our last and call it a day.’

The house with which they proposed to round off their tour had a pretentious front of red brick. The greater part of the house was in darkness, but from the street the two children could see a couple sitting in the open veranda.

Bravely, Evelina unlatched the street gate and led the way up the steps to the veranda.

“Good night,” she greeted the pair in the shadows. “We would like to sing for you.”

The woman chuckled softly and Evelina could see the white gleam of the man’s teeth when he said: “Sure.”

The children rendered their song. When they had finished the man got to his feet and approached them, delving in his pocket.

“Thanks for your singing,” he said kindly. “It was very nice. May, give us some light for a moment.”

The woman got from her chair and, leaning through a window pressed a light switch.

And as the light flooded the veranda little Clement was turned to stone for the tall, greying man foraging the handful of coins was the retiring Headmaster Mr. Megahey.

Clement’s scrambled retreat after Evelina had made her little curtsey which was perhaps unnecessary, since Mr. Megahey had his glasses off and he didn’t seem to recognize him.

Out in the road, Evelina let out the laughter that had been welling inside her.

“Just think how we never thought of where your old Head might’ve moved to after he left the Schoolmaster house,” she laughed.

“But he’s gi’n us our biggest taking for the night, anyway. He’s gi’n us sixpence.”

They counted their takings in the middle of the white road in the moonlight. When they had finished, Evelina poured the coins back into her pocket and said:

“Now I going tell you how we’ll fix that brute Mr. Chase.”

On the following morning the acting Head, Mr. Chase kept his word. Immediately after prayers the boys who had brought no silver were lined up across the platform. They were but eight of them this morning. Two had somehow managed their three penny pieces, while two or three others had absented themselves. Clement counted the line of boys as he took his place among them.

As the Mr. Chase eyed their bowed heads in enjoyment Clement stepped forward, the eight pieces of silver upon his extended palm.

“There are eight,” he told the gaping schoolmaster. ‘One for each of us.”

His voice struck through the silent school, clear and thrilling as a star’s light.