

Steve's Friend

(Katherine Tynan, in 'Christian World.')

The tenement house which little Steve occupied in company with some half-hundred other human beings looked out over the railway line. It was the dirty and squalid line which encircles the greatest of cities. If it had been a line which ran away to the country it would have looked different, Steve thought; but it was like himself, destined to a treadmill round of the dreary town without a chance of escape.

The windows of the house were coated with such an accumulation of smuts that the light could hardly peep through. There was grass on the sides of the cutting, but it was a sadder thing than the dust which the March winds blew about so blindingly. Such poor, stunted, dirty grass! Steve often wondered how it had the heart to grow.

Steve had no one belonging to him. He existed on the common charity of the crowded house. His mother had been a flower-girl, who had died of pneumonia in a hard winter, and no one had ever thought when she died of sending Steve to the poor-house. Perhaps it was not so much deliberate charity as that it was nobody's business, and with so many children on the staircases and in the narrow street between the high, dreary houses, one child more or less hardly mattered.

If Steve belonged to one family more than to another it was to Brady's, the occupier of the south room on the fifth floor. Mrs. Brady was a widow and went out charring. There were five little Bradys, all, like Steve, under the school attendance age. Mrs. Brady's way with them was to lock them out of the room if it was dry, in if it was wet, after she had given them their breakfast of a morning, and then go about her business. Each young Brady was first, however, presented with a hunch of bread for his or her dinner, which was eaten, to save the trouble of keeping, as soon as the maternal back was turned, and then empty stomachs were the order of the day till the mother came home at night.

To this forlorn little family Steve attached himself, watching over it much as a careful nurse might do amid the perils of the streets. By this he earned the right to 'doss' in the Brady's room at night, which was much preferable to a bed on the landing. By-and-by his occupation would be gone, for these children of the streets learn early to take care of themselves; but Steve was not one to look before, and for the day he hugged greedily as much of home and home-ties as his connection with the Bradys afforded.

He had one taste shared by none other in the street. That was a great love of flowers or anything that brought him the the country. The feeling for the country which he had never seen was in his heart like the desire of the children of sailors for the sea. Sometimes he seemed to get a breath of it when the wind was in the west. At times during the long, long days he would adventure to the main thoroughfare, dragging the youngest Brady by the hand, and stand staring at a florist's window, till the shopman, suspecting larcenous designs, would order him away.

He was happy for the day if he was lucky enough to pick up a flower someone had dropped. This taste of his had not gone unnoticed even in Greek street; and the daughter of the greengrocer at the corner would sometimes give him a handful of wilted flowers for himself. Once, for an ecstatic week or so, he had possessed a small fern in a pot which Mrs. Brady had good-naturedly begged for him from the gardener of one of the houses where she worked. It had met with an accident, crashing off the window-sill into the cutting below, and though Paddy Brady had occasioned all the mischief, Mrs. Brady, after whacking her son, was so angry with the cause of her wrath that Steve never dared hope for a growing thing in a pot again.

His eccentricity was put down in Greek street to an inheritance from his flower-girl mother, just as the little Bradys had the brogue and the impulsiveness of the country they had never seen.

It was this impulsiveness in Micky Brady that made the turning point in Steve's life. They were standing gazing into the florist's window one day when the March wind felt like May; turning Steve's thoughts in the direction of wondering whether, hampered by Micky Brady, he could accomplish a walk to a certain growing stretch of herbage, whereupon real, if very dirty, sheep grazed, and from which a line of trees was visible, which indicated to Steve all he guessed at of the country. The thought had come into his mind of a sudden, making his heart beat. The florist had just bid him begone for the ninth time. Each time Steve, who was a docile child, had retired obediently, only to creep back again almost unconsciously as the flowers drew him, and their terrible guardian passed out of sight.

Suddenly Micky, whose small hand had been wriggling about in Steve's unnoticed for some time, so absorbed was Steve in his contemplation of the flowers, got loose and dashed away. There was a shout. Steve made an agonized dart after the little three-year-old figure. In a second of time he saw many things—little Micky crushed under the feet of the great horse that was steadily bearing down upon him, the anguish of Mrs. Brady, who had been his one friend, his own life-long disgrace; this and much more was in his mind as he flew upon Mick's track.

The waggoner was the other side of the horse. Steve could see the stout country feet, lifting themselves as steadily as the horse lifted his great feet, with the fringes of coarse hair down to the hoofs. The waggoner had no idea of Micky's peril. Would he cross in front of the horse safely? Would he not? The question was answered by Mick's suddenly falling almost under the great hoofs. At the same moment Steve was upon him and had flung him away roaring lustily at the assault as he took it. But Steve was caught. Something crashed down upon his hips, pinning him to the ground. Steve closed his eyes. The pain for an instant was sickening. He thought the train had caught him at last against the wall of the tunnel as he had so often dreamt. But why was Micky screaming? Micky was free of the tunnel. It was only he, Steve,

who had been ground to powder. Then there was forgetfulness.

He came to himself in the ward of the children's hospital. He had seen the outside of it many a time, but he had never guessed it to be like this. He was so shut up in something that he could not move, but he smelt wallflowers somewhere near his bed. Turning his eyes from one side to another he could see a long row of little white-curtained beds. There were faces on some of the pillows, but others were empty. Away at the end of the long ward he could hear children talking and laughing about the fire.

Presently a little boy on crutches came down the ward, and, seeing Steve, called out, 'I say, Sister, here's 227 awake.' Then a dark-eyed young lady with white teeth came and stood by him and smiled at him, and asked him how he felt, and fed him with something delicious out of a little flowery cup with a long spout.

'You're going on very nicely,' she said; 'and if you're a very good little boy, perhaps you'll be able to see your friend on Sunday.'

'My friend, miss?'

'Your friend who brought you here'

Of course it could only be Mrs. Brady, though Steve wondered how she came to be about when he met with the accident.

'Micky wasn't hurt, was he, miss?' he asked, anxiously.

'Micky?' The nurse looked puzzled for an instant, then she seemed to understand. 'Oh, I remember, the child you got hurt in trying to save. No, he wasn't hurt. He's all right, I believe. Now don't talk any more, dear, but sleep if you can.'

With little intervals of pain and rest from pain, Steve got round the week till Sunday came. There was no inflammation, and Dr. Heys thought that the little chap in 227 bed might certainly see his friend, if the latter was quiet and stayed only a short time.

When the visitors came tip-toeing down the ward amid shrieks of delighted recognition from many little beds, Steve's heart fell. There was no Mrs. Brady. She had forgotten him. But who was this big man with the country freshness on his cheeks and the mild blue eyes, with the great bunch of wallflowers and daffodils, and the obvious eggs tied up in a red and white cotton handkerchief, who walked softly to the chair by Steve's bed, and took up his place there? Steve felt a dreadful certainty that it was all a mistake, and the visitor not for him; but the mild, serious eyes had no doubt in their gaze.

'The Sister told me as I might come and see how you was,' he said, in a voice subdued to the softest key possible, though it was naturally a big voice to match the big man.

'But I never saw you before,' said Steve, weakly; 'isn't it another boy you want?'

'I want the boy my Dobbin knocked down in the Dover road last Monday. Not as he'd ever 'ave done it, but that he didn't see you, nor yet the little shaver as was the cause on it all.'

'Oh,' said Steve; 'it's very good of you to come.'

Steve's friend came many Sundays before Steve was able to get on crutches and