

Follow the Dream

By David Ayre

Patrington, East Yorkshire, 1850 AD

There was a chill breeze blowing down the High Street, the sky was overcast and Winter was hanging on well past the time when there should be signs of Spring, and people stayed inside if they could. This was certainly the case with the Thompson household.

William was just ten years old and, up until today, his life had been reasonably comfortable. His father, John Thompson, was a master tailor, or so he told everyone, though his business was a poor affair. They lived in a comfortable house on the High Street, and business should have been good. John had always said that he would like one of his sons to take over the business eventually, but three years ago he had sent his oldest son, Richard, out to work at the new flax mill. Since then William had been helping in the shop, though he hadn't learnt a great deal about tailoring. His father told him about the days when he had made fine clothes for the gentry, but it seemed that those days had long gone, but William didn't know why. These days all they seemed to do was make and mend simple garments for trades people and labourers, and there was little money in that.

John was a slightly built man with receding hair, and shoulders hunched from bending over his work from dawn until dusk, and his eyes had wrinkle lines radiating from them as he strained to see in the poor light. He was

stern with little humour, unlike his second son, William who was always full of fun, much to the annoyance of his father.

But today William's life had changed for ever, and he sat in the corner looking very sorry for himself.

"Do I really have to go to work in the flax?" he said pitifully.

"I have told you," snapped his father. "I can't afford to have you here anymore. There isn't enough work for me, let alone the two of us. No, it's time for you to earn your living now you are ten years old. Tomorrow you will go with Richard to the mill. He'll look after you. But for now, you can run an errand for me."

"Yes?" said William brightening up.

"You can go down to Mrs. Williams' shop and see if she has any more thread to match this." He handed William a short length of thread. "Get your coat on, it's very cold out today."

William took his coat from the peg and put it on. His father handed him three pence for the thread. Outside, the ground was frozen and the badly rutted ground had frozen into precipitous ridges which made walking difficult. People were trudging carefully up the High Street, huddled against the cold. A haggard old horse, attached to a coal cart, was grazing on the sparse grass at the side of the street while his master delivered coal to the tavern on the corner, shooting the contents of the sacks down the open coal-hole at the side of the building.

Further down the High Street William noticed a horse and trap outside the hardware store. He recognised it as John Kemp's trap. He was a butcher from Welwick, a few miles away, and William didn't like him over much.

He was a very stern, straight laced sort of man and he seemed to think he was above the likes of William and his family, though William couldn't think why.

In the trap, wrapped in a travelling rug, was Annie Kemp. William liked her. She was a year or two younger than he was, but she was a bit of a minx.

"Hello Annie," he said as he slithered up to the trap. A small red nose poked out of the rug followed by two bright brown eyes.

"Oh, it's you," she said. "What do you want?"

"Nothing in particular," he replied. "Just going to fetch some stuff for father. Why are you sitting out here?"

"Last time we came I knocked a heap of pans over," she said. "So, he said I should stay out here where I couldn't do any harm. But it's cold and I don't like it."

"Will he be long?"

"Ages, I should think. He usually is."

"Why don't we go into the market and see if we can find something to eat?" said William. "It'll warm you up if we run."

"As long as I get back before he comes out."

"Sure," said William. "Come on."

Annie threw off the rug and leapt to the ground and they ran off towards the market as best they could on the uneven ground. The market consisted of an assortment of stalls selling all sorts of interesting things. The one that interested them most was the lad with the roasted chestnuts. They walked up to him and looked at the chestnuts sizzling over the coals.

"How much?" asked William.

“A ha’penny a bag,” said the lad. William looked a bit awkward and fumbled in his pockets. “I’ve only got the money for the thread and I daren’t use that.”

“Here you are,” said Annie handing the lad a halfpenny and collecting her bag of chestnuts. She took one out carefully, as it was very hot, and carefully took the skin off it. William was eyeing it hungrily, so Annie broke it in half and gave a piece to William who put it straight into his mouth. This was a bad mistake as it was still very hot. Annie laughed as he jumped around fanning his mouth.

“Serves you right for being such a pig,” she said. “Come on. Let’s find somewhere to sit and eat the rest of them.”

At the edge of the market place there were some buildings with outhouses. Most were shut up and locked, but one had the door swinging slightly open in the breeze. William looked inside and found that there was no one there.

“In here,” he said disappearing into the gloom. Annie peeked in first and then followed him in.

There was a heap of straw in the corner and William sat down and made himself comfortable. Annie paused and looked at the straw, but then threw caution to the winds and sat down beside him. The chestnuts had cooled down a bit now and they attacked them with vigour.

When they were finished, William lay back in the straw, his hunger satisfied.

“I’d better get back to the trap before my father finds I’m gone,” said Annie.

“Shush,” said William. “There’s someone coming.” The footsteps outside, scrunched on the frozen ground and stopped just outside the door. They hardly dare breathe. Then the door was pushed shut and locked. William crept over to the door and tried to open it, but it wouldn’t move.

“We’re locked in.” he said in alarm.

“Oh you idiot,” she said. “Now we’ll both be in trouble. You’ll just have to find a way out of here.” William looked around the walls of the barn, but it was quite dark with the door closed. He prodded the planking, hoping to find a loose one, but he couldn’t find even the slightest movement in any of them. There was a tiny window high up on one side, but that was barred, and anyway, it was too high for him to reach.

“It’s no use,” he said. “We’ll just have to wait until someone comes and opens the door again.”

“But what if they don’t?”

“They will eventually,” he said. “We’ll just have to wait.”

“You know what this means, don’t you?” she said.

“What?”

“You’ll have to marry me now.”

“What?” he almost shrieked. “But I’m too young to get married.”

“I don’t suppose that will bother them. You know how strict father is. He’ll say I have disgraced the whole family.”

“But he hates my father,” said William, “and he’s not too fond of me either.”

“And you’ll have to support me and our children as well.”

William blanched. “Well I’m to start work tomorrow so I’ll be getting a wage. I don’t know if father will let us live in his house. It’s quite full now, you know.”

“Where are you going to work?” she asked.

“I’m going with Richard to the flax mill,” he said.

“I thought you were going to be a tailor?” she replied. “I don’t like the idea of you working in the flax mill. They say people die of the dust.”

“Richard seems all right,” said William, “and he’s been there three years.”

“I think it takes longer than that to kill you. More like ten years.”

“Well I’m not going to work there for that long,” he said indignantly. “I’m going to make something of myself. Just you wait and see.”

After about an hour they were feeling very cold and no one had been to open the door and they were getting very worried.

“We’ll have to shout so that someone will hear us,” said Annie. So they started shouting and banging on the door, but no one seemed to hear them.

Another hour passed and they huddled together to keep warm. William’s knuckles were bleeding from hammering on the door and both were hoarse from shouting.

“We’ll die of cold,” said William, “if no one comes soon.”

“We must move about,” said Annie. “That’ll keep us warm.”

So they got up and marched round the barn to try and keep warm.

After another half an hour, they heard the sound of boots outside and they started shouting again. There was the sound of chains clanking and the door swung open to reveal a dark figure standing in the doorway.

John Kemp was a big man. He was a butcher by trade and was used to lifting heavy weights, and with the light behind him, he looked like a giant.

“And what is going on here?”. It was more like a rumble deep inside a mountain.

“We got shut in, father,” said Annie.

“We?” he shouted. “And who is ‘we’?”

“William Thompson, sir,” said William in a tremulous voice. John Kemp strode forward into the gloom and grabbed William by the front of his coat and lifted him bodily off the ground.

“And what were you doing in here with my daughter, you little runt?”

“N-n-othing s-sir,” stammered William. “We were eating chestnuts, that’s all.”

“Well your father is going to hear about this,” said John Kemp shaking William until his teeth rattled. “Now get out of here.” And he threw him through the door into the street where a small crowd had gathered. William got to his feet and ran off as the crowd jeered at him. Before he got home he realised that he had gone out to get some thread so he turned and ran to the haberdashery shop.

Inside the barn Annie was being confronted by her father.

“What on earth did you think you were doing?” he said in a less belligerent tone. “You know I don’t approve of you seeing that Thompson boy. Why didn’t you stay in the trap like I told you to?”

“It was cold,” said Annie meekly. She knew just how to twist her father round her little finger. “I only went to get some chestnuts in the market, and it was an accident that we got shut in the barn.”

“Well you shouldn’t have been going into a barn with the likes of him anyway. What were you thinking?”

They came out of the barn to see the gathered crowd grinning at them.

“What are you lot gawping at, then?” he shouted at them. “Be about your business.” No one wanted to argue with Big John Kemp. It wasn’t a very sensible thing to do.

When William arrived home, he was greeted by a very irate father standing at the door with his mother just behind him.

“Where have you been?” asked his father angrily. “I have just had a visit from John Kemp and he was not in a very pleasant mood. I can’t stand the man at the best of times, so I’m not at all happy when you give him cause to have a grudge against us.”

William explained what had happened and said he was sorry for causing any trouble, but that it wasn’t really his fault.

“Well I ought to take my belt to you but you’ll be at work with your brother tomorrow,” said his father. “That should keep you out of trouble.”

“Do I really have to go?” asked William pitifully. “Yes,” said his father. “We need the extra money.” “Perhaps we could manage a bit longer,” said his mother. “Why don’t we wait until he’s twelve? Things might have improved by then.”

“His brother started work when he was ten,” snapped his father. “So can he, and that’s my final word on the subject.”

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The next morning, William was shaken out of bed before dawn and told to get dressed and have something to eat before he set off to work. He didn’t feel hungry but he forced himself to eat some bland porridge and an egg. Richard ate for the two of them as he knew that he needed all the energy he could get for the long day ahead of them.

When they had finished, they wrapped up warm and set off on the mile-long walk to the flax mill. It was a new plant built by Mr Marshall of Leeds and it had brought a lot of work to the area. People praised Mr Marshall for providing all the new jobs, but then, William thought, they probably didn’t have to work there. William had no more than his imagination to tell him what it would be like as he had never been there either. But he did have the tales told him by his brother, and the one that bothered him most was about what they did to new boys to initiate them.

“What will I have to do?” he asked Richard as they walked down the lane to the mill along with many others going the same way.

“I don’t know,” answered Richard. “I started in the retting tanks.”

“What are they?”

“It’s where they put the new flax when it comes into the mill,” said Richard. “It has to be soaked for two

or three weeks to break it down into fibres for spinning. The water sort of unsticks all the fibres you see.”

“Will you still be doing that?” asked William.

“Don’t know. I might go on to the dressing shed. We’ll just have to wait and see.”

As they rounded the corner in the lane, a dark ominous looking building loomed out of the early morning mist. William shuddered and almost turned and ran back home. But he managed to steel himself to the prospect and carried on walking.

When they got to the mill they went in and Richard took William to the overseer.

“What’s this?” he asked looking down his nose at William.

“My brother William,” said Richard. “He’s starting today and I was told to bring him to you.”

“Well take him to the retting tanks and explain what he has to do. When he’s got it, you can start in the dressing shed. Let me know when you think he can manage.”

Richard led William through the various sheds where work had already started and there was a mighty dust being thrown up by the activity making them sneeze. Finally, they got to a door that led outside to where there were long narrow channels of water which appeared to be full of flax. Other lads were already there, up to their knees in the freezing cold water, lifting bundles of soaking wet flax and shaking it, then immersing it again in the water. The stench was appalling. It made William want to retch.

“What you got there then Dick?” The shout came from a rough looking lad who was climbing out of the

water and making his way over to where they were standing. He was a stocky looking boy with jet black hair and an evil grin.

“This is my brother William,” said Richard with a sour expression. “This is Gudger.”

“So, we got a new one to show the ropes, ‘ave we?”

“Leave him alone Gudger,” said Richard moving in front of William.

“But we’ve gotta show ‘im the ropes, ‘aven’t we me mates?” The other lads nodded. “Well come on then.” They all started to get out of the water and squelch their way across to William. Richard stood in front of him and raised his fists. Gudger took a swing at Richard and floored him with one blow. Then they grabbed William and threw him headlong into the water. It was freezing and it completely took his breath away. He tried to regain his feet, but they kept sliding in the slime at the bottom of the tank. He thrashed about, not knowing how much longer he could hold his breath. His lungs were bursting and his head was pounding.

Richard, in the meantime, had staggered to his feet and came up behind the row of lads who were cheering at William’s predicament. He tried to push between them but they held him back. Richard was frantic. He could hear the splashing and struggling but couldn’t see what was happening. Then it all went quiet.

“I think you’ve killed ‘im,” someone said. Richard took the opportunity to barge through and leap into the water. He didn’t know exactly where William was and there was no sign of him anywhere. He groped around but couldn’t find him. “Where is he?” he shouted, but no one

answered. Then suddenly there was an eruption of bubbles a few yards in front of where Richard was standing. He struggled forward through the rotting flax and reached down into the foul-smelling water and his hands found something solid. He hooked his fingers into loose clothing and pulled. Completely waterlogged, William weighed a ton, or so it seemed.

“Will someone help me, please?” shouted Richard. At first no one moved. Then a wiry little lad, Georgie Bates, waded into the water to help. Then one or two others waded in as well. Between them they dragged William out onto dry ground and placed him face down.

“He isn’t breathing!” said Richard, not knowing what to do.

“Move out the way,” said Georgie pushing Richard aside. He then put all his weight onto William’s back and pressed. Then he got hold of his elbows and pulled upwards. Then he pressed down again.

Suddenly William gave a gasp and started coughing; water pouring out of his mouth. Gudger pushed forward to stand in front of William. “Told you he was all right,” he said. “He’s just a bit of a weed.”

William pulled himself up into a kneeling position and looked up at Gudger with a look of real hate. Then he was violently sick all down Gudger’s legs.

“Serves you right,” said Richard.

“You’ll be sorry for that,” said Gudger, coldly. “Just you wait and see.” He turned and walked away.

Richard and Georgie lifted William to his feet and helped him to walk into the nearest shed. It was the spinning shed and was filled with women busily working at the spinning machines. When they saw the boys, one of

them rushed over to see what the matter was while another moved to operate both machines.

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