



THE LITTLE BOY STOPPED CRYING AND OPENED HIS MOUTH.

LITTLE TIM'S CHRISTMAS.

A TRUE STORY.

(By John Law, in Pall Mall Budget.)

PART I.

The sun lay like a red ball in the foggy sky, high up above the London houses. One could not see across the street, or recognize the faces of passers-by, for the yellow fog blinded one's eyes, and confused one's senses. It was thick in the city, thickest of all in the borough.

There, in a garret, two little boys stood with their faces pressed to a pane of glass, watching the red ball and wondering.

"What is it, Tim?" asked the youngest.

"Er's the moon, Bill," replied Tim.

"When I was down 'opping I seed 'er all bloody like that, and Sally said 'er was the 'arvest moon. I guess 'er's come to Lunnon."

A knock at the door made the children draw their faces quickly away from the window.

"Ush!" whispered Tim to his brother, "I guess it's School Board after us."

The knock came again. Tim went softly to the door and peeped through the key-hole.

"It's Sally!" he cried; "I'll unlock the door."

"I thought you was School Board," he explained as an old woman came into the room carrying a jug. "Mother's took our boots, and 'er said if School Board comed we wasn't to let 'im in. What 'ave you got in that jug?"

"Was mother drunk?" inquired the visitor, without heeding his question.

"Well 'er sleep 'eavy last night."

"'Ave yer had any breakfast?"

"Nothink. Baby cried 'issolt to sleep, and Bill and mo's been lookin' at the 'arvest moon, what you and me seed when we was 'opping. What's in the jug?"

"Tea."

"Tea!"

"Yes, my son. Taste it." Sally poured something out of the jug into two broken teacups, and handed it to the children.

"Good?" she asked.

"Prime!" said Tim.

"Sweet?"

"Trenkle!"

Sally chuckled. She was old and weather-beaten; dressed in rags and a crape bonnet. Wrinkles scored her face, creases furrowed her neck; her eyes were sunk deep down in their sockets, but they smiled lovingly on the boys while she watched them enjoying her own scanty breakfast.

"'Ere's summat for the fire," she said, opening her apron, which she held together with a horny hand, and showing Tim some bits of paper and a few cinders. "Got any sticks?"

Tim pointed to a broken box on the hearth.

She set to work.

"Now I'll be off," she said, when a fire burnt in the grate. "If anyone comes after me, just yer say, 'Does yer want rags sorted?' and if the party says 'Yes,' then yer say, 'Well, Sally wun't be 'ome for a bit.'"

"All right," said Tim. "When will you be back?"

"Not before one, sommy."

Saying this, the old woman left the room, casting a glance at the fire that gleamed through the fog, and a hasty look at the red ball in the sky which Tim called the "arvest moon." She knew it was the sun, but why should she confuse the minds of the children?

After the door was shut the boys went to the fire and crouched down on the hearth. Yellow fog filled the room, hiding the old bed where the baby lay under a dirty blanket, and throwing a curtain over the broken chairs and boxes. Tim held his hands up before the burning sticks. He looked wondrous wise in the firelight. Gleams fell on his small white face, showing his wizened features, from which all traces of childhood seemed to have vanished. He had been safe protector of his two little brothers for the space of a year and a half, ever since his father found a home in the cemetery. His mother drank, and when drunk she was sometimes violent. He had seen a good deal of life, although he was only eight, for he lived in a South-wark lodging-house. Fights, murders, suicides, and deaths made epochs in his existence, and he talked of "when I was young" as though the time lay far back in his memory.

Presently the baby began to cry, and Tim went to fetch it from the bed. He brought it to the fire, and fed it with some of the tea which old Sally had given to him for his breakfast. While he was busy with the baby, Bill crawled to the window.

"Oh, Tim!" he said, "the red ball 'as gone out o' the sky."

"I guess," said Tim, "'ers gone back to the country."

Then Tim's thoughts wandered to the days when he had gone hopping with old Sally to the harvest moon and the hop-fields. He would have been perfectly happy then if he had not "worried" about the children.

"When I was young," he said aloud, "I never worried about nothink!"

Just as the words were said a shrill cry came from the window.

"What's the matter?" asked Tim.

"I's cut my thumb wicl a bit o' glass," sobbed Bill.

"Come to the light and let me see," said Tim.

The little boy came howling to the hearth, holding out his thumb, and pointing to the blood upon it.

"Whatever will I do?" exclaimed Tim.

"It's lock-jaw he's got, I knows it."

Only the week before a man had died

from lock-jaw in the room below the garret; and Tim had heard his mother discussing the matter with her neighbors.

"If they'd stuck his jaws open directly he cut his thumb, he'd have pulled through," some one had said, "but all the doctors in London couldn't force his jaws open after he got to the hospital."

Tim laid the baby on the bed, where it lay crying as loud as it could cry, because it was cold and famished; then he went back to the fireplace, and found a square piece of stick.

"Old yer mouth open," he said to Bill. The little boy stopped crying and opened his mouth.

Tim slipped the stick between his teeth. "Now," said Tim, "come along to the 'ospital!"

But Bill threw himself on the floor and kicked. His thumb was bleeding and he felt suffocated, so he rolled on the ground until he lost his breath. Directly he became pale and stiff, Tim picked him up and struggled with him out of the room and down the staircase. No one saw the children leave the house, for the place was full of fog and very dark; so they arrived in the street, where Tim laid his brother down on the pavement, and stopped to pant and to stretch his arms for a minute. Then he picked Bill up again, and struggled bravely along with his burden until he reached the hospital.

"What is it?" inquired the hospital porter as he passed through the gate.

"Lock-jaw, sir!" panted Tim.

"I thought it was a bundle of rags," said the man; "there, to the left, that's the Out-patients' Department."

Tim struggled into the receiving-room, holding his brother tightly round the waist.

"What is it?" asked a doctor.

"Lock-jaw," gasped Tim, "but I've stuck his jaws open."

Loud peals of laughter made him stare at the doctors and students who had gathered round Bill.

"Ain't it lock-jaw?" he whispered to a nurse, who was standing by.

"No," said the woman, "of course it isn't."

For a moment Tim could not believe his senses. Then an awful vision floated before him, a vision of his mother. Supposing she came home while he was away, and found the baby alone, crying? What would happen then? It is but a step, they say, from the sublime to the ridiculous; but sometimes that step is across a precipice. Tim shuddered when he heard the students laughing at his mistake. He had meant to save Bill's life, and all he had done was to make himself a laughing-stock.

Without a word he took his brother's hand and left the hospital. Bill trotted by his side through the foggy street, pointing to the sticking-plaster on his thumb, and chattering about the penny he had received from one of the medical students.

"Praps mother ain't come home," thought Tim, "or praps 'er's so drunk 'er wun't see us!"

PART II.

An hour later the doors of the hospital receiving-room was pushed open by old Sally, the rag-sorter. She hurried through them, carrying little Tim, whose head lay

against her ragged dress, while his arms and legs dangled down, and blood streamed from his forehead.

"Why, this is the boy who came here an hour ago with the lock-jaw case," said the doctor, when Sally laid Tim on the table.

The students crowded round to look, but they did not laugh at Tim now, for they thought he was dead. They listened to the doctor's questions, and watched old Sally's face as she explained that the boy had fallen on the hearth in the garret.

"Is he your grandson?" inquired the doctor as he felt Tim's pulse.

"No, he ain't. I'm a lone woman. I've got no children. I fend for myself."

"Well, it's a matter for the police," the doctor said. "I believe the boy has been knocked down, or kicked; his head's smashed."

The fog had lifted by the time Sally left the hospital. She went back to the lodging-house, up the staircase, and into her room. Rags covered the floor. A large heap of rags made a bed, another heap served as a seat. A horrid stench filled the place, but Sally was accustomed to the smell, and she never opened the window, saying that she liked to be "warm and comfortable." While she was raking the cinders together in the grate, and patting a black cat that had raised its back to welcome its mistress, the door was opened, and Tim's mother came in with the baby in her arms, and Bill hanging to her skirt.

"Sally," she said, "I was drunk when I did it!"

"Yes, yer wos," said Sally, and yer'd best make yerself scarce, for the p'leece 'as been told, and if yer don't take yerself off yer'll swing for it!"

"Will he die?"

"The doctor says 'e 'ull."

"Will you mind the children a bit?"

"Yes, till Christmas."

The woman placed the baby on the heap of rags and vanished.

Each day Sally visited the hospital, and sat beside the bed on which Tim lay unconscious. Tears streamed down her cheeks, and she wiped them away with the back of her hand, saying to the nurse, "I've loved 'im like a son. I'm a lone woman. I never had no children."

At last, on Christmas Eve, when she went to the hospital at about seven o'clock, she found Tim himself again.

She sat down beside him, smoothing out her ragged dress, and trying to make her crape bonnet sit straight upon her head. Tim's white face frightened her, and she could not speak. She did not want him to see that she was crying.

A great fire blazed opposite Tim's bed, and round the fire sat boys and men, reading, playing games, and discussing politics. Nurses flitted about, decorating the walls with ivy and holly, while they chatted to one another and laughed with the patients. No one seemed to be very ill except Tim, but a single glance at his face told Sally that he was dying.

"Tim, my son," she said at last, "this is a beautiful place, ain't it?"

"Yes," answered Tim faintly, "it's like 'eaven."

Neither spoke again for a few minutes. Then Tim pointed to some toys on the bed.



TIM'S MOTHER CAME IN.