

"LITTLE TOMMY TUCKER."

There were but three persons in the car; a merchant, deep in the income list of the *Traveler* an old lady with two bandboxes, a man in the corner with his hat pulled over his eyes.

Tommy opened the door, peeped in, hesitated, looked into another car, came back, gave his little fiddle a shove on his shoulder and walked in.

"Hi! Little Tommy Tucker
Plays for his supper,"

shouted the young exquisite lounging on the platform in tan-colored coat and lavender kid gloves.

"Oh, Kids, you're there, are you? Well, I'd rather play for it than loaf for it, I had," said Tommy, stoutly.

The merchant shot a careless glance over the top of his paper at the sound of this *petit dialogue* and the old lady smiled benignly; the man in the corner neither looked nor smiled.

Nobody would have thought to look at that man in the corner that he was at that very moment deserting a wife and five children. Yet that is precisely what he was doing.

A villain? Oh, no, that is not the word. A brute? Not by any means. A man, weak, unfortunate, discouraged and selfish, as weak, unfortunate and discouraged people are apt to be; that was the amount of it. His panoramas never paid him for the use of his halls. His traveling tin-type saloon had trundled him into a sheriff's hands. His petroleum speculations had crashed like a bubble. His black and gold sign, "J. Harmon, Photographer," had swung now for nearly a year over the dentist's rooms, and he had had the patronage of precisely six old women and three babies. He had drifted to the theater in the evenings, he did not care now to remember how many times—the fellows asked him and it made him forget his troubles. The next morning his empty purse would gape at him and Annie's mouth would quiver. A man must have his glass, too, on Sundays and—well, perhaps a little oftener. He had not always been fit to go to work after it; and Annie's mouth would quiver. It will be seen at once that it was exceedingly hard on a man that his wife's mouth should quiver. "Confound it! Why couldn't she scold or cry? These still women aggravate a fellow beyond reason."

Well, then the children had been sick; measles, whooping-cough, scarlatina, mumps, he was sure he did not know what not; every one of them from the baby up. There was medicine, and there were doctor's bills, and there was sitting up with them at night—their mother usually did that. Then she must needs pale down herself, like a poorly finished photograph; all her color and roundness and sparkle gone; and if ever a man liked to have a pretty wife about it was he. Moreover, she had a cough, and her shoulders had grown round, stooping so much over the heavy baby, and her breath came short, and she had a way of being tired. She had had great purple rings under her eyes for six weeks.

He would not bear the purple rings and quivering mouth any longer. Once fairly rid of him, his scolding and drinking, his wasting and failing, Annie would send the children to work and find ways to live. She had energy and invention, a plenty of it in her young, fresh days, before he came across her life to drag her down. Perhaps he should make a golden fortune and come back to her some summer day with a silk dress and servants and make it all up. In theory this was about what he expected to do. But if his ill luck went westward with him and the silk dress never turned up, why, she would forget him and be better off, and that would be the end of it.

So here he was, ticketed and started, fairly bound for Colorado, sitting with his hat over his eyes and thinking about it.

"Hm-m. Asleep," pronounced Tommy, with his keen glance into the corner. "Guess I'll wake him up."

He laid his cheek down on his little fiddle—you don't know how Tommy loved that little fiddle—and struck up a gay, rollicking tune—

"I care for nobody and nobody cares for me."

The man in the corner sat quite still. When it was over he shrugged his shoulders.

"When folks are asleep they don't hist their shoulders, not as a general thing," observed Tommy. "We'll try another."

Tommy tried another. Nobody knows what possessed the little fellow, the little fellow himself least of all; but he tried this:

"We've lived and loved together,
Through many changing years."

It was a new tune, and he wanted practice, perhaps.

The speed of the train increased with a sickening sway; old wharves shot past, with the green water sucking at their piers; the city shifted by and out of sight.

"We've lived and loved together,"

played Tommy in a little plaintive wail,

"We've lived and loved—"

"Confound the boy!" Harmon pushed up his hat with a jerk and looked out of the window. The night was coming on. A dull sunset lay low on the water, burning like a bale-fire through the snaky trail of smoke that went writhing past the car windows. Against lonely signal-houses and little deserted beaches the water was splashing drearily and playing monotonous basses to Tommy's wail:

"Through many changing years,
Many changing years."

It was a nuisance, this music in the cars. Why didn't somebody stop it? What did the child mean by playing that? They had left the city far behind now. He wondered how far. He pushed up the window fiercely, venting the passion of the music on the first thing that came in his way, and thrust his head out to look back. Through the undulating smoke, out in the pale glimmer from the sky, he could see a low, red tongue of land, covered with the twinkle of lighted homes. Somewhere there, in among the quivering warmth, was one—

What was that boy about now? Not "Home, Sweet Home"? But that was what Tommy was about.

They were lighting the lamps now in the car. Harmon looked at the conductor's face, as the sickly yellow flare struck on it, with a curious sensation. He wondered if he had a wife and five children; if he ever thought of running away from them; what he would think of a man who did; what most people would think; what she would think. She!—ah, she had it all to find out yet.

"There's no place like home,"

said Tommy's little fiddle,

"O, no place like home."

The train was shrieking away into the west—the baleful, lonely west—which was dying fast now out there upon the sea, and it is a fact that his hat went slowly down over his face again and that his face went slowly down upon his arm.

There in the lighted home out upon the flats that had drifted by for ever, she sat waiting now. It was about time for him to be in to supper; she was beginning to wonder a little where he was. She would put the baby down presently, and stand at the window with her hands—Annie's hands once were not so thin—raised to shut out the light—watching, watching.

The children would eat their supper; the table would stand untouched, with his chair in its place; still she would go to the window and stand watching, watching. Oh, the long night that she must stand watching, and the days, and the years!

"Sweet, sweet home,"

played Tommy.

By and by there was no more of "Sweet Home."

"How about that cove with his head lopped down on his arms?" speculated Tommy, with a business-like air.

He had only stirred once, then put his face down again. But he was awake, awake in every nerve, and listening, to the very curve of his fingers. Tommy knew that, it being part of his trade to learn how to use his eyes.

The sweet, loyal passion of the music—it would take worse playing than Tommy's to drive the sweet, loyal passion out of Annie Laurie—grew above the din of the train!

"'Twas there that Annie Laurie
Gave me her promise true."

She used to sing that, the man was thinking—this other Annie of his own. Why, she had been his own, and he had loved her once. How he had loved her! Yes, she used to sing that when he went to see her on Sunday nights before they were married—in her pink, plump, pretty days. Annie used to be very pretty.

"Gave me her promise true,"

hummed the little fiddle.

"That's a fact," said poor Annie's husband, jerking the words out under his hat, "and kept it, too, she did." Ah, how Annie had kept it! The whole dark picture of her married years—the days of work and pain, the nights of watching, the patient voice, the quivering mouth, the tact and the planning and the trust for to-morrow, the love that had borne all things, believed all things, hoped all things, uncomplaining—rose into outline to tell him how she had kept it.

"Her face it is the fairest
That e'er the sun shone on,"

suggested the little fiddle.

That it should be darkened for ever, the sweet face! and that he should do it—he, sitting here, with his ticket bought, bound for Colorado.

"And ne'er forget will I,"

murmured the little fiddle.

He would have knocked the man down who had told him twenty years ago that he ever should forget; that he should be here to-night, with his ticket bought, bound for Colorado.

He wondered if it were ever too late in the day for a fellow to make a man of himself. He wondered—

"And she's a' the world to me,
And for Bonnie Annie Laurie
I'd lay me down and die,"

sang the little fiddle, triumphantly.

Harmon shook himself and stood up. The train was slackening; the lights of a way station bright ahead. It was about time for supper and his mother, so Tommy put down his fiddle and handed around his faded cap.

The merchant threw him a penny and returned to his tax list. The old lady was fast asleep with her mouth open.

"Come here," growled Harmon, with his eyes very bright. Tommy shrank back, almost afraid of him.

"Come here," softening, "I won't hurt you. I tell you, boy, you don't know what you've done to-night."

"Done, sir?" Tommy couldn't help laughing, though there was a twinge of pain at his stout little heart, as he fingered the solitary penny in the faded cap. "Done? Well, I guess I've waked you up, sir, which was about what I meant to do."

"Yes, that is it," said Harmon, very distinctly pushing up his hat, "you've waked me up. Here, hold your cap."

They had puffed into the station now and stopped. He emptied his purse into the little cap, shook it clean of paper and copper alike, was out of the car and off the train before Tommy could have said Jack Robinson.

"My eyes!" gasped Tommy, "that chap had a ticket for New York, sure! Methuselah! Look a here! One, two, three—must have been crazy; that's it, crazy."

"He'll never find out," muttered Harmon, turning away from the station lights and striking back through the night for the red flats and home. "He'll never find out what he has done, nor, please God, shall she."

It was late when he came in sight of the house; it had been a long tramp across the tracks and hard; he being stung by a bitter wind from the east all the