

THE CASUISTRY OF THOMAS PLAYFAIR.

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THOMAS PLAYFAIR, chubby, rubicund, was unusually cheerful after his fourth confession. He experienced a spiritual consolation which was inclined to show itself exteriorly in the breaking of things. However, as he walked homeward there happened to be nothing breakable convenient; so Tom was fain to content himself with drawing a stick rapidly along the iron rods of a fence. His fullness of happiness, however, was tempered by regret for his drum at home.

Tom, you may be sure, had made a good confession; and he had resolved, among other things, to avoid fighting. Such a promise at this interesting period of his life meant much.

As it happened, it meant a great deal on this



very occasion. One square beyond the church, and in a very unfashionable quarter, stood a saloon, fronted at the edge of the sidewalk by a large watering-trough. Beside this trough, as Tom came near, were several very dirty little boys, prominent among whom, for dirt and size, was a dark-eyed, black-haired, unwashed son of Italy. This youth had been knocking his followers about quite freely. His fists were clenched, his scanty shirt was open at the throat, and he was breathing heavily. Two others of the group were rather the worse for battle.

Tom paused.

"If I try to pass that Dago," he reflected, "just as like as not he'll want to fight; I've heard about him. Anyhow, he's not more than my size, and—"

At this stage of his thought Tom shook his head violently. Here he had been actually planning a fight.

"I think I'd better turn and go the other way," he continued to himself, as he slacked his pace.

Now it so happened that the young bully perceived Tom's hesitation. Instantly the fire of battle flashed from his eyes, and he bawled out:

"Halloa, dude!"

Poor Tom! To turn now would seem to be a confession of cowardice. To go on? Yes, Tom would go on; but he would *not* fight, in any event.

The Italian youth met him half-way, advancing with doubled fists and a strut which would have passed muster in the Bowery.

"For two centa I knock your head off."

Tom was anxious, but collected. He put his hand in his pocket, drew out a nickel, and said:

"Here's five cents not to do it."

The bully took the five-cent piece, while a tide of emotion bore down upon him. For the moment he was dumbfounded, while Tom passed on, demure, serene; and all the world, that is the youngsters by the water-trough, wondered.

On coming to himself the young swash-buckler pocketed the nickel, then gave a yell and made after Tom with intentions that could not be misunderstood.

And Tom! Tom took to his heels.

This, I believe, was the beginning of his career as a hero. He ran well, too, and reached home panting, breathless, and, it must be confessed, in a very uncomfortable frame of mind.

"He'll be on the lookout for me again," Tom muttered to himself, "and it won't do to keep running away all the time. It's too hard, and, besides, it will make things worse. All those fellows will want to fight me. I wish I could see my way out. I won't fight, anyhow. It's a conundrum."

Then Tom went out to a sand-pile in the street, and there enjoyed himself in the artless fashion peculiar to boys of his tender age. Meanwhile his mind sustained a process of hard thinking.

Suddenly, hands and feet sent the sand flying into the air, and Tom, with a happy smile, dashed into the house.

He came out presently, giving evidence in his improved appearance of having bestowed unusual attention upon his person. One hand was in his jacket pocket, the other, as he walked, described three-quarter circles in the air. There was no hesitation in his step now, as he retraced at a dignified walk the path of his recent flight.

"Immense," he muttered, as he came in sight of the saloon and perceived the group still lingering beside the horse-trough.