

Little Grains of Grit

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got t' defy the old duchess in the last act. The public insists on happy endin's—that's what she wrote t' Jack. It'n't it jus' glorious? I love happy endin's."

"So do I," voted Tommy, without exactly understanding. "I'd like to run away to a star some time. Come out through the gate."

"Haven't you never run away in your whole life?" probed Beulah.

Tommy winced. "Some day you'll see me fishing," he hinted, vaguely.

Their loitering steps brought them suddenly upon a sight which filled the children with embarrassed alarm. Tommy's mother was not alone; she sat under the nodding lilacs with her face buried in a sleeve of lavender ruffles,

while before her knelt Mr. Jack Kingdom, his jolly face all earnestness and persuasion, his voice as deep and pleading as the new rector's when he read the prayers.

"What's the matter with them?" whispered Beulah, the freckles on her small nose standing out over sudden pallor.

"Listen!" Tommy whispered. "He wants her to do something."

"Well, why doesn't she?"

"She hasn't a speck of grit!" mourned Tommy.

"Lady Jessica hathn't any specks of grit either!" lisped Beulah, hotly. "Jack sayth I'd better get rid of mine. Grit's for men!"

"Grandmother has grit," ruminated Tommy with strong disrelish.

"Sh!"

They listened, huddling in the shrubbery.

Beulah's eyes grew big. "They must be talkin' about you! Jack says it'll serve Madam Tower right if there's a runaway right from her house! Oh, Tom! are you hones' an' truly goin' to run away?"

Tommy chilled with excitement.

"You wait and see! I'll ask Grandmother Tower just once to let me go fishing. If she doesn't—" He frowned.

"What's that?" hissed Beulah.

On the hidden veranda sounded the staccato tap-tap of Madam Tower's cane.

"Josephine!" called the well known voice.

Tommy's mother leaped up in affright, scattering lilacs.

"I'm coming she quavered back.

"You shan't go till you promise me!" Mr. Jack Kingdom caught her hands and held them fast. "Merm!—How I love Tommy's dearest name! Will you promise?"

"Oh, I can't, I can't!" struggled Tommy's mother. "He is all that is left of her blood. It is love that makes her such a tyrant. She loves Tommy—and me, too, Jack. The poor lonely old being loves both of us! But Tommy is mine."

"And you are mine!"

"Oh, I must go! It won't make the least difference to her if you are wallowing in money." Tommy's mother caught her breath in a laugh. "Can't you see that's only her excuse? But she shouldn't treat me like a baby! Anyhow, Tommy is mine! I am his mother!"

"And you are mine!"

"Let me go!" cried Tommy's mother. "Aren't you?" exulted Mr. Jack Kingdom. "Merm! aren't you mine?"

"Yes!"

The startled little spies saw the two that they loved best in the universe kiss each other and separate.

"I give the whole world warning," called the man from the gate, his brown eyes dancing, "that unless Madam Tower listens to reason and quits treating folks like babies, there'll be a runaway pretty quick!" But Merm was gone.

Alone, Beulah viewed Tommy with worshipping interest.

"When are you goin' to run away?" she demanded.

Without haste, Tommy notched his fish pole.

"I'll give her one good chance," he decided. "Then, if she doesn't say yes, I'll walk right off and leave her with the whole bum birthday party! A fellow's got to fish sometime."

He left Beulah in a trance of admiration, and approached the house. In truth, it looked a fine effort at nonchalance to stroll into the pantry, where his grandmother was wielding an immense spoon. Madam Tower was never happier than when she was beating batter.

"Well, well, smelled a birthday cake, did you?" she beamed. "What have you got?"

"This is my fish pole, grandmother. Isn't it fine?" he continued hurriedly. "My bucket is most the usefullest of all my presents, grandmother. Look, look, it's clear full of bait!"

Grabbing a fat earthworm, he held it, wiggling and squirming and scattering dirt, right in front of Madam Tower's nose.

"Goodness!" she screamed hoarsely. "Take it away! Throw the creature out! What do you mean by leaning over my batter with that slippery thing! Lena, give the child bread for bait!"

Tommy accepted the bread. "Guess I'll start for the lake now," he observed, tentatively.

Madam Tower stopped beating and looked at him quite terribly, under her glasses instead of over them.

"Lake fiddlesticks!" she intoned, exasperated. "What are you jabbering about? Who said anything about the lake?"

"Well, where am I going to fish?"

"Such a boy! Fish anywhere! Fish in the slop hopper!"

Tommy could hardly trust the ears that had heard. What had this terrible woman dared to say? The wrath of half a lifetime's ignominy burst in his heart.

"Grandmother," he choked, "either you or I can't stay in this house!" He drew himself up with blazing eyes.

His grandmother loomed over him; in one flour-whitened hand she raised her stick. Then she pushed him away.

"No, I won't!" she forebore. "I won't strike you on your birthday! Go to the sand pile, Thomas Tower, and shame on you for a naughty boy!"

Tommy walked out, with an awful thumping in his ears. His necktie strangled him. Tearing it off, he threw it into a rosebush, and instantly felt an odd release, as if up till now the silken trumpery had cut off his mind from the rest of him, so that no matter what his head might think, his hands and feet were compelled to move with Tower decorum. He glanced up at the ruffled curtains of his mother's room. Some day he would come back and save her, but now his own destiny called him.

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