

"You give up that talk right away!" exclaimed the woman. "Your father is astonishing the life out of me every day by the new way he's talkin' an' livin'. He's the best man in this town; I don't care if he has been in the penitentiary, I'm not going to hear a bit of fun made of him, not even by one of his own young ones."

All the brute in Tom's nature came to the surface in an instant, yet his amazement kept him silent and staring. It was such a slight, feeble, contemptible figure—that of the woman who was threatening to punish him—him, Tom Kimper, whom few men in town would care to meet in a trial of strength. It set Tom to thinking. He said afterwards the spectacle was enough to make a brickbat wake up and think. At last he exclaimed, tenderly: "Mother!"

The woman dropped her weapon and burst into tears, sobbing aloud, "You never said it that way before."

Tom was so astonished at what he saw and heard that he shuffled up to his mother and awkwardly placed his clumsy hand upon her cheek. In an instant his mother's arms were around his neck so tight that Tom feared he was being strangled.

"Oh, Tom, Tom! What's got into me? What's got into both of us? Ev'rythin's diff'rent from what it used to be. It's carryin' me right off my feet sometimes; I don't know how to stand it all, an' yet I wouldn't have it no other way for nothin'."

Tom could not explain, but he did something a great deal better; for the first time since he ceased being a baby and his mother began to tire of him, he acted affectionately to the woman who was leaning upon him. He put his strong arm around her, and repeated the single word "Mother," often and earnestly. As for Mrs. Kimper, no further explanation seemed necessary.

After mother and son had become entirely in accord, through methods which only heaven and mothers understand, Mrs. Kimper began to make preparations for the family's midday meal. While she worked, her daughter Jane appeared, and threw cold water upon a warm, affectionate glow by announcing, "I'm fired."

"What do you mean, child?" asked her mother.

"Just what I say. That young Rey Bartram—that's the Prency girl's feller—has been comin' to the house almost ev'ry day while I've been workin' there, an' he's been awful polite to me. He never used to be that way, when him and the other young fellers in town used to come down to the hotel, an' drink in the big room behind the saloon. Miss Prency got to askin' me questions about him this mornin', an' the less I told her the madder she got, an' at last she said somethin' that made me get up an' leave."

"What's *he* ever had to do with *you*?" asked Mrs. Kimper, after a long, wondering stare.

"Nothin', except to talk impudent. Mother, what's the reason a poor girl that don't ever look for any company above her always keeps findin' it when she don't want it?"

Mrs. Kimper got the question so mixed with her culinary