

THE MESSENGER.

That Terrible Tom.

A STORY FOR SUNDAY-SCHOOL TEACHERS.

(By William J. Lacey.)

The December dusk was thickening in the streets of Hipplebury, and the firelight was pleasant and cheerful in the cosy parlor of Kent Cottage. Saturday afternoon had come round, and Basil Trevor was home early from his office. He had his books spread out on his own table, and was giving the final touches to a Sunday-school lesson. There was only one other person in the room. It was his sister, and she had closed the book she was reading because of the increasing darkness.

'Haden't you better stop, Basil?' she said, 'you will do your eyes no good in these half-lights.'

'I am only memorizing,' he answered, 'and indeed I am through with it now. It is the last lesson I shall have to prepare for the present.'

'You intend to resign?'

'Yes; it is a decision I am very unwilling to come to, but I seem to have no choice. I make no headway with the class at all. Perhaps there may be an easier appointment vacant soon, and I could go into the school again then. Whatever others may say, you know, Madge, that I am not taking the step because I am tired of working for the Master.'

A light was on the young man's face and an inflection in his voice that testified to the truth of his words.

'No, I shall not think that of you,' said his sister, 'only—'

She stopped.

'Only what?'

'Forgive me, dear, I was wondering if it were not possible to deny the commands of duty by mistake in haste, when one is depressed and when everything looks blank.'

'That means that in your view I am wrong.'

'I do not go so far as that, Basil. But I wish you could see your way to hope on and to hold out. It is just one lad who gives you the chief trouble, as I understand?'

'That terrible Tom Houser! He ruins the discipline of the class, and is a ring-leader in all sorts of mischief. I cannot control him, and the officers are so reluctant to expel anyone; besides, I won't ask them to use severe measures. A new teacher may have more resources, and win Tom to better behavior. I shall be glad if my successor does succeed where I have failed.'

There was silence for some minutes, and it seemed to Basil that the absence of remark meant continued disapproval. He set a great store by Madge's opinion, though she was his junior, and he did not like this.

'Mother thinks I am acting for the best,' he added.

But this reference to Mrs. Trevor carried less weight than might have been the case in different circumstances. The widowed mistress of the house was a chronic invalid, and looked at all questions through darkened glasses.

Very softly, and as if to herself, Madge spoke at last:

'Jesus does not give Tom up.'

The young man turned abruptly and stood at the window with knit brows and hands in his pockets. He was not cross, but he was plunged into a fresh train of thought. The time had been, before his father's illness and death, when he was a thoughtless, wilful youth, in imminent danger from bad companions. Conscience spoke to him many times, and he had refused to hear. Strange providences crossed his path, with

their finger-mark directing into the ways of wisdom, and he had kept on in his reckless courses. But his Saviour had not forsaken him in his folly and waywardness. In the far country he had been found and reclaimed, and he had a lively sense of God's goodness vouchsafed to himself when most unworthy. The query would come now, What if he had been abandoned? What right had he to say that Tom Houser was incorrigible?

But his resolution had been a thing of slow growth, and was firmly rooted. He was soon using casuistical arguments in its defence. He did not say that that terrible Tom was past mending. All that his meditated action meant was, that Tom needed a more capable teacher. The change might easily be for Tom's good.

When he looked round Madge was gone, though he had not heard her steal away, and soon the servant came in to light up, and shut out the cold gloaming.

Basil Trevor had grown restless. Tea would not be ready yet for an hour or two. He would have a stroll. He took his hat and stick, and buttoned his coat tightly up to his throat, and went out into the town. He had neither destination nor turning-point before him. It seemed all chance which road he selected. There was a sense of relief from the pressure on mind and heart in quick movement. Once he spoke, alone, as sometimes those in perplexity get a trick of doing.

'It is all very well for Madge to counsel patience, always patience,' he growled under his breath; 'she doesn't have to put up with the impertinence. She isn't a teacher, her hands are full at home; and how can I draw back and stay, when I told Tom last week, that in consequence of his conduct I should only come one more Sunday. He would be worse than ever if I altered my mind.'

At this moment a diversion was created in Basil's thoughts, and yet the new direction which they took had a subtle, singular link with the old. He was nearly in the centre of Hipplebury High-street, and was still swinging along at a great pace. Neither shops nor people won his attention, until, at a corner, that which had been narrowly escaped before, happened—the impetuous young fellow came into collision with a lady.

'I beg your pardon,' he said instantly, with the solicitude of good breeding. And then he started and that terrible Tom was temporarily forgotten.

The girl who was smiling at him as her small gloved hand set straight her bonnet, was an old acquaintance. They had met when he was at his first situation with Shannon Bros., at Southampton. Myra Elborough was assistant in a post-office he had often had to visit. They had been fellow teachers in the same Sunday-school. He had sighed to think how little likely it was that he would ever see her or hear of her again now that he had exchanged the South coast for the Midlands. He had understood that her home was in London. The unexpected had come about, and sunshine seemed to break through his clouds, and he was face to face with Myra.

'Miss Elborough! this is a pleasure—not the crash, of course.'

'Please don't mind about apologizing, Mr. Trevor.'

'You are visiting in Hipplebury?'

'I am staying here until the New Year. I have left Southampton.'

'Yes?'

'Myra, are you ready?'

The speaker was a stout, elderly lady, unknown to Basil, upon whom she bestowed a puzzled stare.

'I knew this gentleman when I was at

Purcell's. Mamma—Mr. Trevor,' Myra said.

There was a stiff little bow, a deeper one from Basil, a merry smile from the girl, and the meeting was a thing of the past.

But not in its impression. Basil Trevor was tossed on a sea of conjectures. What had brought Miss Elborough here? Where was she staying? How could he make use of the introduction which he had received? And then the remembrance of the problem present with him when he started from Kent Cottage came back. He recalled the curious fact that when he first took charge of the class of lads who were almost young men, something in Tom Houser's face had reminded him of Myra Elborough.

He had come out to settle the question once for all, and then sternly to dismiss it. And his sister's words were with him. He repeated them mechanically:

'Jesus does not give Tom up.'

Was he sure that he was wholly loyal to his Lord if, having put his hand to the plough, he drew back through personal pique or disappointment? Was there not a better way? A prayer went up to the God who giveth wisdom. 'Let not self decide. Guide Thou me,' was the cry of his inmost soul.

He could have fancied that the answer came in a small, still whisper:—'In due season we shall reap, if we faint not.'

Basil Trevor sat down with his sister at the tea-table, and as they waited for Mrs. Trevor to appear, he said almost shamefacedly, 'I am going to try what a little more patience will do, Madge; I shan't resign my class for some weeks, at all events.'

The girl's face brightened. 'Do you know, I feel sure you will succeed yet with your terrible Tom,' she said. 'I shall earnestly pray that you may.'

The widow entered, and the topic was dropped.

On the morrow Basil went to school with a more serene spirit than at one time he would have thought possible. He had formed his plan, and it was not without an element of daring. He would try what a frank, straightforward talk would do with the scapegrace, and in the last and worst resort he would get the minister and superintendent to speak a few pointed words.

But the lesson was an ordeal. Tom was in his place and bent on frolic and defiance. He knew how to maintain such a measure of outward decorum as would save him from exposure, and yet be a sharp thorn in his teacher's side. He was a lad about fifteen years of age, of good education, and with obviously no excuse on the ground of coming from a poor and wretched home. His people were comparatively newcomers in Hipplebury, and Basil knew little of them. Basil had been to the house, but he had only seen the father, and his welcome was chilly.

When teaching was over the boys watched their teacher as if expecting an announcement and perhaps a farewell. But Basil merely laid a restraining finger on Tom Houser's arm as the youth was leaving the class-room.

'Do you mind meeting me here for a few minutes after dismissal,' he said, genially, 'I will not detain you long. You will do me a great favor if you will. May I expect you?'

Tom was taken aback. He had earned severity, and here was gentleness as well as mystery. The boy promised before he quite knew what he was doing. And he kept his word, which was better than Basil's fears.

Earnest wrestling with God had gone before this step. Basil stated candidly that he had had it much upon his mind to resign the class, and why. He knew that in acknowledging so much he was not broaching