

The Fireside.

FOR TOMMY.

BY LAURA RICHARDS.

It was New Year's Eve, but the tramp did not know that. He was tired and hungry. He had been walking all day, and had not been well treated. At many houses he had been turned away without ceremony; at others, work had been offered. Only one woman had taken him and fed him for nothing, and she had given him sage bread, which always disagreed with him, and cold tea. The profession was not what it had been cracked up to be, thought the tramp, and he began to think that the burglar had the best of it, after all. He had always called himself an honest man, and he now and then split wood, when he could not get food without, but, after all, was honesty the best policy? He knew burglars who had their little houses as neat and pretty as any one could wish to see. Texts round the walls, too, "God Bless Our Home," and all that. The tramp liked a pretty text. This very afternoon he had been walking with a burglar—they separated when they came to the village, in mutual though friendly disgust—who was going home with a New Year's present for his little boy—a gold watch it was. He had taken it from an old curmudgeon who kept it locked in a box doing no good to anybody. The burglar was going home to have a cosy time with his wife and child, and here was he, a tramp, an honest man, and not able to get a bite of supper. Decidedly, tramping was not what he had been led to believe it. He thought he should try stealing after all; he stopped, full of the thought, and looked around him.

A bright light shone from the window of a cottage hard by; the blind was up; the tramp stepped to the window and looked in. A neat, bright, cosy kitchen, a little old woman busy over the stove. No sign of masculine presence anywhere.

"I'll try here," said the tramp.

He opened the door without knocking and went in. The little woman looked up. "Good evenin'!" she said. "I didn't hear ye knock. What can I do for ye?"

"I want some money," said the tramp, in a hoarse voice, for he had made up his mind now.

"Well, I haven't got a cent!" said the little woman, "and if I had I wouldn't be fool enough to give it to you. So here it is, you see. But you can do something for me," she added, brightly. "You've come just in the nick of time. I want this soup taken to a sick boy round in the next street. His mother is sick, too, and can't cook things nice as he ought to have 'em; hasn't means to get 'em, neither, I expect; and I set out that he should have something good and hot to go to sleep on, and begin the new year with nourishment inside of him."

All the time she was talking, the little woman was busy getting out a bowl and cover and finding a clean napkin.

"Here!" she said, and she poured some of the steaming broth into a cup. "See if that ain't good! I guess likely 'tis."

The tramp glared at her, but drank the broth and said it was good.

"Then you take this!" said the little

woman. "Go round the corner to the fourth white house and say it's for Tommy. What ye waitin' fer?"

"I didn't come here to do errands!" said the tramp.

"Yes, you did!" said the little woman sharply. "That's just what you came for. I've been waiting the past half hour for the Lord to send me some one—I can't go out at night myself, for fear of the asthmy—and he sent you. Reckon he knows what he's about!"

She pushed the tramp out gently, but firmly, and shut the door on him.

"Well, I swan!" said the tramp.

He carried the bowl safely to the fourth white house from the corner. Once, indeed, he stopped on the way and muttered to himself:

"Tommy!" he said, and his tone expressed deep injury. "You'd think they might have called him William, or something else. There's names enough, you'd think, without hittin' on Tommy. But that's the way. A man doesn't have no chance!"

A horse and buggy stood before the white house, and when he knocked, the door was opened by a short, square man with "doctor" written all over him.

"What's this?" asked the doctor. "Soup!" said the tramp, "for Tommy!"

"Who sent you?" asked the doctor.

"Old woman, brown house round the corner. All right! If she sent you, I suppose you are a respectable fellow. Jump into my buggy and drive to 140 Gage Street. Give this note to my wife—Mrs. Jones—and bring me back the medicine she will give you. Hurry, now! I can't leave this boy, and I've been waiting half an hour for somebody to come along."

He nodded and shut the door.

"Well, I swan!" said the tramp again.

He pocketed the note and drove rapidly away. He did not know where Gage Street was, but a few questions put him on the right track, and after a drive of some minutes he drew up before a neat white villa standing back among well-trimmed shrubberies.

A lady answered his ring. She began to speak before she saw him. "Why, John!" she cried. "Did you forget your key? I heard the buggy wheels—oh, mercy! who is this?"

The tramp gave her the note, which she read quickly.

"Yes," she said. "Oh, certainly, I will get them at once. And while you are waiting"—she looked at the tramp, doubtfully. "The doctor sent you—it must be all—I wonder if you would be so very obliging as to look at the furnace for me? Our man is gone off—I don't know where he can be—and I am sure there's something wrong. The house is cold as a barn, and I can't leave the baby more than a moment, and my girl is sick. If you would be so kind!"

She showed him the cellar door and ran to get the medicine.

The tramp stumped down the cellar stairs, shook the furnace thoroughly, put coal on, and shut it up.

When he went up, the fire was burning well, and the doctor's wife was waiting for him with a packet and a cup of coffee.

"You must be cold!" she said. "And

I am so much obliged. I cannot imagine where Thomas can be."

"You're a lady, mum," said the tramp.

On the way back, he was hailed by a woman who came to her gate with a shawl over her head. "Say, mister, was you goin' anywhere near the post-office?"

"Most probably I was," said the tramp. "I'm in the delivery business to-night."

"Then if you'd post this letter for me I'd be a thousand times obliged to you. It's to my son, and he'll fret if he don't hear from me New Year's Day. Thank you, sir. I hope your mother feels comfortable about you this cold night."

The tramp winced at this. He said nothing, but took the letter and went.

As he drove by the street-lamp, a rough voice called out to him to stop. He checked the horse, and was aware of the burglar with whom he had walked and talked a few hours before.

"Hello, pal!" said the burglar. "You're in luck. Seems to me you was the feller that was goin' to stay an honest man, was you? And got a team already! That's smart business. Gimme a lift!"

The tramp grunted and shook his head. "I'm on an errand," he said.

"Sick granny!" said the burglar. "You go shares or I'll give you up."

He grasped the horse's bridle as he spoke, and his looks were ugly enough.

"All right," said the tramp, "jump in."

He drew back the ropes and held out his hand. The burglar left the horse's head and was in the act of springing into the buggy, when the well-directed blow sent him sprawling on his back in the road.

The tramp drove on rapidly. "Some folks ain't got no sense of what's right and fittin'," he muttered. "There's a time for everything. That's scripture."

He found the doctor waiting at the door of the white cottage.

"Sharp's the word!" said the doctor. "I was getting uneasy, my man."

"So was I," said the tramp. He explained that the hired man was gone and the lady had asked him to see to the furnace.

"Gone, was he?" said the doctor, and his face darkened. "Then that's the last time. He needn't come back, the tipsy rascal!"

Again he looked keenly at the tramp, who was shifting a buckle of the harness in a very knowing way.

"Know anything about horses?" he asked.

"Reckon," said the tramp.

"Who are you, anyhow?" asked the doctor.

"Well, I was wonderin'," said the tramp. "I took care o' horses five years. I been sick, and since then I began tramping a spell. To-night I started out to be a burglar, but I ain't had no chance. I might as well go back to work again and done with it."

"I think you might," said the doctor. "Come in and help me with this boy. He's pretty sick, and his mother's not much better."

"Well, it's all in the night's work," said the tramp. "I'll be dressmakin' before I'll get through with this."

He stepped inside, but stopped short at the bedroom door with a white face. A child's voice was heard within, asking for water.

"Who's that?" asked the tramp, staring at the doctor. "Whose voice is that?"

"Tommy's," said the doctor. "Tommy Trent."

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"O my Lord!" said the tramp. "How did he come here?"

"His mother came some weeks ago," said the doctor, "to get work in the mill. Good, steady woman. She was doing well till she fell sick, and then Tommy took this fever. Nice boy, Tommy. Do you know anything about them? They seem to be quite alone. There was an older son, I believe, but he seems to have got into bad ways and gone off. Do you know anything about Mrs. Trent?"

"Reckon," said the tramp. He hid his face against the wall for a moment, then he turned upon the doctor with flaming eyes. "Something's been after me to-night!" he said fiercely. "Things is all of a piece! I don't say what it is. You may call it the Lord, if you've a mind to. I shan't say nothin'; I tell you I ain't had no chance." He put the doctor aside with one hand, and slipped noiselessly into the low room.

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