

## SENTIMENTAL TOMMY.

Tommy was a nice youngster—fine-souled, sweet-hearted, laughter-loving. The first occasion on which I spoke to him was when I discovered him seated in a dugout in the trenches, plastered with mud from head to foot, and engrossed in a copy of Palgrave's "Golden Treasury." And a little later I made him my friend for life by lending him a copy of Gissing's "Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft." His enthusiasm over "Ryecroft" was refreshing.

He was twenty-two years old, but with his girlish complexion, his short crisp fair hair, and his blue eyes, he looked more boyish than his years; and he spoke with a pleasant Southern accent learned of an English mother. He was her only child, and usually referred to her as The Little Lady at Home—and with all the reverence that habitually characterises the soldier's references to his mother. For there is that in warfare which increases a man's appreciation of motherhood—raises it to worship. I have heard the roughest, most toughened, most

reckless soldiers speak with the tongues of angels when their thoughts turned to Her who waits and prays.

We were billeted in a ruined cottage in "Harley Street"—a road lying in rear of the firing-line, and communicating with it by a series of trenches. The roof had gone the way of all roofs in this neighbourhood, and above us was only the wooden floor of the upper storey. In one corner there was a jagged hole in this, several feet in diameter, and underneath it the stone floor of our apartment was wet and muddy. The sandbags stretched across the empty window frame bellied inwards, and the wind blew down the crumbling chimney-vent in fierce gusts, spraying lime dust and ashes into the room. Tommy and I crouched over a charcoal brazier placed close to the gaping hole in the wall where the fireplace had once been. Wrapped in their greatcoats and blankets a half-dozen other men lay on the floor, in those places most immune from draughts.

Tommy lit a cigarette and then, with hands outstretched to the brazier, sighed forth a thin cloud of tobacco smoke.

"I've got the blooming pip to-day," he confessed; "I dunno why, for I shouldn't have,

seeing that we came out of the trenches yesterday for four days."

"Guess you've been thinking of your leave, Tommy, and the good times you had at home a fortnight ago," said I, as I threw on a handful of charcoal and wiped my hands on my wet puttees.

"That's just what I was thinking about. I say, Leo, isn't it awful coming from that to this?"

He glanced scornfully around—at the cobwebbed wooden rafters of the ceiling, at the broken, discoloured plaster on the walls, at the muddy floor.

"And to think that only two weeks ago I was sitting in an armchair before a great fire, with all my heart's desire about and around and within me. The Little Lady was there too, looking as happy and pleased as though she'd just come into a fortune. . . ."

"I fancy you were the fortune that she'd found," I ventured, remembering the ways of mothers.

"That was it!" said Tommy with a sudden energy and a seriousness that were almost amusing. "She thinks I'm just 'It'—Me! A rotter like me!"

"But you're not such an awful rotter, Tommy, you're rather a good sort," I said half smiling.

“ Oh, but you don't know—you don't understand—nobody could. You've never seen the Little Lady. She's not really little, you know—she's as tall as I am, and she's a stunner for looks. I like grey hair—don't you? Hers is nearly white—yet she's quite young. She's a real sport, a topping good sort—the best pal in the world. I call her 'old fellow' sometimes, and she likes it.”

He gave the brazier a kick with his foot to shake up the charcoal, and went on—“ She fussed over me a lot when I was home—it was great to have her. I can't stick people fussing over me, as a rule, but I didn't mind her doing it then. She knows just what a fellow wants.”

The crackle of musketry and of machine gun fire came to our ears from the firing-line, and there was the faint dull sound of shells bursting far away.

“ Hear that !” said Tommy. “ They're at it again. . . . And two weeks ago I hardly knew there was a war on. I remembered you fellows often, and talked about you, but somehow I couldn't realise that you were still hogging it ' somewhere in France.' You seemed to belong to a period of my life long past. Why, the first thing I did when I reached home was to get into my old civvy clothes—and honestly I hardly

knew myself. I felt like the King of creation. When my throat was walled round again with a white linen collar—when I'd thrust my hands deep into my trousers pockets and jingled a bunch of keys and a few honest English shillings—I couldn't help laughing. I felt as though I'd suddenly recovered my individuality which I'd lost: I was no longer a mere number—the smallest of small cogs in the great military machine. I was the old ME, independent of action, free to do what and go where I chose. And as I walked along the streets I just didn't give a damn for anybody or anything."

There was a stunning roar—and another—and another—and the walls of the house shook. A battery of guns stationed a little distance behind our billet had opened fire on the German lines.

But the look of tender reminiscence still lingered in Tommy's eyes.

"Dear old Blighty!" said he.

And the shatter-batter of the guns continued.

Tommy rose and donned his greatcoat, for the tiny charcoal fire was insufficient to drive the chill from our bones. When he had re-seated himself—

"You know," said he, "I never realised how great was the refining influence of women

until I joined the Army and was divorced from all feminine society. A good woman's society breeds fineness of soul in a man: where women are, the very atmosphere seems softer, sweeter, purer, don't you think? I felt it so when I was with the Little Lady . . . and others."

"And another, don't you mean, Tommy?" I queried in mild amusement.

He laughed—half shyly. "I see what you're driving at. Yes, maybe you're right. I had only two women in mind when I spoke—the Little Lady and . . . another. But it's true, isn't it? I know that when I returned here my soul sickened at the rough, coarse talk of some of the boys—I hated it—yet now after only a fortnight I hardly notice it. The woman influence has worn off."

"Hardly that," I interpolated. "You've simply come to realise again that all the oaths you hear are meaningless: they're the result, not so much of mental depravity as of mental laziness—thoughtlessness."

"I know that; I'd got into the habit of talking loosely and coarsely myself before I went on leave, but I forgot all that when I was with the Little Lady again."

"And another," I interjected.

“Oh, that’s understood,” he laughed. Then, serious still, “But you’re not to think from what I’ve said that I’m not glad to be with the boys. After all’s said and done, I’d rather be hogging it in the mud with them than be anywhere else. They’re great, aren’t they?—Sports, every one of ’em. It’s worth while to have lived just to have known and been able to appreciate so many real men. I’m often glad now that I didn’t take a commission—that I didn’t shirk the last least bit of hardship—I’m glad I’m just a common swed, doing the same little bit as the humblest, most uneducated man in the land. It makes me realise so much more that I’m that fellow’s brother—and I don’t think I’d like to feel that I was leaving the unpleasantest work for another man to do.”

“Sentimental Thomas Atkins!” said I.

“Huh! That’s what the Little Lady calls me sometimes—Sentimental Tommy.”

The Artist rose from the dark corner where he had been lying, shook himself like a retriever just emerged from water, and came forward to the brazier.

“Br-r-r!” he shivered. “I feel exactly like a ha’p’orth of ice cream. It’s not half *froid*.”

He squatted on the floor close beside the brazier.

“What the dickens have you chaps been talking about for the last hour? I’ve heard you mumbling away like a pair of old crones. Wonder what sort of night it is!”

He rose and went to the doorway, pulled aside the waterproof sheet that served as door, and looked out.

“Bon!” said he. “It’s started to freeze—and the moon and stars and all the elements of romance are here—all except the girl. ‘Bokoo’ shells bursting up in the firing-line. . . . Eh! there’s a big dirty one . . . hear it?—and the Allemands are sending up as many flares as there are stars in the sky. They’ve got the wind up, sure. Reg’lar theatrical performance it is.”

The Artist stepped outside to view the fireworks.

“I was at a theatre one night while I was home,” said Tommy suddenly, apropos of the last remark. “And I don’t think I ever enjoyed anything so much. It was a musical show—lots of singing and dancing and pretty girls—and I daresay it wasn’t great of its kind. But I wasn’t critical—it was the first theatrical performance I’d seen for eighteen months, and I enjoyed it immoderately.



“ Did you ever remark how often over here one’s thoughts turn to plays that one has seen in the past ? It’s so with me, anyway. Often and often, when cold and miserable in the trenches, I’ve found myself picturing some revue or musical play that I’ve seen, and a craving has arisen in me to experience again all the old joyousness of it—a craving as strong as that of hunger. The fluffy, frilly girls—the gay dresses—the bright lights and the painted scenery—and the irresponsible frivolity of it all—I’ve longed for that as a world-weary man might long for heaven. And I’ve known one of those jingling, pretty-pretty melodies of the theatre—the kind you tire of after you’ve heard them twice—haunt me and move me almost to tears. For somehow they carry such a wealth of association with them—like music from a better, brighter world—one we knew of old and lost. . . .

“ Well, when I was in the theatre at home I seemed to have regained that light, bright, care-free world, and somehow at the back of my mind all the time was a faint consciousness of the miseries of the trenches, and doubtless the involuntary contrast quickened my enjoyment of the play.”

“ Was the Little Lady with you that night ?”  
I asked.

There was a shy roguishness in his smile as he answered, "Nitski! Not that night. It was Helen of Troy who was with me then."

"A Trojan?"

"You bet! A trump—a—a——."

"'Queen rose of the rosebud garden of girls,'" I suggested.

"Now you've got it! She's all that—and then some more. She's the best of the best."

"Next to the Little Lady, of course?"

"I dunno—The Little Lady's first, of course—but Helen's first too. But what's the use of talking? Want to see her? Half a minute!"

From the pocket inside the cover of his pay-book he produced a photograph—that of a sweet-faced girl.

Tommy broke in upon my admiring comments.

"But that isn't really good of her. She's heaps better-looking than that—although she can't help looking nice there too. But you get no idea from that of the bluey-black shadows in her hair, or of the warmth and softness and tenderness in her brown eyes. And her complexion doesn't——"

"Now look here, Tommy, you're giving yourself away completely," I interjected.

“Huh! I fancy I did that when I was at home . . . to her,” he laughed softly.

“So this is Miss One-and-Only, is it? You young oyster, you never said a word about her to me before.”

He laughed delightedly. “No, I didn’t talk much about her, but maybe I thought a lot.”

“And now you’ll be dreaming golden dreams of being happy ever *après la guerre*.”

“Something like that, I suppose. But even after the Big Job is finished I’ll have much to do before my dreams materialise. I know they will—some day! I’ve a feeling in my bones. When I first came out to France, over a year ago, I felt sure I’d be one of the first to be knocked out. I looked for bad luck, and it didn’t come. But after coming through the hell of the Richebourg bombardment my bad presentiments completely vanished, and I knew I was destined to come through this war safely. And I’m sure of it now. The shell hasn’t been made yet that’s got my name scratched on it.”

Here The Artist entered again.

“I’m nearly frozen watching those fire-works,” said he. “Any of you got any water in your bottles to make tea?”

None of us had, but the idea of a hot drink appealed to us.

"The water carts are just a couple of hundred yards along the road," said The Artist. "Let's toss to decide who goes for water."

We tossed and Tommy was odd man out. He picked up a mess-tin and two water-bottles.

"Be back in five minutes," said he, and disappeared.

The Artist and I stoked the fire and brought it to a red glow. Nearly a quarter of an hour elapsed before we heard footsteps outside. But it was not Tommy.

Ginger burst in breathlessly. "Where's Tommy's kit? Quick! It's to be taken along to the dressing-station now."

"What's up?" I asked in alarm as I rose.

"Tommy's been hit. A stray bullet caught him just along the road a wee bit—between here and the water carts. Plugged him clean—drilled him through the stomach. I'm afraid he's 'na-poo'h'd.'"

"God's truth!" said The Artist helplessly.

Tommy "went West" a few hours later; he never left the Field Dressing Station. And next day a parcel came for him and, in accordance with an unwritten law of Army messes, his messmates opened it. But we all choked a

little over the grub it contained, and didn't relish it as much as usual : and inside the parcel there was a card inscribed " To My soldier, Sentimental Tommy, with love from The Little Lady." And we all choked a little over the reading of that too.