



LOST TOMMY JEPPTS

BY
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I. AT Stratford Main Railway Station there are about half-a-dozen platforms, with stairs and an underground passage to join them; and on Bank Holiday all these platforms, as well as the stairs and the passage and the booking-offices, are packed so closely with excited people that there seems to be no room for one single walking-stick more, even a thin one. The fortunate persons in front stick to the edge of the platform somehow by their heels, in defiance of all natural laws. When a train arrives, the people in the booking-office rush at the passage, the people in the passage rush at the stairs, the people on the stairs rush at the platform, and nothing seems left for the people on the platform but slaughter and destruction, beginning with the equilibrists at the edge. And yet nobody gets killed. Half the people seem to be on the wrong platforms, but are wholly unable to struggle through to the right ones; and I believe the other half are on the wrong platforms too, but don't know it. And yet everybody seems to get somewhere, eventually.

Jepps's family party was one of a hundred others in Stratford Station, and in most respects very like ninety-five of them at least. There was Thomas Jepps himself, head of the family by courtesy, but now struggling patiently at its tail, carrying the baby always, and sometimes also carrying Bobby, aged four. There was Mrs. Jepps, warm and short of temper; there were Aunt Susan, rather stout, and Cousin Jane, rather thin; and there was Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt, warmer than Tilda Jepps and stouter than Aunt Susan, and perpetually losing something, or losing herself, or getting into original difficulties in the crowd. And then, beside the baby and Bobby, there were Tommy and Polly, whose ages were eight and five respectively, though it was Polly who tyrannized. It was the way of this small woman to rate her bigger brother in imitation of her mother's manner; and Tommy, who had the makings of a philosopher, was, as a rule, moodily indifferent to the scolding of both, so long as he judged himself beyond the radius of his mother's arm and hand.

"What 'a' you bin an' done with the tickets now?" demanded Mrs. Jepps of her husband in the midst of the wrestle in the booking-office.

"Me?" asked Jepps, innocently, from behind the baby's frills. "Me? I—I dunno. Ain't you got 'em?"

"Yes," piped Tommy, partly visible beneath the capacious lunch-bag of Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt. "Yes, mother's got 'em!"

"You look after your little brother an' don't go contradictin' me!" snapped Mrs. Jepps. "Of course I ain't got 'em," she went on to Jepps. "You've bin an' lost 'em, that's what you've done!"

"Don't contradict mother," Polly echoed, pragmatically, to her wicked brother. "You be a good boy an' look after Bobby. That's what you've got to do. Ain't it, mother?"

"Oh, don't worrit me!" answered the distracted parent. "Where's them tickets? Did he give 'em to you, Aunt Susan?"

Aunt Susan hadn't seen them, and passed the question on to Cousin Jane. Cousin Jane, with a reproachful look at the unhappy Jepps, declared that he had never given them to *her*, whatever he might say or fancy; and her sister's young man's aunt gasped and stared and swayed in the crowd, and disclaimed all knowledge of the tickets; also she announced that whatever had become of them she expected to be taken to Southend, and that whatever happened she wasn't going to pay again. Poor Jepps defended himself weakly, but he was generally held to have spoiled the day's pleasure at the beginning. "I think you've got 'em, really, 'Tilda," he protested; "look in your purse!"

"Yes," piped Tommy once more, this time from behind Aunt Susan; "I see mother put 'em in her purse!"

Mrs. Jepps's plunge at Tommy was interrupted by Jepps. "You might look, at least," he pleaded.

"Look!" she retorted, tearing open her bag and snatching the purse from within. "Look yourself, if you won't believe your own wife!" She spread the purse wide, and displayed—the tickets; all in a bunch, whole tickets and halves mixed together.

"He'd better not let me get hold of him," said Mrs. Jepps, a moment later, nodding fiercely at Tommy. "Aggravatin' little wretch! He'll drive me mad one o' these days, that's what he'll do!"

With that the family was borne full drive against the barrier, and struggled and tumbled through the gate, mingled with stray members of other parties; all to an accompaniment of sad official confusion in the matter of what ticket belonged to which. But there was no easy rallying in the sub-

way. The crowd pressed on, and presently Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt got into a novel complication by reason of her umbrella (which she grasped desperately in the middle) somehow drifting away horizontally into the crowd at her full arm's length, so that in a moment she was carried irresistibly up the first steps of the wrong staircase, clinging to her property with might and main, trailing her lunch-bag behind her, and expostulating with much clamour. Jepps, with the baby, watched her helplessly; but Tommy, ducking and dodging among the legs of the crowd, got ahead of her, twisted the umbrella into a vertical position, and, so releasing it, ducked and dodged back again. Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt was very angry, and the crowd disregarded her scolding altogether—laughed at it, in fact; so that Tommy, scrambling back triumphantly through the crush, came very handy for it.

"If I was yer mother I'd give you a good sound hidin', that's what I'd do," said Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt.

Tommy began to feel resentful, philosopher as he was. And when his mother, having with difficulty been convinced that the staircase she insisted on was another wrong one, and that the one advised by Tommy was right, forthwith promised him one for himself when she got him home, he grew wholly embittered, while his sister Polly openly triumphed over him. And so, with a few more struggles and family separations (Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt was lost and recovered twice), the party at length found itself opposite an open third-class carriage door, and climbed in with all the speed it might.

"Ah, well," said Aunt Susan, "here we are at last, an' no more bother till we get to Southend, any'ow."

"There'll be a lot afore you get there in this train, mum," observed a cynical coster, who had been greatly impressed—on the toes—by Aunt Susan's weight.

"What!" exclaimed Cousin Jane; "this is the Southend train, ain't it?"

"No, mum," replied the coster, calmly; "it ain't."

Mrs. Jepps caught at the door, but it was too late. The train was gathering speed, and in a few seconds it was out of the station. "There," said Mrs. Jepps, desperately, "I knew it was the wrong platform!"

"Then you was wrong again, mum," pursued the sardonic coster; "'cos it was the right 'un. But this 'ere's the wrong train."



"WHAT! EXCLAIMED COUSIN JANE; 'THIS IS THE SOUTHEND TRAIN, AIN'T IT?'"

"Mother!" squeaked Polly, viciously, "Tommy says—go away, I *will* tell—Tommy says he knew it was the wrong train when we got in."

"What! You young—you didn't! How did you know?"

"Read it on the board," said Tommy, sulkily. "Board in front of the engine. C.O.L, Col, C.H.E.S.T.-chest, E——"

"Take him away, somebody," yelped Mrs. Jepps. "Take the little imp out o' my sight or I'll kill him—I know I shall! Knew it was the wrong train an' let us get in! I—oh!"

"Why," pleaded Tommy, in doleful bewilderment, "when I told you about the tickets you said I was drivin' you mad, an' when I told you about the platform you said you'd whop me when you got me home, an' now 'cos I didn't tell you about the train——"

"He's a saucy young varmint, that's what *he* is," interrupted Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt, whose misfortunes were telling on her temper as well as reddening her face. "Lucky for him he ain't a child o' mine, that's all. I'd show him!"

"So would I!" added Cousin Jane.

"He's a perfect noosance to bring out," said Aunt Susan; "that's what he is!"

"You're a naughty, wicked boy, Tommy!" said his superior little sister.

Tommy's spirits sank to the lowest

stage of dejection. There was no understanding these grown-up people and no pleasing them. They were all on to him except his father, and even he seemed sadly grieved, in his mild fashion.

The cynical coster had been chuckling in a quiet, asthmatic sort of way, rather as though some small but active animal was struggling in his chest. Now he spoke again.

"It's all right, mum," he said. "Don't be rough on the kid. You can change at Shenfield, jest as good as if you come in the right train all the way."

This was better, and the spirits of the party rose accordingly; though their relief was balanced by a feeling of undignified stultification.

"Givin' us all a fright for nothing," said Aunt Susan, with an acid glare at the unhappy Tommy. "It's a pity some children ain't taught to keep their mouths shut!"

"Why, so I did, an' mother said she'd——"

"Be quiet, now!" interrupted Mrs. Jepps. "Be quiet! You've done quite enough mischief with your clatter. Catch me bringing you out again on a holiday, that's all!"

And so for the rest of the journey Tommy remained in the lowest depths of despondency; never exhibiting the smallest sign of rising to the surface without being instantly shoved down again by a reproof from somebody.

The cynical coster got out at Romford,

with another asthmatic chuckle and an undisguised wink at Tommy. The train joggled along through Harold Wood and Brentwood to Shenfield Junction, and there the party found the Southend train at last. With the people already there they more than filled the compartment, and Tommy had to stand, a distinction which cost him some discomfort; for when he stood by the door he was blamed for interfering with Polly's and Bobby's enjoyment of the landscape, and when he moved up the carriage his efforts to maintain his equilibrium seriously disturbed the repose of Aunt Susan's corns.

The day was bright, and Southend was crowded thick everywhere with holiday-makers. Mrs. Jepps rallied her party and adjured Tommy. "Now you, Tommy, see if you can't begin to behave yourself, an' take care of your little brother an' sister. S'pose a man was to come and take *them* away! Then I s'pose you'd wish you'd been a better boy, when it was too late!"

"I'd make him wish it a quicker way than that!" said Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt, spitefully; for she had not yet got over her earlier misfortunes.

As the words left her mouth a horrible squeak rent her ears, and a long pink "trunk"—one of those paper tubes which, when blown, extend suddenly to a yard long

trumpeting away in the crowd, a trickle of fragrant liquor, which would have smelt much the same if it had been gin, issued from the lunch-bag and wandered across the pavement. And Tommy Jepps, startled in the depth of his gloom, hastily stuffed his fist against his mouth, and spluttered irrepressibly over the knuckles. For indeed in his present state of exasperation Tommy had little sympathy for the misfortunes of so very distant a relation as Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt.

Tommy's father was mildly horrified, and murmured deprecatingly from among the baby's frills. "Tommy!" he said, in an awe-struck whisper. "Tommy! Nothing to laugh at!"

"Get out o' my sight," cried Mrs. Jepps, making a miss at Tommy's head with her own bag. "Get out of my sight before I——"

Tommy got out of it with all possible celerity, and took his place in the extreme rear of the procession which formed as soon as the lunch-bag had been recovered and cleared of broken glass. The procession, with a score of others like it, went straggling along the High Street towards the beach, where the crowd was thicker than ever.

There were large open spaces, with shows, and swings, and roundabouts, and stalls, and

cocoa-nut shies, and among these the Jepps column wound its way, closing up and stopping here and tailing out lengthily there. It stopped for a moment before a shooting-gallery, and then lengthened out in the direction of a band of niggers; arrived opposite the niggers it closed up once more, and Mrs. Jepps looked about to survey her forces. There was Jepps, perspiring freely under the burden of the baby, for the day was growing hot; there were Aunt Susan, Cousin Jane, and Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt, whose shorter name was Mrs. Lunn, red and ruffled;

there were Polly and Bobby; but—Mrs. Jepps gave a second glance round before she would believe it—there was *not* Tommy.

Mrs. Jepps's chin dropped suddenly, and she began darting and dodging, looking this



"WITH A GASP AND A BOUNCE SHE LET GO UMBRELLA AND LUNCH-BAG TOGETHER."

and as suddenly retreat into a little curl—shot over her shoulder into her eye, and was gone again. With a gasp and a bounce she let go umbrella and lunch-bag together; and, while a grinning boy went dancing and

way and that, among the crowd. "Tommy!" she cried, "You Tommy!" with a voice still a little angry, but mainly anxious. "Mercy on us, where's the child gone?"

Jepps came back, with blank alarm on so much of his face as was visible above the baby and its clothes, and the rest of the party started dodging also. But all to no purpose. Their calls were drowned in the general hubbub, and their questings to and fro were fruitless; Tommy was lost!

"Oh! my child!" cried Mrs. Jepps; "my lovely, darling boy! What shall I do? He's lost! He's been stole! The best child as ever was!"

"Such a little dear!" said Cousin Jane.

"Such a jool of a duck!" said Aunt Susan, affected almost to tears.

"Oh, oh!" gasped Mrs. Jepps, with signs of flopping and fainting; "an'—an'—you called him a noosance!"

"An' you called him an imp!" retorted Aunt Susan. "You should ha' treated him better when you had him."

"If he was a child of mine," said Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt, sententiously, "I'd ha' been a little more patient with him."

Jepps was off to the nearest stall to ask the stall-keeper if he had seen a boy. It seemed that the stall-keeper had seen a good many boys that morning. But had he seen Jepps's own boy? This conundrum the stall-keeper gave up without hesitation.

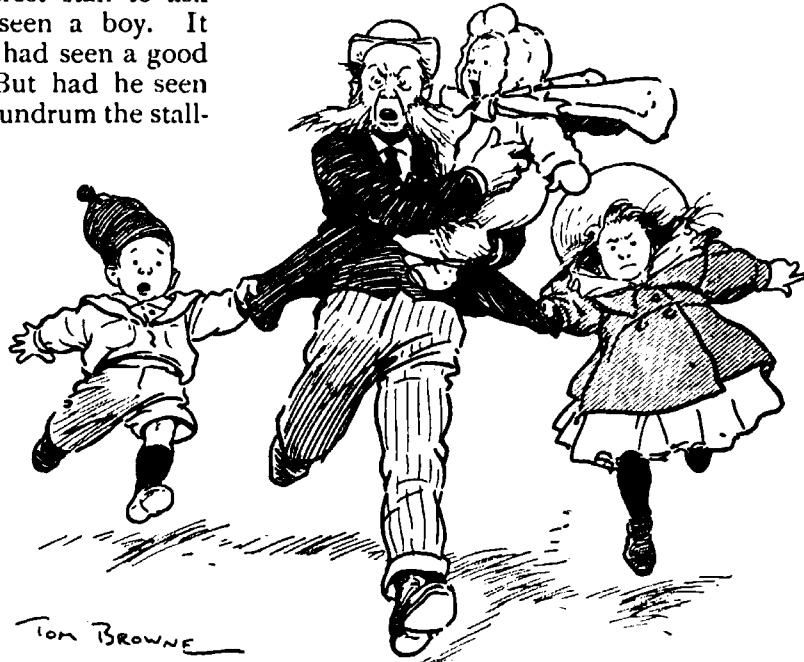
But Jepps's example did something, and presently the whole party scattered for the hunt. Jepps was left with the baby in his arms and the other two children about his knees, and he had strict orders not to lose any of them nor to wander far from a certain indicated point, near which the rest of the party might find him on occasion. He was not allowed to join in the search because somebody must take care of the children and Mrs. Jepps felt that she would die of suspense if condemned to wait inactive.

Mrs. Jepps was anything but inactive, and the other ladies were as busy as Mrs. Jepps. Before they separated they seized on a wandering apple-woman, who was confused and badgered into a cloudy admission that

she *had* seen a boy with a man somewhere a little while ago, or perhaps rather before that, and, her replies being considered evasive, she was unanimously suspected of complicity.

It speedily grew apparent that small boys with men, together with small boys plain, were rather numerous in the many crowds; and one mistaken pursuit followed another for a sad long time, while Aunt Susan narrowly escaped a visit to the police-station on a charge preferred by the indignant parent of a child whom she chased and seized violently from behind, because of a supposed resemblance to Tommy when viewed from that aspect.

So it came to pass that, Aunt Susan having rejoined Mrs. Jepps, the two, fatigued and a trifle hysterical, returned to where they had left Jepps. As they turned the last corner, a red-headed man, with his hat in his hand, came running past them and vanished in the crowd, while they almost immediately perceived Jepps in the distance striving his utmost to raise a gallop, while Polly and Bobby hung to his coat-tails, and the baby tumbled and struggled in his arms.



"STOP HIM!"

"Stop him!" cried Jepps, choking with the breathlessness of his trot and the flapping of the baby's cape over his mouth. "Stop him! It's him! He's stole my——"

"The villain!" cried Mrs. Jepps, turning and charging the crowd. "Stop him! He's stole my child!"

"Stop him!" gasped Jepps again. "He snatched my——"

But Mrs. Jepps and Aunt Susan were deep in the crowd, chasing and grabbing this time at red-headed men. Red-headed men, however, were scarce in that particular corner just at the moment, and the scarcest of all was the particular red-headed man who had rushed past them.

Jepps, gasping still, came up with his wife and Aunt Susan in the midst of a knot of people, answering the inquiries of curious sympathizers as he came along.

"Was it a good 'un?" asked another family man, with another baby in his arms, just as Jepps reached his wife.

"Yes," answered Jepps, "a real good 'un!"

"The best in the world!" sobbed Mrs. Jepps.

"I won it in a raffle," Jepps added.

"What?" cried Aunt Susan, "won it in a raffle? What do you mean? Is this a time for sich jokes, Thomas?"

"Jokes?" bleated poor Jepps. "It ain't no joke! He stole my watch, I tell you! Snatched it while I was a-trying to keep baby quiet!"

"Your watch!" Mrs. Jepps exclaimed. "Your watch! Thomas Jepps, you ain't fit to be trusted neither with a watch nor a family, you ain't!"

II.

TOMMY had lagged behind a little at the rifle-gallery, a place where you shot into a sort of tunnel with a target at the other end. The tunnels—there were four of them—interested him deeply, and he walked round to the side of the establishment to see how they were built. They were long, tapering metal tubes, it seemed, painted red. Tommy walked along to the very end, hoping to see something of the target mechanism, but that was boxed in. Here, at some little distance from where his wandering started, his attention was arrested by a man in a little crowd, who offered to eat a lighted newspaper for the small subscription of two shillings. It seemed to Tommy that so handsome an offer must be closed with at once, so he pushed into the crowd.

And that was how Tommy Jepps was lost. For each individual member of that crowd agreed with Tommy, feeling convinced that some of the others would be sure to subscribe so reasonable a sum without delay, so that the subscription was a long time beginning. And when at last it did begin it grew so slowly that at last the champion fire-swallower of the world and elsewhere

was fain to be content with eighteenpence, at which very reasonable sum his contract was completed. Having witnessed this, Tommy's eyeballs retired to their normal place in his head, and his mouth, which had been wider open than the fire-swallower's, closed slowly. The crowd opened out, and Tommy, who had been effectually buried in it for half an hour, awoke to the realization that the rest of his party were nowhere to be seen.

For the moment it seemed a rather serious thing. Then, with a pause of reflection, he saw his misfortune in quite another light. He looked cautiously about him, and, after a little more consideration, he resolved that he would not be found—just yet, at any rate. He had enjoyed the society of his family for some time, and he resolved on a temporary change.

Tommy was not only a philosopher, but a sagacious boy of business. He had come out for a day's pleasure, but he must attend to business first; and one piece of business must needs be transacted to make things quite secure. So he started off back to the railway-station, keeping a wary eye for his relations as he went.

The station was just a little less crowded now, though it was busy enough still. Tommy had not quite settled how, exactly, he should set about his business, but he kept his eyes open and looked out for a friend. Grown-up people, as a rule, were difficult to negotiate with; you never could tell for certain what they would do or say next, and it was apt to be something unpleasant when it came. But there was a sort of grown-up persons—Tommy could never have described them—who were quite excellent, and always behaved like bricks to boys. And they were not such a rare sort of people, either. So he kept watch for some person of this kind, resolved to ask help and advice. Presently he saw one—a stout, red-faced man in a staring tweed suit, with a big gold watch-chain. Several other stout men were with him, and they were all laughing and chuckling together at a joke one of them had made about half an hour before.

"Please, sir!" said Tommy, craning his neck up at the red-faced man.

"Eh! Halloa!" said the man, almost falling over him. "Well, young 'un, what's up?"

"Please, sir, will they give me another ticket home, and who ought I to go and ask for it?"

"Another ticket home? What for? Lost your own?"

"No, sir—mother's got it. But I've lost mother."

"O—o—o—oh! Lost your mother, eh? Well, would you know your way home if you had the ticket?"

"Yes, sir. But"—this with a sudden apprehension—"but I don't want to go home yet."

"No? Why not?"

"I come out to have a holiday, sir."

"Stratford, sir."

"That's all right," said the loser, moving off with his hand in his pocket. "I was a bit rash. It might ha' been Manchester!"

"That's saved me one d," observed the red-faced man, spinning his shilling again, and dexterously transferring it to Tommy's startled palm. "You go an' buy the town, you despr'it young rip! An' take care you don't go losing the last train!"



"PLEASE, SIR, WILL THEY GIVE ME ANOTHER TICKET HOME?"

The red face broadened into a wide grin, and some of the stout men laughed outright. "So you're goin' off on the spree all by yourself, are you?" said the red-faced man. "That's pluck. But if you go asking for another ticket they'll keep you in the office till your mother comes for you, or take you to the police-station. *That* wouldn't be much of a holiday, would it?"

Tommy was plainly dismayed at the idea, and at his doleful face several stout men laughed aloud. "Come, Perkins," said one, "it's only one and a penny, half single. I'll toss you who pays!"

"Done!" replied the red-faced man. "Sudden death—you call," and he spun a shilling.

"Heads!" called the challenger.

"Tails it is," was the answer. "You pay. What station, young 'un?"

Tommy was almost more amazed than delighted. This was magnificent—noble. As soon as he could, he began to think. It was plain that being lost had its advantages—decided advantages. Those stout men wouldn't have looked at him a second time in ordinary circumstances, but because he was lost—behold the shilling and the railway ticket! Here was a discovery: nothing less than a new principle in holiday-making. Get lost, and make your holiday self-supporting.

He did not buy the town, but began modestly with a penn'orth of bulls'-eyes, to stimulate thought. He sucked them pensively, and thought his hardest: thought so hard, indeed, that in his absence of mind he swallowed a bull's-eye prematurely, and stood staring, with a feeling as of a red-hot brick passing gradually through his chest, and an

agonized effort to remember if he had heard of people dying through swallowing bulls'-eyes whole. The pain in the chest presently passed off, however, and he found himself staring at a woman with a basket of apples and oranges.

"Apples, three a penny," said the woman, enticingly. "Oranges, a ha'penny each. There's nice ripe 'uns, my dear!"

"I've lost my mother," replied Tommy, irrelevantly.

"Lost yer mother!" responded the woman, with much sympathy. "Why, I wonder if you're the little boy as I was asked about? Has yer father got pale whiskers an' a round 'at, an' a baby which knocks it off, an' yer mother an' three other ladies an' yer little brother an' sister?"

Tommy nodded—perhaps rather guiltily.

The woman swung her basket on her arm and gave him an energetic push on the shoulder. "You go straight along down there, my dear," she said, pointing, "an' then round to the left, an' yer father's waiting by the second turning. Don't forget! Here—have an apple!" And she thrust one into his hand. "And an orange," she added, impulsively, stuffing one into his jacket-pocket.

This was really very satisfactory. He had half expected the apple, but the orange was quite an extra—in fact, the whole contribution had been wrung from the honest apple-woman by the pathetic look occasioned by the swallowing of the bull's-eye. Tommy went off in the direction she indicated, but somehow made the mistake of turning to the right instead of to the left at the critical point, being much occupied with thought. For he was resolving to look, all day, as pathetic as could be expected of a boy with a holiday all to himself, and an entirely new invention to make it pay.

And, indeed, the invention paid very well. Tommy perambulated the crowded beach on a system of scouting devised for the occasion. He made a halt at each convenient booth or stand, and from behind it carefully reconnoitred the crowd in front. No doubt he was searching anxiously for his sorrowing relatives; but somehow, though he altogether failed to meet them, he never seemed disappointed.

And meantime, as I have said, the invention worked excellently. He did not always set it in motion by the mere crude statement that he had lost his mother—he led up to it. He asked people if they had seen her. In this way he procured a short sea voyage, by

interesting the mother of an embarking family which did not quite fill the boat. He had his railway ticket, he explained, and could get home, but meantime he must make his holiday as best he might. That excellent family yielded a penny and a bun, as well as the experience in navigation. A similar family was good for a turn on a roundabout.

"Got no change," said the roundabout man, as roundabout men do. For it is their custom, if possible, to postpone giving change, in the hope of their patrons emerging from the machine too sick and giddy to remember it. "Got no change. I'll give it you when you come off."

"Not you," retorted paterfamilias, made cunning by experience. "You'll be too busy, or forget, or something. Here's a boy what's looking for his mother; we'll make up the tanner with him."

So the morning went; and Tommy acquired a high opinion of the generosity of his fellow-creatures, and a still higher one of his own diplomacy. Not that it always succeeded. It failed sometimes altogether. There was a cocoa-nut shy proprietor, for instance, whose conduct led Tommy to consider him a very worthless person indeed. He began by most cordially inviting Tommy to try his luck—called him a young sportsman, in fact. Tommy was much gratified, and selected a stick.

"Money first," said the man, extending a dirty palm.

"Lost my mother," replied Tommy, confidently, having come to regard this form of words as the equivalent of coin of the realm.

"What?" The man's face expressed furious amazement.

"Lost my mother," Tommy repeated, a little louder, surprised to find anybody so dull of comprehension.

"'Ere, get out!" roared the outraged tradesman, who was not educated to the point of regarding a cocoa-nut shy a necessity of life for a lost boy. "Get out!" And he snatched the stick with such energy that Tommy got out with no delay.

He was so far cast down by this ruffian's deplorable ignorance of the rules of the game that his next transaction was for cash.

He saw a man selling paper "trunks" of the sort that had so seriously startled Mrs. Lunn on the family's first arrival, and he greatly desired one for himself. But the trunk-merchant was an unpromising-looking person—looked, in fact, rather as though he might be the cocoa-nut man's brother. So

Tommy paid his penny, and set out to amuse himself.

The toy was quite delightful for a while, and utterly confounded and dismayed many respectable persons. But after a little time it began to pall; chiefly, perhaps, because it interfered with business. If you wish to appeal to the pity of any lady or gentleman in the character of a lost child, it is not diplomatic to begin by blowing a squeaking paper "trunk" into that lady's or gentleman's face. It strikes the wrong note, so to speak: doesn't seem to lead up to the subject. So presently Tommy tired of the "trunk," and devised a new use for it. For he was a thrifty boy, and wasted nothing.

He looked about to find some suitable person to whom to offer the article for sale, and at length he fixed on a comfortable old lady and gentleman who were sitting on a newspaper spread on the sand, eating sandwiches. Now to the superficial it might seem that a stout and decorous old couple of about sixty-five years of age, and thirty-two stone total weight, were not precisely the most likely customers on Southend beach for such an implement as Tommy had to offer.

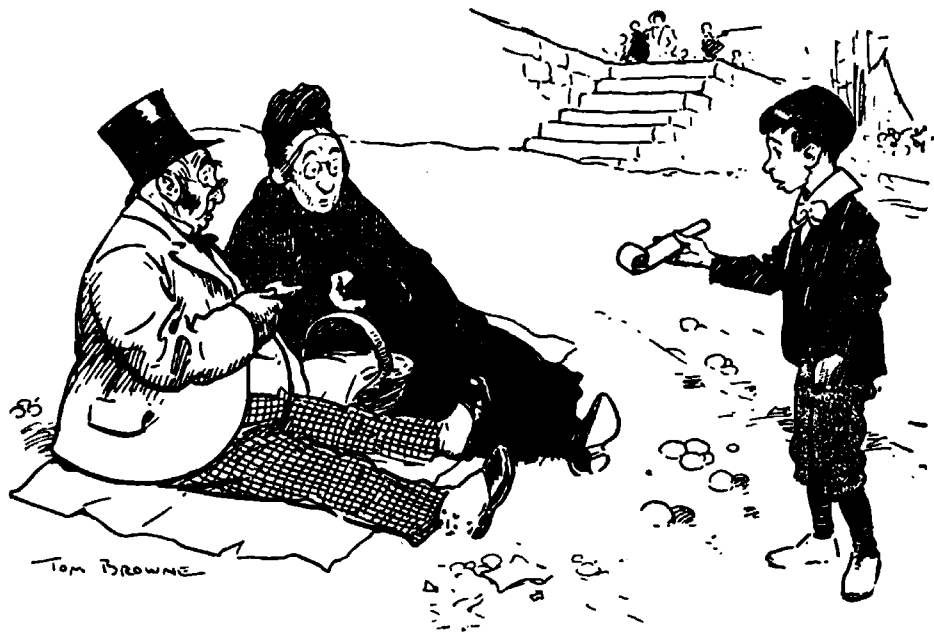
lady; "we don't want a thing like that!" And the old gentleman sat speechless—partly because his mouth was full of sandwich.

"I've lost my mother," said Tommy.

For a moment more the old couple continued to stare, and then the old lady realized the pathos of the situation in a flash. Tommy suddenly found himself snatched into a sitting position beside her and kissed. And the next moment he was being fed with sandwiches.

"Poor little chap!" said the nice old lady. "Poor little chap! Lost his mother and tried to sell his toy to buy something to eat! Have another sandwich, my dear."

Tommy did not really need the sandwiches, having been eating a good deal all day, and being even now conscious of sundry pockets distended by an apple, a paper of bulls'eyes, several biscuits, and a large piece of toffee. But he wished to be polite, so he ate as much as he could and answered the old lady's questions to the best of his ability. He told her his name, his age, where he lived, and what sums he could do. He assured her that he knew his way home



"PLEASE WOULD YOU LIKE TO BUY THAT?"

But Tommy was not superficial, and he knew his business.

"Please would you like to buy that?" he asked, looking as interesting and as timid as he could manage. "Only a ha'penny. It cost a penny."

"Why, bless the child!" cried the old

and had his ticket safe; and he eased her mind wonderfully by his confidence that he could find his mother very soon, and particularly because of his absolute certainty of meeting her, at latest, at the railway-station. And finally, not without difficulty, he tore himself away, bearing with him not only the

rejected "trunk," but also added wealth to the amount of fourpence.

He did very well with the "trunk"—very well indeed. He never got quite so much as fourpence again; but he got some pennies, one twopence, and several halfpennies. He continued to select his customers with care, and rarely made a mistake. Some selections were unfortunate and unproductive, however, but that he quite expected; and it surprised him to find what a number of benevolent persons, made liberal by a fine Bank Holiday, were ready to give a copper for a thing and then let him keep it. But he never fell into the inartistic error of offering his stock-in-trade to any person in the least likely to use it. Persons of sufficient age and dignity were easily to be found by a boy of discrimination, even on Southend beach.

But everything must come to an end at last, and so did the trunk. Having carefully observed a large, good-tempered-looking woman sitting under an umbrella, and having convinced himself that she was not likely to need a paper trunk for personal entertainment, he proceeded to business in the usual manner.

"Lost yer mother?" said the woman, affably. "All right, you'll soon find her. Here's yer ha'penny."

And with that this unscrupulous female actually *took* the trunk, and handed it over to some children who were playing hard by.

Tommy felt deeply injured. He had no idea those children were hers. It was shameful, he thought, to take advantage of a lost boy in such an unexpected fashion as that. And he had really begun quite to like that trunk, too.

But it had paid excellently, on the whole; and, at any rate, with his accumulated capital, he could make an excellent holiday for the rest of the day: to say nothing of what he might still come in for on the strength of his distressful situation.

So he went on combining business with pleasure, till he was driven to absolute flight by an excellent but over-zealous old gentleman who insisted on taking him to the police-station. It was a narrow squeak, and it was a most fortunate circumstance that the zealous old gentleman was wholly unable to run. As it was, the adventure so disconcerted Tommy that he concluded to relinquish business altogether for a time, and seek some secluded spot where he might at leisure transfer some of his accumulated commissariat from his bursting pockets to a more interior situation.

The cliffs at Southend, as you may know, are laid out as public gardens, traversed by precipitous paths, embushed with shrubs, and dotted with convenient seats. But Tommy did not want a seat. He was, in fact, a little tired of keeping a constant lookout, and since there were his own party, the apple-woman, whom he had espied in the distance twice since their first encounter, and the zealous old gentleman, all at large somewhere in Southend, he judged it safest to lie under a convenient bush, in some place commanding an interesting view, and there begin a leisurely picnic.

He found a capital bush, just behind one of the seats; a thick bush that no eye could penetrate from without, yet from between the twigs of which he had an excellent view of the sea and some part of the gardens. It was almost as good as a pirate's cave, which was very proper, for, on the whole, he felt something of a pirate himself to-day. He began his picnic with toffee.

Presently his attention was drawn to a man who came up the path with a very laboured air of casual indifference, although he was puffing visibly as he came, as if he had been running. He was a red-headed man, and, as he walked, he glanced anxiously over his shoulder. The seat before Tommy's retreat was empty, and the man threw himself upon it, so that his legs obstructed Tommy's view. And then, to Tommy's utter amazement, the man's hand came stealing out behind him into the bush, and there deposited on the ground, absolutely under Tommy's nose—two watches!

The hand was withdrawn as stealthily as it came, and the man began with some difficulty to whistle a tune. And now up the same path there came another man, plainly following the first: a tall, well-set-up man who walked like a policeman, which, indeed, was exactly what he was—a policeman in plain clothes.

"Well, Higgs," said the new-comer, suspiciously, "what's your game to-day?"

"Game?" whined the red-headed man, in an injured tone. "Why, no game at all, guv'nor, not to-day. Can't a bloke come out for a 'oliday?"

"Oh, of course," replied the other; "anybody can come out for a holiday. But there's some as does rum things on their holidays. I've got my eye on you, my fine feller!"

"S'elp me, guv'nor, it's all right," protested the red-headed man, rising and moving off a little way. "I'm on'y 'avin' a 'oliday,

guv'nor! You can turn me over if you like!"

Now Tommy did not know that to turn a man over meant to search him, but he did not stop to wonder. For what occupied the whole of his attention now, even to the exclusion of the very toffee in his mouth, was the astounding fact that one of the watches was his own father's!

There was no mistake about it. There were initials on the silver case—not his father's initials, for, indeed, he had won the watch in a raffle; but Tommy knew the letters well enough. Plainly the man had stolen it; and, in fact, three links of a broken chain were still hanging to the bow; and Tommy knew the chain as well as he knew the watch.

Tommy was a boy of business, a philosopher, and a practical person. He knew nothing of the second watch, whether it was the red-headed man's or another's. But he did know that this with the broken chain was his father's—he had had it in his hands a hundred times. So with no more ado he put it in his trousers pocket, on top of the bag of bulls' eyes, and then quietly withdrew from the bush, leaving the red-headed man and his enemy talking some yards away on the opposite side.

"I can't go home without him!" cried Mrs. Jepps that evening in the booking-office of Southend Station. "My darling child! I can't! I can't!"

"But come an' ask the station-master," reasoned her husband. "He might ha'

come here to see about gettin' home. We never thought o' that!"

A small boy, who had been mistakenly trying to weigh himself by clinging desperately to the arm of the machine used for luggage, let go as he recognised the voices, and came out of the dim corner, looking uncommonly bulky about the pockets.

"Halloa, mother!" said Tommy, "I've been waiting for you since—well, I've been waiting a long time!"

This time Mrs. Jepps really did faint. But it was not for long. When she came to herself, with water from the waiting-room bottle in her hair and down her back, she recovered her customary energy with surprising rapidity. "Tommy, you wicked, ungrateful little wretch!" she said; "a nice holiday you've made o' this for me! Wait till I get you home, that's all!"

"Why, Tommy," said his father, "wasn't there no party as stole you, after all?"

"I don't believe parties steal boys at all," said Tommy;

"but parties steal watches." And with that he hauled out what Jepps had never expected to see again.

This phenomenon completed the demoralization of the party; it also dissipated the storm that was gathering about Tommy's head.

"Lawks, child!" cried all the ladies at once. And Cousin Jane's sister's young man's aunt clung for support to the nearest object, which was a porter.

"Come!" squeaked Tommy, with a new importance in his voice, rattling the money in his trousers pockets. "Got your tickets? Keep close to me, an' I'll show you the right train."



"YOU CAN TURN ME OVER IF YOU LIKE!"