

TOMMY THE BAD



WHERE lived in England, once upon a time, a little boy named Thomas Teazer, but that was not the name by which he was really known in the county where he lived. All those who knew him best, his old friends and his kindred and neighbors, called him "Tommy the Bad," and they had good reason to do so, for he was certainly a bad boy, and a great nuisance in the neighborhood. If there was any mischief going on Tommy was usually at the bottom of it, or the top, and he was quite as sure to be in any naughtiness. He was a perfect terror to all the old women, and as for the dogs, and the cats, and the chickens, they fled at the sight of him. Perhaps he was not born cruel, but certainly he had become so, either from thoughtlessness or evil example. He was always throwing stones or shooting arrows, and there was hardly a dog or a cat in the place that had not been at one time or another

lamed by Tommy the Bad. As for the birds, he was always killing them—from pure love of doing unkind things—and he robbed every nest for miles around, so that the very robins must have hated him. He never lost an opportunity to do something mean—he thought it such fun to plague other people, though he would not have liked it so well if they had plagued him in the same fashion.

Thus it chanced that one fine morning Tommy was out in the meadows looking about for something to do; nothing useful, you may be sure, but something naughty, for there is an old proverb, that Satan always finds something for idle hands to do. It was a charming day: the sloping meadows were covered with short green turf, dotted thick with the little English daisies, pink and white, and directly in Tommy's path grew a tall, straight oak tree, a graceful, stately tree, with its dark, glossy leaves and its green acorns only half formed, its branches gently swayed by the breeze. Tommy looked at it in some surprise, for he could not recollect that he had ever seen it before, though he had crossed that field twenty times in the last month; and an oak, as we all know, does not grow in a day, or a year either, and this was a tall and finely shaped tree.

However, Tommy was not a speculative boy; his mind was too busy planning mischief and naughtiness to concern itself with more serious things, so he thought that, in some way, he must have overlooked that tree. But just as he came to this conclusion and was going on, in his idle way, a robin darted out of the foliage and flew off in the distance. A gleam came into Tommy's eye. "Ah, ha!" he thought, "there must be a nest up there, and I'll have the eggs, or the young birds—whichever are there." In a trice, he pulled off his jacket, and started to climb the tree, intent on the fun of breaking up the poor robin's home; for—when you stop to think of it—every such nest in a tree or under the eaves of the house, is a home, a miniature of your home and mine, and the little birds are God's creatures, too, with their own affections, and griefs, and fears.

Tommy never thought about that, of course, but went on clambering up the straight trunk, no easy task, for the lowest limb was high over his head; but he was a very agile and daring boy and he had climbed all his life; so, on he went, higher and higher, all the while peering up through the foliage, looking for a nest, and it was not long before his

sharp eyes spied one. It was there, but it was up very high, almost at the top of the tree, set securely in the fork of two branches, and woven in that wonderful fashion in which birds build their homes. It was a fine large nest, and Tommy's eyes twinkled with satisfaction, and on he went, among the branches now, stepping from one to another, swinging himself lightly along, at a dizzy height above the ground and still going higher. The breeze rustled the broad leaves around and above him, making a soft, delicious noise, which was, perhaps, the reason he did not notice a scratching and clambering in the tree below him, and never suspected that any trouble was in store for him, until he felt a sharp sting in one of his legs. Tommy gave a squeal of pain and tried to look down to see what kind of a wasp had stung him; but twist his head as he would, he could see nothing, and meanwhile, he felt another horrible jab in the other leg. He shrieked with pain and rage, and, forgetting the nest, began to let himself down, intent on either finding or escaping this unseen enemy. But no sooner had he fairly turned around and begun his descent, than he was stung in every direction, and, to his horror, discovered — not a wasp or anything of that sort, dear me, nothing of the

kind! — he discovered that the whole tree below him was simply swarming with little men, all clad in green. In fact, for a moment, he thought they were only large leaves, but a second glance showed him their eager little faces and sharp, twinkling eyes; and he saw the cause of his troubles, too, for each gnome was armed with a sharp-pointed reed which — to his sorrow — Tommy knew was as keen and hard as the blade of a knife. What made matters worse, too, was the fierce and angry expression of their upturned faces. They looked as if they hated him and intended to hurt him as much as they could; and Tommy, being, like all bullies, a great coward, screamed with fright and climbed frantically higher up to escape, but to no purpose. Up swarmed the derrick after him, prodding here and prodding there, with malicious fury, and uttering shrill little squeals of exultation whenever he winced or groaned with pain; and he was in great pain, for they were a good deal worse than a swarm of angry hornets, and directed their operations in a far more skilful and deadly way. Poor Tommy! He forgot the nest altogether, he forgot everything but these dreadful little creatures, and he clambered from branch to branch, trying to draw up his legs

after him, as fast as he could, but he could not escape his enemies. They were as nimble as gadflies, and they seemed rather to enjoy the race. They swarmed all about him, and they laughed, and they jeered, and they thrust at him with their little spears, until he fairly howled with pain and fright.

"Up with you!" they shrieked. "Get the robin's nest."

"Oh, let me go down," sobbed Tommy, quite cowed with fear; "let me go down, and I'll never, never touch a robin's nest again!"

"Let you go down!" they cried. "Not a bit of it! Up with you, into the robin's nest, and we'll teach you a lesson, you little brute!" and they prodded him hard and fast.

With a groan of pain, Tommy started once more on his fearful ascent, pursued by the derricks from limb to limb. And now he began to discover another trouble; the harder and higher he climbed, the taller grew the tree; it seemed to shoot up in the air—in the most marvellous manner—and the nest was always just a little above his head, just out of reach; but the derricks were not out of reach; they were close behind, pricking, and mocking, and driving him on. When he looked down his head

swam, for the tree had grown so tall that the earth seemed at least a mile off, and other trees were little more than shrubs, by comparison; and here was Tommy, suspended in mid-air, surrounded by foes, and still the tree seemed to grow, and the nest was not yet within his grasp.

Thoroughly subdued, Tommy stopped, and clinging to a branch, implored the derricks to let him off.

"No, no," they replied; "you've never had mercy for others, and we have none for you! Up you must go—up, up!" and they stung him so fiercely that Tommy went. He saw, at last, that compassion was a better quality than he had thought it, and already he began to repent of his own cruel ways; but, alas for him, it was too late.

Up, up, he climbed, panting for breath, his eyes half out of his head with fright, and still the derricks swarmed after him, prodding him in the rear with increasing fury, and yelling with rage and triumph.

"You would rob all the nests, would you?" they screamed. "You kill all the young birds and leave only the old ones to mourn. Ugh, you rogue—we'll see to you now, we'll teach you a lesson."

"Oh, pity me!" shrieked Tommy, in tears. "I can't climb any farther — I shall surely fall!"

But he was answered only by shouts of derisive laughter, and such fierce stabs that he clambered up again, and this time the nest really stood still; but it grew larger and larger as he drew near, until, as the exhausted boy reached it, it was as large as a bushel basket. Mad with fear and pain Tommy leaped into it, to escape the malicious little creatures behind; but, horror of horrors! the bottom dropped out, and he fell through, not into the open air, but apparently right into the trunk of the tree; for it was like falling down a dark, straight tunnel, and he kept on falling — down, down, down, inside the tree. You remember that the tree had grown enormously tall, so, of course, the fall from a nest in the top to the bottom would be a tremendous distance; and Tommy kept on falling, very much as we do sometimes in dreams, dropping swiftly through space, with a qualm of fear and giddiness, and landing with a jerk that makes us wake up with a start; but as Tommy was not dreaming, but wide awake, he landed with a most terrific bump, bump, and found himself in the strangest place he had ever seen. It looked like a cavern, all

lined with feathers, and twigs, and old women's ravellings, and bits of hair, and bundles of rags, but all these unsightly things were so interwoven with the daintiest straw and foliage that the effect of the whole was picturesque. Tommy rubbed his eyes and stared, too dazed by his fall and his fearful experience to move; and what was his amazement to behold a company of birds — robins and larks, nightingales and wrens, and gay little sparrows — all sitting solemnly about the place, and all staring gravely at him in the deepest displeasure. The slayer of birds, and the robber of nests, had lost his courage, and he sat there frightened half to death, for instinct warned him that more trouble was in store for him; therefore he was not surprised to hear these birds solemnly conversing together in a tongue that he could not understand, and finally one of them — a robin — stepped out of the circle and gravely addressed him.

"Thomas Teazer," squeaked the bird, "commonly called Tommy the Bad, you have been tried before the court of the birds, and found guilty of murder, and rapine, and assault, and you are sentenced to expiate your diabolical crimes by remaining — for one whole day — in the skin of a robin. This court

agreeing, you are transformed." And the robin waved one claw.

Tommy opened his mouth to remonstrate, but stopped short, for his mouth and nose suddenly ceased to exist, and he had only a bill, and bills are always unpleasant; and then, to his horror, his arms began to prick and feel strangely, and feathers started out and grew into wings, and with a cry of horror he looked where his feet ought to have been, and there were claws; then he felt a tremendous burning and throbbing at the tip of his spinal column, and — agony of agonies — Tommy the Bad had a tail! He screamed with all his might, but it was only the cry of a bird now, no louder than the wail of many a bird that he had stoned to death, and just as unlikely to bring help or pity. What was worse, he began now to shrink, one of the most painful processes in the whole world — it is always so hard to be cut down, and made small, and of no importance. Tommy had always been a conceited boy, with a vastly better opinion of himself than others had of him, and now he was shrinking, not gradually and gently, but tremendously — all at once — from a big, well-grown lad of ten into a robin. Think of the dreadful shrivelling and shrink-

ing that must have gone on. Meanwhile, the birds chattered among themselves, and twittered and fluttered about, apparently charmed with their work; and now and then one of them would give the victim a particularly vicious peck, and pull out a bunch of feathers, which hurt Tommy terribly and made him shriek with pain.

At last the transformation was over, and no sooner was Tommy an average-sized robin, than the other birds set upon him, with beak and claw, and drove him before them to an opening in the nest, where the daylight shone in, and through this they hustled him out into the world — and a very different world it looked to him through a pair of bird's eyes. The first thing he saw, when he got out, was a field of grain, and he thought the grain was at least a mile high, and a cow in the distance had taken on the dimensions of an elephant. Quite overcome by all he had gone through, Tommy crouched for a while on the ground, a very miserable-looking bird; and his first attempt to walk was certainly strange, for he did not know how to hop along like a robin, and he could not walk with bird's claws and legs, so he ended in a sort of a scramble, which made him extremely tired; and when he tried

to fly, it was equally difficult, and he flopped about in a hopeless manner and was nearly upset by a large cricket that chanced to be in his way. It took him some time, therefore, to learn how to travel around, and he was getting very hungry and thirsty, and did not know where to get any food, and was just looking about for a pool of water, when he suddenly espied a huge, fierce, gray cat, with eyes of fire, crouched ready to spring. It gave Tommy a chill down his spine. He had never even imagined the horrors of being eaten alive, until he saw that awful gray tabby licking her lips and swinging her tail with a horribly ferocious waggle. Tommy was poor at flying, but I can tell you he stretched his wings and flopped into the nearest tree, and held tight to the branch, in an agony of terror, while the cat slowly and stealthily crept nearer and nearer, with her green eyes glaring and her terrible tail. She was going to climb the tree! Poor Tommy! He began to realize some of the terrors of a bird's existence as he flew off again, a little more lightly and swiftly, for he improved with practice; and this time he escaped the cat and landed safely in a grove of birches where there were other birds, and he hoped to find a friend in his hour of need. But,

either Tommy's transformation was publicly known to the whole feathered tribe, or it was not perfect enough to deceive their bright eyes, and they either avoided him, or fell upon him, and pecked and drove him out of their company; lonely, and sore, and faint with hunger, Tommy fled to a quiet tree and there determined to eat a bug — better a bug than starve, he thought. So, screwing up his courage, he snapped up just such a bug as he had seen another robin enjoy, but horrors! he spit it out. It kicked and buzzed in his very bill, and poor Tommy's human stomach refused to receive it. Remembering that food was thrown to the chickens in every barnyard, he determined to go over to a house he saw in the distance, and look for a crumb of comfort; and stretching his wings he started upon his journey. Scarcely had he left the shelter of the woods, however, before an arrow whizzed close to his head, frightening him almost out of his wits, and he flew so fast that when he at last arrived near the house, he was panting for breath, and could only cling to the branch of a tree and look about him. The tree was in the rear of the house, and some hens were feeding comfortably just below poor Tommy, and while he watched, the housewife came

out with another pan of food and scattered the tempting crumbs in full view of the hungry one. Tommy could resist no longer, and never having been afraid of a woman, he flopped awkwardly down from the tree and commenced to peck greedily at the food; but he was destined to disappointment; no sooner did the housewife discover him than she raised an outcry.

"The saucy wretch!" she cried. "A robin as well as the sparrows to steal food from my hens! Away with you, you little thief!" and she flung a stone at Tommy.

It hit one of his feet and crushed three of his toes, and he flew away, screaming with pain, and hungry as ever; and now he could only use one foot to clutch at the branches, and, being an exceedingly awkward bird, he kept flopping over on one side and could scarcely hold on to a twig; and, dear me, how hungry he was, and how thirsty! He had been driven away from the water by a terrific cat, he had been unable to digest a bug, and he had been stoned by a heartless woman. Tommy thought it heartless now for others to do what he had done himself with such glee. He sat, in a lop-sided, hopeless way, on a friendly branch, hungry, thirsty

and listless, and would doubtless have rested a while if he had not been startled by a terrific whirl of wings, and looked up to see a hawk making straight for him, with evil intent. The poor little bully and braggart of old days screamed with terror and flew — as he had certainly never flown before — with the breath of the hawk ruffling his tail, so close and keen was the chase. Tommy's heart thumped hard against his bosom, his breath came short, and he almost gave up, when an arrow darted past him, aimed at the hawk; and though it missed, it alarmed his pursuer and gave Tommy time to fly under the eaves of a barn and cling there, half dead with terror. What a wretched thing it was to be a bird, after all! Tommy hung there a long time; indeed, until his one claw could cling no longer, and then he flopped hopelessly down to the ground, intending to rest; but there is no rest for the wicked. Tommy the Bad had scarcely landed in the grass before he saw his own likeness, in the shape of an active boy, armed with a sling and a bag of stones, who saw him appear, with a hideous grin, and immediately flung a stone. Tommy, exhausted and broken hearted, rose in the air and began to fly for his life; but, alas! that boy could fling a stone as well

as he could himself, and Tommy was fairly hit in the breast. Stunned and wild, he flew on, trying to reach a tree, but he was not destined to escape, and another stone struck his left wing, breaking it; and dizzy, and smarting, and bleeding, Tommy fell, his ears deafened by the jeers and cries of that terrible monster of a boy. Down, down, fell Tommy — and thump!

He found himself in the middle of that field of grass and daisies, where he had found the fateful oak in the morning. Now the sun was setting and Tommy was a boy again. He would, perhaps, have thought that he had been dreaming — that he had had a fearful nightmare; but just as this came into his mind, he saw some little green figures darting about in the grass, and he heard a squeaky chorus, off in the distance.

"How do you like being a bird, Master Tommy?" it said.

"I will never, never hurt one again!" he replied, with a sob. "I solemnly promise you that, and oh, I'm so sorry that I was ever so cruel!"

"Ha, ha!" they replied; "so we've found a way. Well, keep your word, be kind to birds, and dogs, and cats, and horses, and everything small and

weak, and all will be right, — but, if you break it again, you'll be a bird for life!"

You may be sure that he never broke it; indeed, so complete was his reform, that, after that eventful day, he was known as Tommy the Good.