

A Book of the Week.

"SENTIMENTAL TOMMY."*

THE story of "Sentimental Tommy" is an exceedingly subtle study of the childhood and boyhood of a youth, who afterwards became a celebrated personage in the literary world. He possessed that peculiar type of mind which is able to sympathise with every class, and to identify himself in turn with each of the very diverse natures with which his path across life brings him in contact. All the same, Tommy, though most interesting as an individual, was by no means an entirely loveable character; he sympathised with the sorrows of his friends, and acquaintances as an artist, and not as a fellow human being—a distinction with a very wide difference indeed. The greatest tyro in the craft of story-producing cannot fail to enjoy this study in character; but it is just a little doubtful if the general public will not find it a trifle over-subtle, and will, in consequence, fail to appreciate the skill of the portraiture. The minutest details are not neglected; nothing is left to the imagination; and the result is like an elaborate Dutch painting—an absolute representation of things as they were. Nevertheless, this last book of Mr. Barrie's is something more than a mere representation of things as they are, it is full of suggestion, and here and there a pathetic note is sounded that cannot fail to carry conviction of its truth to the heart of any careful reader. The book is one that exacts a slight effort of mind to appreciate; practically, all good books need that; and those readers who resent even the smallest demand upon their mental powers, may be gently advised to leave it alone, and confine their reading to shilling shockers and the Christmas numbers of newspapers and magazines, which experience proves do not require the smallest exertion of anybody's mind to understand. Hence their large and steady sale.

Tommy is first introduced to our notice sitting, in sexless garments, upon a dirty London staircase, in company with another male imp, named Shovel. A doctor passes the two little boys on the stairs, and Shovel, the elder of the pair, finding that his visit was for Tommy's mother, asks him sharply, knowing that only birth or death brought a doctor into their building, "Is it a kid or a coffin?" The subsequent conversation between the children display Tommy's powers of imagination in embryo. Finding, to his disgust and uncomprehending dismay, that he is not to have the coveted honour of having a "deader" in his family, he thinks that if he can only stop the baby coming up the staircase, or getting in at the window, he will, at any rate, be spared the ignominy of a "kid." This notion of Tommy's leads to an amusing episode with a little golden-haired girl, who wanders in at the open door, and whom he carefully conducts up the street to her own home again, but, on returning home, he finds that the baby has been too clever for him after all, and is securely ensconced in his mother's bed! After a few chapters describing the poverty life in London of this poor Scotch mother and her children, she dies; and Tommy and baby Elspeth are sent away to Thrums, the ideal heaven of their dreams, but which (like so many other ideal

heavens) proves a crushing disappointment. The scene describing their first view of the dour little Scotch town is one of the very best in the book. Space fails to record the series of adventures in which Tommy engages, and all the various play-acting diversions of which he is always the inspirer, and in which he cleverly contrives to be ever the chief personage. These boyish pastimes reflect the strident mind of the idealist, just as his various friendships with the girls and boys of his town exhibit his ineradicable sentimentalism, which, for the life of him, could not refrain from making a picture (or, to use a technical journalistic term, "copy") of every event and of every character that he comes across, and which his nimbleness of brain made him quickly comprehend by intuition.

Tommy himself is not the only character that deserves attention. The "Painted Lady," and her sturdy-hearted little daughter, Grizel, are vital studies. The Painted Lady is a very weary woman, who has learnt a dreary worldly wisdom, from crooked experiences in life. She tries to impart some of this ill-begotten knowledge to Tommy's sister, Elspeth. This is what she sadly says about men to that pure little maiden:—

"It would be so nice, would it not, if they liked us to be good? I think it would be sweet . . . but they don't you know, it boro's them. Never bore them—and they are so easily bored! It boro's them if you say you want to be married. I think it would be sweet to be married, but you should never ask for a wedding. They give you everything else, but if you say you want a wedding, they stamp their feet and go away. . . . Put on your prettiest gown and laugh, and pretend you are happy, and they will tell you naughty stories, and give you 'these.' She felt her ears and looked at her fingers, on which there may once have been jewels, but there were none now."

Practical, tender-hearted, unimaginative Grizel is a delightful contrast to her playfellow Tommy. She says to him, "It is so easy to make up one's mind!" and he characteristically retorts, "It's easy to you that has just one mind, but if you had as many minds as I have—!"

Tommy shows the versatility of his genius in many diverse ways, to the admiration and amazement of his comrades, and the distraction of his guardian, pastors, and masters; but, perhaps, the best scene of all is when his schoolmaster, Mr. Cathro, discovers that he has usurped his prerogative of being letter-writer-in-chief to the uneducated among the village population. Tommy's letters are certainly unique, and display great signs of his future fame. He is an artist, not only in the words he used, but also in his subtle appreciation of what words it would *not* be well to use; remarking, with a snigger, why he did not put into a mourning letter a beautiful bit about weeping willows, that he had judged it better to omit. "It was because, though it is a beautiful thing in itself, I felt a servant lassie would not have thought o't." Mr. Barrie has had the genius to make Tommy's boyhood a failure. He does not gain a bursarship, and fails in his examinations, but various touches like the above make it easy to prophecy that in later years he would become as much a master in the craft of writing as his creator and author, Mr. J. M. Barrie himself. A. M. G.

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Economic in use, and goes far in brewing.

* "Sentimental Tommy. The Story of his Boyhood," by J. M. Barrie, author of "A Window in Thrums," "Auld Licht Lichts," &c., 6s. (Cassell & Co., 1896).

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