

A Tragedy in Little

By Richard Middleton

I

Jack, the postmaster's little son, stood in the bow-window of the parlour and watched his mother watering the nasturtiums in the front garden. A certain intensity of purpose was expressed by the manner in which she handled the water-pot. For though it was a fine afternoon the carrier's man had called over the hedge to say that there would be a thunderstorm during the night, and every one knew that he never made a mistake about the weather. Nevertheless, Jack's mother watered the plants as if he had not spoken, for it seemed to her that this meteorological gift smacked a little of sorcery and black magic; but in spite of herself she felt sure that there would be a thunderstorm and that her labour was therefore vain, save perhaps as a protest against idle superstition. It was in the same spirit that she carried an umbrella on the brightest summer day.

Jack had been sent indoors because he would get his legs in the way of the watering-pot in order to cool them, so now he had to be content to look on, with his nose pressed so tightly against the pane that from outside it looked like the base of a sea-anemone growing in a glass tank. He could no longer hear the glad chuckle of the watering-pot when the water ran out, but, on the other hand, he could write his name on the window with his tongue, which he could not have done if he had been in the garden. Also he had some sweets in his pocket, bought with a halfpenny stolen from his own money-box, and as the window did not taste very nice he slipped one into his mouth and sucked it with enjoyment. He did not like being in the parlour, because he had to sit there with his best clothes on every Sunday afternoon and read the parish magazine to his sleepy parents. But the front window was lovely, like a picture, and, indeed, he thought that his mother, with the flowers all about her and the red sky overhead, was like a lady on one of the beautiful calendars that the grocer gave away at Christmas. He finished his sweet and started another; he always meant to suck them right through to make them last longer, but when the sweet was half finished he invariably crunched it up. His father had done the same thing as a boy.

The room behind him was getting dark, but outside the sky seemed to be growing lighter, and mother still stooped from bed to bed, moving placidly, like a cow. Sometimes she put the watering-pot down on the gravel path, and bent to uproot a microscopic weed or to pull the head off a dead flower. Sometimes she went to the well to get some more water, and then Jack was sorry that he had been shut indoors, for he liked letting the pail down with a run and hearing it bump against the brick sides. Once he tapped upon the window for permission to come out, but mother shook her head vigorously without turning round; and yet his stockings were hardly wet at all.

Suddenly mother straightened herself, and Jack looked up and saw his father leaning over the gate. He seemed to be making grimaces, and Jack made haste to laugh aloud in the empty room, because he knew that he was good at seeing his father's jokes. Indeed it was a funny thing that father should come home early from work and make faces at mother from the road. Mother, too, was willing to join in the fun, for she knelt down among the wet flowers, and as her head drooped lower and lower it looked, for one ecstatic moment, as though she were going to turn head over heels. But she lay quite still on the ground, and father came half-way through the gate,

and then turned and ran off down the hill towards the station. Jack stood in the window, clapping his hands and laughing; it was a strange game, but not much harder to understand than most of the amusements of the grown-up people.

And then as nothing happened, as mother did not move and father did not come back, Jack grew frightened. The garden was queer and the room was full of darkness, so he beat on the window to change the game. Then, since mother did not shake her head, he ran out into the garden, smiling carefully in case he was being silly. First he went to the gate, but father was quite small far down the road, so he turned back and pulled the sleeve of his mother's dress, to wake her. After a dreadful while mother got up off the ground with her skirt all covered with wet earth. Jack tried to brush it off with his hands and made a mess of it, but she did not seem to notice, looking across the garden with such a desolate face that when he saw it he burst into tears. For once mother let him cry himself out without seeking to comfort him; when he sniffed dolefully, his nostrils were full of the scent of crushed marigolds. He could not help watching her hands through his tears; it seemed as though they were playing together at cat's-cradle; they were not still for a moment. But it was her face that at once frightened and interested him. One minute it looked smooth and white as if she was very cross, and the next minute it was gathered up in little folds as if she was going to sneeze. Deep down in him something chuckled, and he jumped for fear that the cross part of her had heard it. At intervals during the evening, while mother was getting him his supper, this chuckle returned to him, between unnoticed fits of crying. Once she stood holding a plate in the middle of the room for quite five minutes, and he found it hard to control his mirth. If father had been there they would have had good fun together, teasing mother, but by himself he was not sure of his ground. And father did not come back, and mother did not seem to hear his questions.

He had some tomatoes and rice-pudding for his supper, and as mother left him to help himself to brown sugar he enjoyed it very much, carefully leaving the skin of the rice-pudding to the last, because that was the part he liked best. After supper he sat nodding at the open window, looking out over the plum-trees to the sky beyond, where the black clouds were putting out the stars one by one. The garden smelt stuffy, but it was nice to be allowed to sit up when you felt really sleepy. On the whole he felt that it had been a pleasant, exciting sort of day, though once or twice mother had frightened him by looking so strange.

There had been other mysterious days in his life, however; perhaps he was going to have another little dead sister. Presently he discovered that it was delightful to shut your eyes and nod your head and pretend that you were going to sleep; it was like being in a swing that went up and up and never came down again. It was like being in a rowing-boat on the river after a steamer had gone by. It was like lying in a cradle under a lamplit ceiling, a cradle that rocked gently to and fro while mother sang far-away songs.

He was still a baby when he woke up, and he slipped off his chair and staggered blindly across the room to his mother, with his knuckles in his eyes like a little, little boy. He climbed into her lap and settled himself down with a grunt of contentment. There was a mutter of thunder in his ears, and he felt great warm drops of rain falling on his face. And into his dreams he carried the dim consciousness that the thunderstorm had begun.

II

The next morning at breakfast-time father had not come back, and mother said a lot of things that made Jack feel very uncomfortable. She herself had taught him that any one who said bad things

about his father was wicked, but now it seemed that she was trying to tell him something about father that was not nice. She spoke so slowly that he hardly understood a word she said, though he gathered that father had stolen something, and would be put in prison if he was caught. With a guilty pang he remembered his own dealings with his money-box, and he determined to throw away the rest of the sweets when nobody was looking. Then mother made the astounding statement that he was not to go to school that day, but his sudden joy was checked a little when she said he was not to go out at all, except into the back garden. It seemed to Jack that he must be ill, but when he made this suggestion to mother, she gave up her explanations with a sigh. Afterwards she kept on saying aloud, "I must think, I must think!" She said it so often that Jack started keeping count on his fingers.

The day went slowly enough, for the garden was wet after the thunderstorm, and mother would not play any games. Just before tea-time two gentlemen called and talked to mother in the parlour, and after a while they sent for Jack to answer some questions about father, though mother was there all the time. They seemed nice gentlemen, but mother did not ask them to stop to tea, as Jack expected. He thought that perhaps she was sorry that she had not done so, for she was very sad all tea-time, and let him spread his own bread and jam. When tea was over things were very dull, and at last Jack started crying because there was nothing else to do. Presently he heard a little noise and found that mother was crying as well. This seemed to him so extraordinary that he stopped crying to watch her; the tears ran down her cheeks very quickly, and she kept on wiping them away with her handkerchief, but if she held her handkerchief to her eyes perhaps they' would not be able to come out at all. It occurred to him that possibly she was sorry she had said wicked things about father, and to comfort her, for it made him feel fidgety to see her cry, he whispered to her that he would not tell. But she stared at him hopelessly through her red eyelids, and he felt that he had not said the right thing. She called him her poor boy, and yet it appeared that he was not ill. It was all very mysterious and uncomfortable, and it would be a good thing when father came back and everything went on as before, even though he had to go back to school.

Later on the woman from the mill came in to sit with mother. She brought Jack some sweets, but instead of playing with him she burst into tears. She made more noise when she cried than mother; in fact he was afraid that in a minute he would have to laugh at her snortings, so he went into the parlour and sat there in the dark, eating his sweets, and knitting his brow over the complexities of life. He could see five stars, and there was a light behind the red curtain of the front bedroom at Arber's farm. It was about twelve times as large as a star, and a much prettier colour. By nearly closing his eyes he could see everything double, so that there were ten stars and two red lights; he was trying to make everything come treble when the gate clicked and he saw his father's shadow. He was delighted with this happy end to a tiresome day, and as he ran through the passage he called out to mother to say that father was back. Mother did not answer, but he heard a bit of noise in the kitchen as he opened the front door.

He said "Good evening" in the grown-up voice that father encouraged, but father slipped in and shut the door without saying a word. Every night when he came back from the post-office he brought Jack the gummed edgings off the sheets of stamps, and Jack held out his hand for them as a matter of course. Automatically father felt in his overcoat pocket and pulled out a great handful. "Take care of them, they're the last you'll get," he said; but when Jack asked why, his father looked at him with the same hopeless expression that he had found in his mother's eyes a short while before. Jack felt a little cross that every one should be so stupid.

When they went into the kitchen everybody looked very strange, and Jack sat down in the corner and listened for an explanation. As a rule the conversation of the grown-up people did not amuse him, but to-night he felt that something had happened, and that if he kept quiet he might find out what it was. He had noticed before that when the grown-ups talked they always said the same things over and over again, and now they were worse than usual. Father said, "It's no good, I've got to go through it;" the mill-woman said, "Whatever made you do it, George?" And mother said, "Nothing will ever happen to me again!" They all went on saying these things till Jack grew tired of listening, and started plaiting his stamp-paper into a mat. If you did it very neatly it was almost as good as an ordinary sheet of paper by the time you had finished. By and by, while he was still at work, the mill-woman brought him his supper on a plate, and raising his head he saw that father and mother were sitting close together, looking at each other, and saying nothing at all. He was very disappointed that although father had come home they had not had any jokes all the evening, and as they were all so dull he did not very much mind being sent to bed when he had finished his supper. When he said good-night to father, he noticed that his boots were very muddy, as if he had walked a long way like a common postman. He made a joke about this, but they all looked at him as if he had said something wrong, so he hurried out of the room, glad to get away from these people whose looks had no reasonable significance, and whose words had no discoverable meaning. It had been a bad day, and he hoped mother would let him go back to school the next morning.

And yet though he took off his clothes and got into bed, the day was not quite over. He had only dozed for a few minutes when he was roused by a noise down below, and slipping out on to the staircase he heard the mill-woman saying good-night in the passage. When she had gone and the door had banged behind her, he listened still, and heard his mother crying and his father talking on and on in a strange, hoarse voice. Somehow these incomprehensible sounds made him feel lonely and he would have liked to have gone downstairs and sat on his mother's lap and blinked drowsily in his father's face, as he had done often enough before. But he was always shy in the presence of strangers, and he felt that he did not know this woman who wept and this man who did not laugh. His father was his play-friend, the sharer of all his fun; his mother was a quiet woman who sat and sewed, and sometimes told them not to be silly, which was the best joke of all. It was not right for people to alter. But the thought of his bedroom made him desolate, and at last he plucked up his courage, and crept downstairs on bare feet. Father and mother had gone back into the kitchen, and he peeped through the crack of the door to see what they were doing. Mother was still crying, always crying, but he had to change his position before he could see father. Then he turned on his heels and ran upstairs trembling with fear and disgust. For father, the man of all the jokes, the man of whom burglars were afraid and compared with whom all other little boys' fathers were as dirt, was crying like a little girl.

He jumped into bed and pulled the bedclothes over his face to shut out the ugliness of the world.

III

When Jack woke up the next morning he found that the room was full of sunshine, and that father was standing at the end of the bed. The moment Jack opened his eyes, he began telling him something in a serious voice, which was alone sufficient to prevent Jack from understanding what he said. Besides, he used a lot of long words, and Jack thought that it was silly to use long words before breakfast, when nobody could be expected to remember what they meant. Father's

body neatly fitted the square of the window, and the sunbeams shone in all round it and made it look splendid; and if Jack had not already forgotten the unfortunate impression of the night before, this would have enabled him to overcome it. Every now and then father stopped to ask him if he understood, and he said he did, hoping to find out what it was all about later on. It seemed, however, that father was not going to the post-office any more, and this caused Jack to picture a series of delightfully amusing days. When father had finished talking he appeared to expect Jack to say something, but Jack contented himself with trying to look interested, for he knew that it was always very stupid of little boys not to understand things they didn't understand. In reality he felt as if he had been listening while his father argued aloud with himself, talking up and down like an earthquake map.

At breakfast they were still subdued, but afterwards, as the morning wore on, father became livelier and helped Jack to build a hut in the back garden. They built it of bean-sticks against the wall at the end, and father broke up a packing-case to get planks for the roof. Only mother still had a sad face, and it made Jack angry with her, that she should be such a spoil-fun. After dinner, while Jack was playing in the hut, Mr. Simmons, of the police-station, and another gentleman called to take father for a walk, and Jack went down to the front to see them off. Jack knew Mr. Simmons very well; he had been to tea with his little boy, but though he thought him a fine sort of man he could not help feeling proud of his father when he saw them side by side. Mr. Simmons looked as if he were ashamed of himself, while father walked along with square shoulders and a high head as if he had just done something splendid. The other gentleman looked like nothing at all beside father.

When they were out of sight Jack went into the house and found mother crying in the kitchen. As he felt more tolerant in his after-dinner mood, he tried to cheer her up by telling her how fine father had looked beside the other two men. Mother raised her face, all swollen and spoilt with weeping, and gazed at her son in astonishment. "They are taking him to prison," she wailed, "and God knows what will become of us."

For a moment Jack felt alarmed. Then a thought came to him and he smiled, like a little boy who has just found a new and delightful game. "Never mind, mother," he said, "we'll help him to escape."

But mother would not stop crying.