



Charles Carroll

To

George Washington



Tom and the Oysterman.

See page 2.

T O M,

T H E O Y S T E R - B O Y .



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TOM,
THE OYSTER-BOY.

CHAPTER I.

OPENING OYSTERS.



"CH, misther, plase
gev me some
work," said a
round-faced little
urchin one day to
a man who was
opening oysters on
the sand-banks of
a little inlet down Jersey.*

"Sure'n what does such a little

* See Frontispiece.

scapegrace as yourself want with work? I don't suppose you would stick at it three hours if I was to give you a year's job."

"Och, and you'd betther thry me," said the "little scapegrace."

"You're nothing but a Paddy, anyhow. Paddies are always lazy. I never saw a smart one in my life."

"Troth, and I'd like the pleasure of showin' you one, thin. It's meself that's smart; tho' I'm afther sayin' it that shouldn't be sayin' it."

"'Self-praise is no recommend.' I'm in want of a smart boy. But I know you're lazy. I see it in your very looks. How long have you been in the country?"

"Three weeks this very day, sure. Me father fetched me over, and now he's gone out West, and left me here

to get my livin' till he'll be afther comin' back."

"He had better have pinned you fast to his coat, I'm 'afther' thinking. A red-haired chap like you are ought not to have been left on the public. Sich always get to the poor-house."

"Beggin' your parthen, I'm not on the public, and never will be while these two hands are whole, and me health's in me body, and me head on me shoulders."

"Hi! hi! You have a wee bit of spunk, I see. What would you give for a job?"

"I'd give me time, and all me strength, and all I know, eleven hours every day for good wages."

"Good wages! Such a fellow as you want wages?"

"Beggin' parthen, yer honor, me

time's as much as any other person's time, and me strength's as much as any other boy's strength, and what I know is just as good as far as it goes as what any other one knows; so I must ask just as much wages."

"Here, take this knife, and let's see how many oysters you can open in an hour. Mind ye, I tell you in the beginning I hate lazy boys."

"So do I, yer honor."

And so the boy took the knife, and worked away with a will. For a few minutes the man never spoke a word to him. During the silence the little Irish boy thought:

"This is pretty hard work, but it's better than doing nothing, sure. That man's a mighty hard case too, or I don't know. I tell you, but I had hard work not to give him any impu-

dence. He was real sassy to me. But pshaw! I shant think about it; it'll make me so mad. I'll keep cool, and if I stay with him I'll show him a few things! I reckon my counthry is as good as his any day. I'll let him see *one* 'Paddy scapegrace' at any rate has some grit!"

While Tommy was thinking thus, the oyster-man was having his thoughts:

"The fellow has bright eyes. He looks like a sturdy, healthy chap. He has the right snap about him. I like him. I guess I'll keep him if he'll stay. I'd like to do the poor little fellow a kindness. He looks ragged, and I don't believe he has a stitch of clothes besides those he has on. He hasn't a bit of a bundle with him. But still he looks clean. Maybe he's

not honest, though. Maybe he's been 'putting on,' and telling me lies. Dear! there's so much roguery now-a-days a body can't tell what's what. But any how, I like that chap. But hold on! I mustn't spoil him by kindness. I do wonder how he lived in Ireland." Then the oyster-man said aloud,

"Been here three weeks, eh?"

"Three weeks this day, yer honor, since the ship put ashore."

"Don't call me 'yer honor!' that's Irish! Call me *sir!*"

"Yes *sir*," said the boy, biting his lip.

"Three weeks since you landed? Who paid your passage?"

"I paid it meself, sir. I worked me way across."

"You! You look like it! About thirteen years old, I should judge."

"Twelve, sir, six weeks ago."

"Why didn't your good-for-nothing dad pay your passage? and what did he go off and leave you for as soon as you landed?"

"Barrin' your presence, sir," said the boy, his eye flashing, "there's not a betther man to be found in this free counthry thin me father. He didn't have any money to pay for me; and if he had had, I'd rather use me arms and legs for meself."

"Why, *I* make money; why couldn't your father?"

"He did; but the priests and the docthors got it all from him, every cint of it."

"How? did they steal it?"

"Sure'n 'twas jist as good as stealin'."

"Then you're not a Catholic?"

"Me father is, but I aint. I'm not

a goin' to let any priest take *my* money like they took me father's!"

"Why, how did they take his money if they didn't steal it straight out?"

"Sure, they *swindled* it out of him!"

"How?"

"Lots o' ways."

"How?"

"Maybe they'll catch me and bate me if I tell you."

"Pshaw! I'm not a Catholic, and you're not in 'ould Ireland' now."

"Troth, nuther am I. Me father used to pay plenty when he had plenty to pay. But the crops failed, and he lost a lot o' money. Thin me mother was taken sick, and two o' me father's cows died, and three of his best pigs, and the priests told me

father he must have committed some sins, and these troubles were punishments; and so me father had to pay a heap of money to get his sins pardoned. And then me dear mother died, and them men in long faces and long gowns said she was in purgatory, and they must say long masses to pray her out, but that they couldn't do it if they didn't have plenty of money to help them do it. They said their prayers wouldn't do any good without the money. And father gave 'em all the money he had, and they said it wan't enough. Father had one beautiful horse left. O how I did love that horse. And they asked me father which he would rather do, keep the horse or let me dear mother's soul stay in purgatory. So they took the horse, and

I never liked the old priests after that."

"Then what did your father do?"

"What could he do, sir? He had no horse left to work his little place, and after he had paid all the priests what they asked, and all the doctor's bills, he had no money left to buy another, and none to pay the rent of the land. So we jist had to leave it, and had nothing else to do but to work our way over to Amiriky."

And so the two talked on for the rest of the hour, the Irish boy telling his story, and the oyster-man saying many rough things in reply, although feeling deeply down in his great big heart the greatest kindness and sympathy.

Many times, when there came a rough reply, Tommy felt as if he

would not answer a single question. Then in a moment he would think, "O, I am to fight my way up to the top of the hill somehow or other. Harsh words won't kill me. Be brave! be brave!"

All the time, as that hour passed, the oyster-man was getting more and more in love with Irish Tommy, there was something so noble about him, and so persevering. All the time he was talking he went on with his work. He was one of the few boys who can work and talk at the same time.

The oyster-man noticed, too, that he did not pick out the easy oysters to open. This pleased him very much. If he tried one and found it very hard, he did not throw it down and pick up another, whose open mouth showed

there would be no trouble to get its shells apart; but he would work away at it without any grunting until open it came.

By the time the hour was up Tommy's fingers were pretty tired. But he did not care a button for that, for he felt pretty sure he had pleased the rough oyster-man, because he said to him:

"See here, youngster, you've done right smartly. Here's twenty-five cents for what you have done, and take those dozen oysters along, and you and my boy here go into the house to the kitchen fire and roast 'em and eat 'em."

"May your shadow niver grow less," said Tommy, gathering up his oysters and following the oyster-man's son into the house.

CHAPTER II.

NEW FRIENDS.



HE two boys had fine fun roasting their oysters in the hot ashes. Tommy's fun was just as hearty as his work, and that was one reason his work was so hearty. He did not believe in mixing up things. "Work when you work, and play when you play," was his motto in practice; and I would add, for the benefit of some little boys and girls that I know, "Study when you study."

In about half an hour the oyster-

man came in. "Wife," said he; "here's a boy."

"Well, I see him," said the wife.

"What do you think of him?" said the man.

"I should think he was a thick-headed Irishman," was the blunt reply of the woman.

All this was said in the kitchen, where Tommy and James were roasting their oysters. But no one would ever have thought that Tommy heard a word of it, although he did hear it all.

"Don't be too hasty, wife; there's grit in that boy, and no mistake," said the man.

"O you are always taking queer notions. I suppose, now, you will be wanting me to take that Irish ragamuffin into my house and 'try to

make something of him,' as you always say."

"Well yes, wife, that is just what I was going to do. I've had the boy on trial for an hour or so, and I am pretty sure there is the making of a man in him. I would like to engage him for a month if he is willing to stay. My busy season is coming on and I will want help."

"Law! you could get better help than a raw Irish boy; a straggler, too, at that."

"I'm not so sure of that. Besides, the boy has no home; his father has gone to the West and left him, his mother is dead, and the little fellow has not a spot upon which to rest his head. He may go to ruin if he wanders around much longer."

The man knew how to touch the

tender spot upon his wife's heart, and she changed her tone right away.

"O well, take him and try him. If he don't turn out anything it won't be our fault, I hope."

While this conversation was going on, Tommy, as he stood over the hot embers of the kitchen fire, had varied thoughts. Sometimes he would think, "Indeed, I wouldn't stay with them for a million pounds." Then again he would say, "But I've looked three weeks for work; I had better take it while I have a chance. They don't know me. I'd be very foolish to let a little ignorance on their part throw me out of a job of work. Besides, man, 'Hard words don't kill."

Presently the oyster-man came up

behind him, and slapping him pretty hard on the back, said,

“Well, chap, how do the oysters go?”

“Troth and they taste good, sir, seein’ I’ve had but a crust to eat since the mornin’—”

The oysterman turned on his heel, but before he could find a knife and a plate his wife had brought up from the cellar a great dish full of cold potatoes, and corned-beef, and bread, with two huge pickles and a bowl of milk, and in a manner for all the world like her husband’s, placed it on a chair beside him and said,

“There!”

And then she walked to another corner of the large kitchen. The oyster-man stood behind the boy, his eyes fairly dancing with delight

to see him eat with such an appetite the hastily prepared repast.

He was a strange man. It seemed as if he took the greatest pains not to let his really kind heart be seen. He could not help it, though; his heart was too big and kind to keep it entirely covered up.

When Tommy had nearly finished eating, the man came up to the fireplace, and taking the tongs, as if he had never thought of the boy, but had come there to fix the fire, he said, as if to himself,

"Well, I'm getting mighty busy. I can't tend to my work at home and take the oysters to town too. I'll have to have some help I do expect. See here, boy; do you know figures?"

"No, sir," said Tom; "not much, but I can be after learnin' sure."

"Well, you can open oysters anyhow. See here; would you like to stay here a month? If you do you can stay; if you don't want to you needn't."

Tom had a pretty high spirit, and if he had not had better judgment, or perhaps had not overheard the talk between man and wife in the other corner, his *spunk* would have replied *no* to this rough speech.

As it was he said, "Yes; I'll stay if you will give me good wages."

"Well, what do you call good wages?"

"I'll stay for two dollars a week and board."

"Do you think you'll be worth it?"

"Sure'n I'll *make* myself worth it."

"I'll try you."

"Very well, yer hon—sir!"

So the bargain was made in few words. But *words* didn't satisfy the boy. His nature was too business-like for that.

About eight o'clock in the evening the oyster-man's wife brought him a tallow candle and said, "Here; I reckon you're tired; I 'spose you'd like to turn in?"

Tom *was* tired, and was glad of the chance to go to bed. He followed the woman up stairs to a kind of loft, and there was a little bed spread on the floor. He was told that was the place for him to sleep. The woman took the candle away, and Tom undressed in the dark, and in a few minutes was in bed. There were plenty of covers and he was quite comfortable. Just before he went to sleep he began to think a

little about his business. He thought, "Words wont *kill* anybody, and words wont *save* anybody. How do I know what this man is? He said he'd give me two dollars a week; but his words are in the air. I'd like to have the bargain in writing; then I could show it. But I dont know how to write. I declare I'll learn. I guess he knows how to write though. I'll ask him."

And Tom in three minutes was asleep. Next morning he was up *bright and early, long before sunrise*, and down at the bay. The oyster-man himself did not get there until five minutes after he did.

He was very much pleased indeed to see the boy there so early, though he would not have told him so for anything. That was not his fashion.

"Come on, Tom," said he, "the tide is low now; let's get to work and dig for the oysters."

"Yes, sir," said Tom; "but let me spake a word to you first." Then he told him about having the bargain in writing.

The oyster-man's eyes showed the pleasure he could not speak. He only roughly said, "Humph! we will put that all down when we go in to breakfast."

So Tom went to work as usual with a hearty good-will. Tom found that there were several children in the oyster-man's family, boys and girls of various ages.

Two or three of the boys helped their father dig clams and oysters, and opened them, and put them up in cans to send off to inland

places where the waters do not yield them.

These boys seemed to take great delight in calling Tom "that Irish chap," or the "ragamuffin," or the "Comet," on account of the color of his hair, or any other offensive name that happened to enter their ill-natured minds.

But Tom soon let them know he had too much true dignity to suffer it. He did not tell them so; that would have done no good. He did not get angry; that would have been worse still. He knew they wished to make him angry, and he disappointed them. Nor did he put on a manner as much as to say, "I feel myself above you."

When they treated him meanly he merely put on a quiet reserve.

He made them *feel* he was not in the least disturbed by their taunts, and they soon stopped them altogether.

CHAPTER III.

TRUE AMBITION.



ONE of the oyster-man's boys went to a school in the village, which was three miles off. He used to come home every Friday night, and go

back every Monday morning. Tom liked this boy better than he did any of the others, and it seemed to him as if John knew more than anybody else he had ever seen.

Eleven hours in the day Tom had promised to work with all his might, and with all the mind necessary, for

the oyster-man. He always was up at half-past five at least, and ready to begin work at that hour, no matter if it were sawing wood, or digging oysters, or "dragging" for oysters, or canning them, no matter what; he was ready for anything which his employer wished him to do.

He worked faithfully on till about dark, and then he felt that his time was his own, according to the written agreement. He had not forgotten his resolve to learn to write, and he remembered too that the oyster-man had asked him if he "understood figures."

He could read pretty well, and he knew enough of figures to be able to find the pages of a book, but that was about all.

However, if a person knows how to read, he has the beginning of every-

thing else. Tom knew this as well as anybody.

The second Saturday that John came home from school after Tom had entered the family, Tom told him how badly he wanted to learn figures and writing, but that he really did not know how to get books. He said:

"Faith, and I've got twenty-five cents that I might buy books with, but I can't take the time to go after 'em."

John smiled, and told him to "never mind about his twenty-five cents." He said he had some old school-books in a chest up in the garret where Tom slept, and he might have them. Before he went away on Monday morning he got them out for Tom.

So after that Monday morning, be-

fore half-past five o'clock in the morning, and after five o'clock in the afternoon, you might see Master Tom up in his garret, poring over his old school-books. But they were new to him; so new that he could scarcely tell what to do with them, or, as he expressed it, he "couldn't make head nor tail out of them," until the next Friday when John came home. And then the two boys were in the garret together a good deal of the time until Monday.

The oyster-man's wife was not a selfish woman by any means. She let Tom have as many candles, as he wanted to burn up there by himself, and she never as much as asked him what he wanted them for. She had found out from John all about it, and had said,

"O well, *larnin'* won't hurt the fellow, and he'll be out of mischief and out of my way while he is up there."

Nor would she let the other children go up there to tease and disturb him. She heard one of them going up one day, and, as he went, saying to his brother,

"I am going to play a prank on Irish Tom."

"No you're not, either!" said she, and gave the little fellow such a whipping that he remembered, ever after, "never to go up into that garret."

Still Tom had not the least idea that the woman had any kind feelings for him, or took any interest in what he did. All her kindnesses were done in such a way that one would rarely know she did them at all.

The first money that was paid to

Tom, he thought he ought to have some better clothes. The oyster-man's wife thought so too, but she knew he wouldn't know how to get them. So she made it convenient about that time to be going to "town" in the oyster-wagon, or at least in the wagon as far as the steamboat, and Tom asked her if she would be good enough to buy him a suit. She replied, "I reckon I can;" and Tom really did not know whether she was willing to do it or not. She only spent half his money, and paid the rest of the cost of the suit out of her own pocket, and the boy never knew a word about it.

The oysters were generally taken to town in a sloop. The oyster-man's oldest son went in her, to see to the sale of the oysters. He did not like

either job very much. He once said to Tom,

"If you understood figures you might go in the sloop."

Then Tom knew why the oyster-man had asked him if he "understood figures." Tom had an idea he would like to sell the oysters, so he went to work harder than ever at the figures.

But to make a long story short, let me tell you that in about a year from the time he opened the first oyster, sitting on the bottom of an upturned boat, and had to answer "No" to the question, "Do you understand figures?" he was not only able to go to market and sell the oysters, and keep a perfectly correct account of his sales, but he had mastered thoroughly all the principal rules of arithmetic, and was quite expert in "figures."

On the long, slow voyages of the sloop he had plenty of time to read. Of course his wages were increased as he stepped into the "higher offices," and the larger part of his money he spent in buying books. His ambition had been and still was to do his best in everything.

CHAPTER IV.

A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER.



T another time, while Thomas was in the city, engaged in selling his oysters, he heard several persons talk of a great man who was preaching there. In the evenings he had no business to attend to; he usually *spent them in reading in his room at the hotel*; but this evening he concluded he would have a change, so he went out to hear the great preacher.

O what a sermon that was to Thomas! It showed him plainly

that all his life he had been serving himself and not his God. It proved to him that he was a sinner. He bowed before the throne of grace, and asked that his sins might be forgiven. They were forgiven, and Thomas went back to the oyster-man's home a "new creature in Christ Jesus."

Some of the young men of the church where Thomas was converted became interested in him. The next time he came up to the city with his sloop full of oysters they told him of a fine situation they knew of in a store, and asked him if he would not prefer it to the situation he then had. He told them "Very much," and that he would speak to his present employer about it.

In about a month's time he was in

his new situation in the city. He soon became a teacher in the Sunday-school. He gathered a class from among the rude Irish boys who throng certain parts of that city. He believed there was more good in many of those boys than persons generally thought there was. He found a great deal of bad though among them, and some little knowledge. One time he asked one of his scholars who the Jews were. He answered:

"Them's the people what don't never think that Jesus Christ is nothing at all."

He tried to urge another to be good through the coming week.

"O," said the boy, "I can't be good. I commit all sorts of sins. I break every one of the command-

ments, and it aint no use no how for me to try."

This same boy came into Sunday-school one Sunday with a pistol in his pocket and a lot of segars in his hand!

But Thomas was not one of the kind to grow faint under trial. His ambition still was to do everything in the very best manner possible. His Sunday-school class began to love him, and soon loved him dearly.

And now where is Thomas? Going along the street the other day, I saw, printed in very large letters on hand-bills posted up, "Rev. T. — will lecture this evening at — Hall."

"What!" said I to myself, "that little oyster-boy?"

It was really so. In the newspaper, the next day, I saw that crowds had "hung upon his lips."

He has been a preacher for some years. Come with me to his pleasant home. It is on the bank of a lovely stream that bears on its broad bosom *boats of all sizes*. The house is a pretty little Gothic cottage, with a piazza running almost all around. It is embowered in trees and shrubbery, and Rev. Thomas — is very happy in *this his home*.

His congregation love him very dearly, and have made him a present of this cottage. He has a dear little wife and three dear little children, and when, in the soft summer twilight, the family group sit out upon the river bank, looking at the white sails gliding noiselessly by in the distance, the little ones never tire of hearing the story of the oyster-man and the oyster-sloop; and the Rev.

Mr. ———, their father, seems never to be ashamed to tell it.

He believes that true ambition is an honorable thing. He used to say to his children :

“Suppose I had been dissatisfied with my mean employment of opening oysters, and had gone wandering about from week to week! I would have been like the rolling stone that gathers no moss. Suppose too I had been angry at the oyster-man and his wife for every harsh word, I would have had no peace, and I could not have stayed there at all.”

Ah no! the very best way is to do our *very best* in the place where God puts us. That is the true ambition.

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