

PEEPING TOMMY

by ROBERT F. YOUNG

Tommy was rich, idle and fond of practical jokes. But he went a bit too far!

Tommy Taylor? Oh, he's coming along fine. I visited him just the other day. Had a long talk with him. He'll be as good as new again as soon as they take the bandages off. Funny, how an expression can be born for the wrong reason, and last for centuries . . .

He quit the Club, you know. Said he didn't want any part of it any more. As though the Club had anything to do with his mis-fortune! To tell the truth, we were dubious about letting him join in the first place. We're a pretty serious bunch, you know, us fellows at the Yore. Each of us is a specialist in his own right and not ordinarily inclined to bend elbows with a layman, even a filthy-rich layman who can speak six different languages. But, as Hoggglewaite (he specializes in Permian rocks) said, time-travel costs like hell and we needed the money.

And Tommy didn't mind. Like most playboy-inheritors of late-twentieth century family fortunes, he throws \$1,000 bills to the winds like rain. Oh, we're going to miss him all right. The more so because, contrary to our expectations, he never played a single one of his practical jokes on us.

You didn't know he was a practical-joke enthusiast? You can't know very much about him then. Some men—like myself,—live to tape ancient battles. Some men—old Hoggglewaite, for instance—live to collect Permian rocks. And some men—yourself, for instance—live to pick the brains of people like me while we're on our coffee break so they can write technical articles for the trade journals. But Tommy Taylor lives to play practical jokes. Or at least that was his purpose in life up until a few weeks ago.

At first, he was content to play them on people in the present, and then it occurred to him how much more fun — and how much easier — it would be to play them on people in the past. That was when he joined the Yore Club and took out a two-year lease on one of our time-bikes. (The lease has another two months.)

Up until the time this awful thing happened to him, he was gone most of the time, pedaling back to every age you can think of, and playing practical jokes on this past person and that. I'm not defending him when I say that there are far worse ways for a man to work off his frustrations, and I'm not being callous either. No one can do anything in the past that, in one sense, he hasn't done already ... which means that if he hasn't already done it, he won't, and that if he has, he will, whether he wants to or not. Tommy was merely fulfilling his destiny —that's all. And basically that's all anyone who ever pedals back to the past is doing.

Anyway, most of Tommy's capers were little more than mischievous pranks, and did no real harm to anyone. Take the time he went back to Charlestown of the night of April 18th, 1775, and hid Paul Revere's horse. Poor Paul was half out of his mind till he found it, but no permanent damage was done. He still made his historic ride. And then there was the time Tommy put invisible ink in the Continental Congress' inkwell on the eve of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. John Hancock was fit to be tied—but again, no permanent damage was done. The ruse was discovered (though not its author), the inkwell was emptied and refilled, and the historic document was signed.

In addition to being a master of six languages, Tommy Taylor was a master of disguise. If you don't believe it, take a look at Brueghel the Elder's "The Peasant Wedding" sometime. A good reproduction will do. That's right—Tommy's in it. He's the musician in Red (did I mention he's an accomplished musician—well, he is)—the one who has the hungry look in his eyes and who needs a shave. Brueghel recorded him perfectly. Photographically, almost. Tommy loves to go to weddings—or at least he did. Weddings provide ideal situations for practical jokes.

Some of his more malicious capers, though, I can't quite go along with, even though I realize that basically he had no free will in any of the things he did. Take the innumerable times he told Balzac's creditors where Balzac was hiding, for instance. Or the time when he intercepted the one and only letter that Dante wrote to Beatrice (I guess we have Tommy to thank for *The Divine Comedy*). And then there was the time he burned Carlyle's first draft of *The French Revolution* after John Stuart Mill finished reading it. It was the only copy poor Carlyle had, and he had to do the whole thing over again from memory. Mill blamed his housemaid, and so does history; but we at the Yore know better.

Probably the most fiendish joke Tommy ever played, though, was the one he played on King Solomon. On the eve of the Queen of Sheba's arrival in Jerusalem, Tommy got a job in the royal kitchen, and everyday for the duration of the Queen's visit he slipped six grams of anti-aphrodisiac powder into the king's daily cup of goat's milk. I imagine it would come as some thing of a shock to Biblical scholars to know that the *Song of Songs* is nothing more than a wish-fulfillment reverie.

But Tommy's activities in the past weren't limited to playing jokes. Not only was he a practical joker, he was also a Peeping Tom.

The one is a natural outgrowth of the other, you see. You can be present at the denouement of most jokes, but not all of them. Some of them you have to view from the outside, so to speak.

You've probably guessed the truth by now, but I'll unveil it anyway: Tommy Taylor was the "tailor" who peeped—and got blinded for it. But the incident didn't happen quite the way the legend would have you believe. Legends are about as historically accurate as old Biblical movies.

Tommy never dreamed the Coventry caper would backfire on him. The analogy between his surname and the occupation of the legendary victim failed to register on his mind, you see, and he took it for granted that he and the famous tailor were two different people. So, figuring that he was immune from harm, he costumed himself to conform to the period, pedaled back to ancient Coventry, hid his time-bike, and, using his own name, rented a room whose single window faced the narrowest street in town. Then he sat back to wait till Lady Godiva came riding by on her white horse. When she did, he threw open the shutters and looked—and she almost clawed his eyes out.

Now wait a minute. Don't jump to conclusions. I didn't say she tried to claw his eyes out because he looked. I know as well as you do that she probably *wanted* someone to look. But Tommy Taylor, remember, was a practical joker first and a Peeping Tom second. Sure, he looked—

But he also leaned out the window and, with a long pair of barber's shears, cut her hair off.

—ROBERT F. YOUNG