

Not much
to look at

Jeffery Farnol

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By Jeffery Farnol

Tommy Frayne, starting in life with much to lose, had been steadily and consistently losing all his days; fortune, position, money, friends, the woman he had loved—all had gone and, lastly, his self-respect.

So tonight he meant to finish his career of ineptitude once and for all, and, being a Londoner born and bred, had decided to end his troubles and float away from his sordid miseries on the broad bosom of the old river.

Thus then upon this sad autumnal evening he shuffled along in his broken shoes. Being a gentleman of infinite leisure he went very much at his leisure until Big Ben, a pallid disc twixt heaven and earth, chimed the eleventh hour.

"And that's—*that!*" quoth he, when the deep reverberation had died, humming to silence. "And now for supper. As well go hence full as empty."

So saying, he shuffled on until he had reached a bench almost opposite a broad flight of steps that led down to the river's verge; and here, seated cross-legged at his ease, he fished from sagging coat-pocket a screwed-up paper bag wherefrom he extracted a crust of bread, a wedge of cheese, and an onion....

Something rubbed against his leg and, glancing down, he saw two eyes very bright and wistful, a stump of tail and, in between, a woefully gaunt, disreputable shagginess; and these wistful eyes pleaded with a profound eloquence.

"Hal-lo, old boy!" exclaimed Tommy, reaching hand to this shaggy head that became suddenly abject. "Are there two of us? Are you likewise up against it, down and absolutely out too, old chap? Well, let's eat. I suppose you're hungry?" The dog sat up and uttered a short, muffled yelp, his eyes upraised to the man's pallid, unshaven face.

"Yes, I thought so, starving, of course!" sighed Tommy and offered a piece of bread that instantly vanished ... and the bright eyes pleaded, the stumpy tail wagged.

"Exactly, my lad," murmured Tommy, "but what about me? I'm pretty ravenous too!" The dog, eyes intent, sat down, close against Tommy's leg and made quick, soft thumping noises with his brief tail. So, chunk by chunk, Tommy parted with his supper, as he had done with all other of his worldly

goods, watching the dog's gulping ecstasy with eyes very wistful also.

"And that's the last, my boy," said he, tossing his onion into the river. "So hook it—away with you." But instead of so doing, the dog butted his head against Tommy's knee, shot pink tongue a little tentatively toward his nearest hand, then, crouching at his feet, gazed up at him with such look that in human eyes might have been called adoration.

"Ha!" quoth Tommy, pulling an ear. "And when we mean to insult a fellow that's a pestiferous blighter and what not, we call him ... a dog! ... Well, I suppose you had a name once—but my name for you would be Demosthenes, though I'll swear that old-timer with all his oratory, eloquence and what not could never have wheedled me out of my last meal.... And now a long good night!"

So Tommy arose, a little wearily, and went slouching to a flight of steps ... down these steps to where the river lapped hungrily, lit by a lamp immediately above. Then he turned and leaped....

But Tommy had been a powerful swimmer and now, though his soul courted death and oblivion, his body yearned for life, and, rising to the surface, his limbs struck out instinctively. Tommy laughed, swore and, in the act of throwing up his hands, heard a gasping whine, saw in a patch of radiance a small, shaggy, wet head with eyes wide and staring in passionate supplication.

"Oh!" gasped Tommy, "Demosthenes ... you fool! Come on then ... after me!" Another whine that ended in piteous choke ... Tommy saw these bright eyes suddenly quenched. "What are ye ... done, lad? Sure, he'll never make it!" Tommy dived, found and clutched that sinking shagginess and rose to lights and air again.

But the current ran strong and Tommy, enfeebled by privation, hampered by the dog and his own sodden clothes, was dragged down and swept away ... down to a roaring darkness ... up to a swirl of lights that spun past giddily ... yet still he clutched Demosthenes.

He was whirled beneath the rushing gloom of a bridge ... out again and on, struggling feebly, but with a grim resolution. For the Man in him was awake and doing at last. Death lured him, like kindly friend, with proffer of the weakling's haven, respite from pain, trouble and needless travail; Death glared on him like bitter foe certain of victory—but Tommy the Man strove, as conqueror must, with heart and brain, body, soul and will, with his every nerve, muscle and sinew, to the limit of his strength—and just beyond.

Thus he strove, weak but indomitable, keeping afloat by his mere water-sense ... a red glare ahead of him ... a huge bulk that loomed above them, nearer ... nearer yet ... timbering that changed to stone ... to a flight of slimy steps.

And so—out of the depths, up from the river, up from the death he had sought crawled Tommy, the dog beneath his arm, and found himself on a small jetty with tumble-down sheds and new masonry at one end, and before these a red-glowing fire in a brazier. Thither he staggered, gasping, shivering, half dead, and sinking down in this grateful warmth, closed his eyes ... opened them to see a whiskered face topped by battered peaked cap bent over him:

"What-o, mate!" said the face, in accents hoarse yet kindly, "where you come from, I wonders?"

"The river."

"And wot was you a-doing of in the river, mate?"

"Drowning myself."

"Lumme ... Well, why ain't you? Why come out afore you was drowned?"

"To save my dog ... had to ... absolutely!"

"Dog? Love a duck! And he ain't much to look at!"

"Neither am I, for that matter. But we're both better than we look."

"Could ye eat some stew, mate? Though it's a bit coldish."

"Eat? Try me, friend, try me." So Tommy ate ravenously, then dozed a while until the kindly watchman roused him and he saw it was dawn with promise of a golden day.

"It's home and bed for me, mate—and wot for you? Soocide, eh? Going to try it again?"

"Not likely!" answered Tom Frayne, rising. "You see, old chap, I shall have to ... er ... give my dog a chance and what not ... and besides—there's always—Tomorrow, with a capital T."

"Why then good-by, mate, and good luck!"

"The same to you and ... my hearty thanks ... both our thanks! ... Come on Demosthenes, old chap!"

So, man and dog, they went to face the chance of this new day together, the dawn bright above them, and it was to be noted that the dog's stumpy tail was jauntily a-cock, and the man, chin up and shoulders squared, shuffled no more.

[The end of *Not much to look at* by Jeffery Farnol]