

The Free Press Short Story

TONY'S GIFT OF VIOLETS

OLIVE BURNS KIRBY

TONY SHAPIRO whistled blithely while he helped his father polish the tan and black shoes arranged in a waiting row before them. It was Saturday and Tony was free from school. Across the way, a brick trade was being carried on at the establishment of a rival shoe-shine parlor and Tony's eyes darkened as he observed a small Jewish form dart through the hurrying traffic.

"I'll bet that Ike is coming over to get some of our trade," Tony threw the polishing cloth over his shoulder and marched toward the door. "I'll just watch him and, if he does—"

What dire punishment awaited the other lad was never divulged, for, at that moment, a sweet-faced young woman entered and turned toward the vacant chair bearing the caption, "For Ladies Only." She smiled as she read the sign and Tony sighed ecstatically. He had prevailed upon his father to reserve a chair for his feminine customers, because Margaret Langmuir had once spoken of it.

"Tony, this is a surprise!" exclaimed the girl, climbing into the seat. "A special chair for me every time I come. It will be very much nicer. And what neat printing—did you do it?"

Tony beamed with pleasure. "Yes'm. My father said I could do it. I told him you said we would get more ladies to come here."

The girl nodded. "I am sure you will, Tony. By the way, how is business these days? You ought to do well while the streets are so muddy."

Tony glanced across the street. Two men were crowding into a narrow door, followed by a gawking little figure. The Italian boy's eyes clouded angrily.

"We'd be all right, if they'd let us alone," he cried, motioning toward the other shop. "Ikey goes up and down our side of the street trying to get our customers. We'll get the police after them if they don't quit. It ain't fair. I'll fight that Ikey when I get a chance."

"Tony! Tony!" rebuked Margaret Langmuir gently. "I have you forgotten last Sunday's lesson—how we must love our enemies?"

The boy finished underneath the dark skirt he had not forgotten the lesson, but Ikey was worse than an ordinary enemy. He could not love Ikey, no matter how he tried. He seized a brush and began on the trim little brogues. His spirit was in a turmoil and, recognizing this, Miss Langmuir wisely refrained from pursuing the matter further.

"To-morrow is Mother's Day, Tony, and we are having a speaker at the Mission. You will be sure to be there, won't you?"

"Yes, Miss." Tony did not look up. He was still struggling with his baser emotions. That Ikey—

"And Tony," Margaret Langmuir's voice took on a softer note. "We will all be wearing a flower to-morrow in honor of our mothers. I will wear a colored one, because my mother is living; but you are to wear a white one, dear. That is because your mother has gone to live in Heaven."

Tony had never known his mother but he loved flowers and he welcomed the opportunity to wear one—even a white one! His eyes brightened and he forgot about Ikey and the worries of business.

"I'll wear one, Miss Langmuir," he promised. "Be there, in time, too."

He hastened with his polishing. The long narrow room was filling with customers and he knew he must hurry or they would not wait for service.

"That will do for this time, Tony," smiled Miss Langmuir, inspecting the tan brogues critically. "You may give them an extra rubbing some time when you are not so busy." She did not offer to tip the lad—Tony would have resented it.

The Italian Mission was several blocks from Tony Shapiro's home but the boy was the most faithful member of the class. Margaret Langmuir liked all the little dark-eyed sons of Italy but he was especially fond of Tony. He was always so ready to answer questions or to help around the Mission.

"I do not know what we would do without him," she told the Superintendent. "As long as Tony is around there are no squabbles, but the minute he is absent there is usually a dispute of some sort among the children."

The rush of business in the shoe-shine parlor kept up all through the afternoon, but at supper-time there was a temporary cessation. Tony's youthful back ached from the stooping but he carried on valiantly until his father called him into the little back room for supper. "The Shapiro home consisted of two small rooms in the rear of the shop. You gotta wear a white flower in your coat because my mother is dead."

"Ah—hi!" The black eyes stared into space. Tony's mother had died when he was born but her memory still lived in the heart of Giovanni Shapiro. So! To-morrow they were to honor the mothers of his adopted country? Very well, his

son would wear a flower, too—the whitest and most beautiful that could be bought.

"And, Father—" The lad's voice again detained him.

"What, son, Tony?"

"May I take some of my money and buy a bunch of flowers for Miss Langmuir? You're supposed to take flowers to your mother and I have no mother, May I, Father?"

The boy's voice trembled. It was a momentous question, and he waited eagerly for the answer. There was silence for a minute, broken only by the quick breathing of the boy and the bubbling of the spaghetti on the stove.

"Ya, Tony. You gotta da flower. I giv' you da mon'. Misay—she good to you."

He disappeared through the doorway, leaving the boy to a bifid meal. Tony waited while his father finished his supper, then he slipped into the street and joined the hurrying crowds of evening shoppers. The nearest florist was two blocks distant and he ran swiftly in that direction, dodging in and out of the jostling pedestrians with the agility of a cat. It was not yet dark and he would be able to purchase his flowers, deliver them and be back before the evening rush of business.

"Five dollars a dozen!" intoned the man in the florist's shop, holding out a cluster of fragrant roses.

Tony gasped. In his hands he clutched a precious dollar—his own money, for he meant this gift to be from himself and not from the firm. For a dollar, he would only get one, two—not even three roses! He looked about the hot moist shop in desperation. Surely there would be something he could get for his dollar that would be a tribute to his dear teacher.

Violet! He spied them over in a corner of the window. Somehow, they looked like Margaret Langmuir and the lad was quick to sense it.

"How much are those violets?" he asked breathlessly, indicating the single bunch in the low glass container.

The clerk coughed wearily. He would be glad when Mother's Day was in the limbo of things past. "One dollar and a half—no, they are marked down to one dollar. Violets are too perishable to keep long."

Tony heard only the magic words "One dollar!" His face became wreathed in smiles, and he pressed the crumpled bill in the man's hand.

"I'll take them, Mister. Wrap them up nice and fancy, won't you? They're for a young lady."

The assistant had sufficient remaining vitality to smile at this naive announcement and he produced a square purple box from the recesses of a rear cupboard and packed the violets carefully in it. Five minutes later, Tony emerged upon the street with the box tucked underneath his arm, and started for the Mission. He knew Miss Langmuir had a class of older boys on Saturday evenings, to whom she taught English.

"Oh! Oh! What's been doin', Dago? Buyin' flowers for your girl?"

The jeering taunt came from the edge of the pavement. Tony whirled about in time to see the mocking face of Ikey Einstein disappear behind the broad back of a portly gentleman. He forgot his sweet-smelling bunch of posies, forgot the admonition to love his enemies, forgot everything, in fact, but the near presence of his hated rival.

"You, Ikey! I'll get you this time."

He sped through the crowd, his eye on a rugged figure in a blue cotton jersey. Ikey, although heavier in build and older than Tony, had no desire to come to grips with the Italian lad and he darted down a side street and into a narrow lane behind some stores. Tony never lost sight of his quarry. Presently he began to overtake him.

"You, Ikey! I'll catch you in a minute!"

A big truck, laden with milk cans, backed heavily out of a store alley, as Ikey fled past the opening. Tony, his head down, did not see the machine until it was too late. With a sickening thud, the truck side-swiped the child and flung him upon a mound of straw, piled against the wall of a stable. Beneath the unconscious form was a square box wrapped in purple paper. In some unaccountable manner, it had escaped destruction.

The driver, ignorant of the accident, turned his car around and drove slowly out into traffic. He did not see the small boy lying so quietly against the building. But Ikey saw him and the Jewish lad crept back fearfully to see if his enemy were really hurt or merely feigning unconsciousness. The still white face frightened him and he ran to tell his father.

"Now, Ikey, what I been tellin' you about not fightin' with other boys?" reprimanded Isaac Einstein, when Ikey began his story.

"What's that? Tony's hurt—where? Why didn't you go tell his fadder? Yes, yes, I know we ain't friends, but this is different. Go, Ikey, and tell Tony's fadder." The boy may die—go quick."

But Tony did not die. When Giovanni Shapiro reached the lane where his son lay, the boy was regaining consciousness and he smiled wanly into the anxious face above him.

"Tony?—You hurt?" murmured Shapiro, brokenly. His son, the very apple



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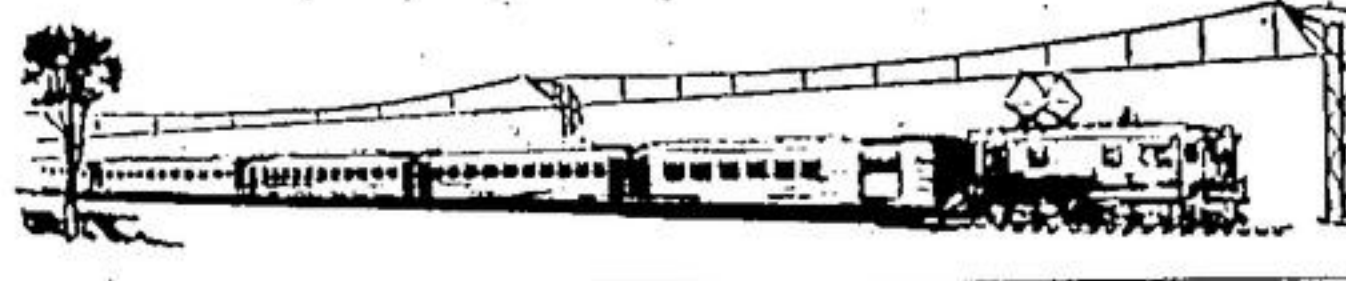
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of his eye—if anything should happen to him, the will to live would be gone.

"In—right, Father," gasped the boy, clutching his side. It pained him to breathe. "Help me up. I want—to go home."

But he was not able to walk and the man lifted him in his arms and carried him the two short blocks to their home. Big Tina, the policeman on the beat, listened sympathetically to Giovanni's explanation of the accident and went to summon a doctor. Tony's ribs were broken and his side badly bruised. It would be many weeks before he would be able to return to school or take his place in the blue-shine parlor on a Saturday.

Giovanni was waiting upon a belated customer about eleven o'clock that evening, when he heard Tony call him.

"Ya, Tony. What's eat'?"

"The violets, Father. Did you find them?" The boy's tone was agitated.

"Violets, Tony? What violets?"

"The box of violets I got for Miss Langmuir." Tony became more and more excited. "The man did them up all fancy for me and they looked just like her. Are you sure you didn't see them, Father?" The tears welled up in the dark eyes. Tony was doing his best to stand the agony of the broken ribs but the thought of the lost violets, together with the pain, was a combination too excruciating to be borne with equanimity. He turned his face to the wall and sobbed unrestrainedly.

"Tony! Tony! Stoppa da cry!" exclaimed Giovanni distractedly. "I take da light and go looka for dem in a lit' while. Stoppa da cry, Tony!"

The sobbing ceased and the boy waited patiently for the little shop to close. Half an hour later, Giovanni returned empty-handed and Tony spent a sleepless night, tossed by pain and troubled by the loss of the flowers.

Mother's Day dawned softly and brought with it a morning of sunshine and gentle breezes. Tony's bed was near the window and, between the walls of the two stores, he could see a tiny patch of blue sky. A pang shot through him—this was Mother's Day and the violets were gone!

"You eat' da porridge?" admonished Giovanni bristly, observing his son's downcast face and surmising the cause. Punny how the child lay such store by the Mission and his teacher. "See? Plenty cream and sug' for eat!"

"I'm not hungry," began Tony listlessly. He turned his head languidly. "In that somebody at the door, Father?"

I heard a knock."

Giovanni placed the cream pitcher on the tray and shuffled into the little shop. The knock was repeated before he reached the door and he quickened his pace. It was probably the doctor.

"Good-morning, Mr. Shapiro!" Margaret Langmuir stood on the pavement. She was garbed in a smart suit of grey tweed and she wore a felt hat in the shade. A carriage bouquet of deeply purple violets was the only color note in the modish ensemble.

"Good-day, Miss," muttered Giovanni. His dark eyes caught sight of the flowers in her coat and his jaw dropped. Violet!

"How is Tony? I have brought him some jellied chicken and a pudding. May I go in and see him?"

The man nodded. How had she known of the boy's accident? And the violets—

"Miss Langmuir!" Tony's cry rang out like a clarion call. In spite of the pain, he twisted himself about so he might see his dear teacher. How pretty she looked! His big eyes travelled from the becoming hat down the fair face, framed in golden hair, to the open jacket with its bouquet of violets! Tony's eyes grew bigger and bigger and he forgot the intense pain.

Miss Langmuir was talking softly. "I was so sorry to hear about your accident, Tony, dear. If it had not been so late, I would have come over after the class last night. And Tony," she patted the brown hand lying on the quilt. "It was nice of you to send me the violets. See—I am wearing them to-day."

"I—sent you—" stammered Tony, his brain whirling with the suddenness of it all. "Why, I—"

"Ikey told me you and he were going to be friends, too," went on the girl. "I am so glad, Tony. He said he was coming over to help you after every Saturday until you are better. I know you would make friends with him, Tony."

Ikey! His hated rival and arch enemy! He must have found the box in the lane. Tony had put a card inside it. The lad's heart was filled with a great wonder, but this noon gave way to a tremendous peace and content. If Ikey would play fair, business could go on as usual. He smiled happily and clutched Miss Langmuir's hand in both of his.

"I'm so glad you liked them, Miss," he murmured, his eyes on the violets. "They looked like you."

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