

The Rector of Saint Gabriel's

He certainly is a very striking man," said Lucia Easton in her clear imperious tones. "Why, he's as handsome as can be," returned Mrs. Williams with the vivacity of her sort of a woman. "He can't be more than thirty-five or thirty-eight, if his hair and beard are gray. Jim says he looks like an up-to-date prophet," she added with a high pitched brittle laugh peculiarly distasteful to her companion's esthetic sense.

"I was not thinking of his features," Miss Easton retorted with rather edgy precision. "What you see behind them is the great charm. He has a manner that is not reserve or coldness. But he always seems in leash to some deep rooted reminder! He must have been through a crisis of some kind, presumably mental, and he has not survived its influence—yet!"

"Well, if it isn't strange to hear you say that! I wonder if I had better tell you something Jim heard about him," Mrs. Williams continued slowly. She eyed her companion appraisingly. "You'll never tell, will you?"

"If it's anything very dreadful," replied Miss Easton promptly, "perhaps you'd better not tell me. Mr. Woodridge has shown himself a model of zeal and practical energy ever since he came to Saint Gabriel's. If there's anything about him that is queer, it had better come from himself. He has scoured the place for miles around to get the children together for this confirmation. He seems to have a peculiar liking for children. It was strange enough that he should throw up a wealthy parish for this poor little one in the Upper Peninsula."

"He does read the Versicles as nobody else. Jim hasn't missed a morning service since he came. I think I ought to tell you what Jim heard. I wouldn't tell it to many in the parish. But you won't tell."

"I certainly shan't tell," replied Miss Eaton somewhat scornfully. "Well then,"—Mrs. Williams lowered her voice impressively—they say—she killed some one once."

"Oh, what a shame!" exclaimed Miss Eaton indignantly. She was the kind of a woman who lent vigor to that sort of exclamatory protest: slender, olive skinned, thirty, and an important personage in Saint Gabriel's since she was rich, intellectual and of good family.

"I don't mean deliberate murder, of course," Mrs. Williams hastened to add, with nice discrimination of manslaughter from the real thing. "It was when he was very young. Another boy angred him, and he struck him; and he fell and—died afterward. Jim says he heard it from a man who knew Mr. Woodridge when he was in the East years ago. He didn't mean to, of course. But then, it might have something to do with his expression."

deration. Honest white bone buttons fastened them to a skimp homespun jacket. On his small round head was a battered straw hat, as incongruous as the rest of his outfit. With this grotesque simplicity of attire went a scrupulous neatness.

Embarrassed by the fooling of the boys and the snickers of the girls, he had edged away from the crowd of children so bent on emphasizing his variance from themselves and courted the lesser evil of solitude. In his isolation, through whatever impulse, he drew a small green catechism from his pocket, and sought to distract himself with its questions and answers. Religion has its soothing for the bruised spirit.

The ringleader in the baiting—one of the largest boys—had small respect for this shy withdrawal. With an elaborate grimace to his fellows he circled near his butt with a too palpably simulated indifference with suspicious foreboding the odd boy divided his attention between his book and the chortling tormentor. All at once the latter dashed forward, snatched the catechism from the small brown fingers, and with a laugh of derision flung it to some of the others. This horseplay was applauded by the young yokels, to the added discomfiture of the childish neophyte.

Throughout this petty drama the new rector of Saint Gabriel's had stood watching the scene with what seemed undue intensity of interest. The set look in his face hardly had warrant in the trivial puerility of the action. Once, when the brown face had been lifted with a sudden gleam of apprehension in the round blue eyes the Rev. Arnold Woodridge had pressed his sinewy hand over his eyes, and murmured, "Ah," in a stifled way. Now he went downstairs quickly, and then, with more measured strides, out onto the smooth-cropped lawn. He was certainly striking enough a personality to awaken all the interest the two women had shown in him. Tall, compactly built, a broad forehead, strong, well-cut nose, gray eyes with a searching sympathy in their clear depths, and the lower part of his face concealed by a thick, curling beard and mustache, both gray—such was the figure that approached the children.

The expression of his face was singularly riveting, but baffling. Despite its material serenity, it breathed of something within that was a dominant feature of his soul life. Something had gripped his inner man with a pinioning hold that affected the very marrow of his sensibility. As he moved along the children the change that came into that strange face was like the brightening of a landscape under the sun just emerging from overhanging clouds. His winning, serious, smile; the light, caressing touch of his hand, and the cheery words of greeting dispelled the severe restraint of his repose by a singularly attractive suavity.

Quite naturally he arrived at the little boy who stood meekly aloof in his artless raiment. The rector's heart gave a throb as he felt the diminutive figure stiffen into grateful response under the magnetic hand he laid upon the close-cropped head.

"Children," he said, in his rich clear voice, "it is so pleasant out here in the open air, that if you just sit down on the grass I will tell you a story before we go into chapel for the confirmation instruction."

He walked toward a rustic bench, as the young ones settled on the sward expectantly, still holding by the hand the childish martyr. When he seated himself he lifted the little chap to a place by his side, and threw his strong arm lightly across the small shoulders. He looked over his juvenile congregation, drew a long breath, and began. Miss Easton and her companion who had halted in the edge of the lawn, now drew nearer and disposed themselves on the velvet sward. This is a "true story" children, and I am going to tell it to you for your good. I happened to see when you were playing, and of course I saw better than you did that your fun was at the price of Peter's peace and comfort. I do not suppose you had any thought of cruelty in this. You did not reflect that Peter has not had many playmates in the deserted part of the country where he lives, and naturally felt it strange to be thrown with a lot of children whom he didn't know. He did not understand your way of making up to him. It wasn't a very nice way to treat a stranger, and a little boy so much younger than a good many of you. Do you think it was, Billy Stevenson? You meant no harm by it; but I want you to have a better idea of that sort of selfish thoughtlessness, and so I tell you this story. "The bravest are the tenderest," and as you are all going to be enrolled as soldiers by the confirmation you are preparing for, you must get the right soldier spirit.

"Once upon a time," a good many

years ago, at a boarding school for boys on the Niagara River, in New York, there was one small and odd looking little chap. The other boys took a good deal of pleasure in fooling with him. They made his life miserable, in fact, by their constant hectoring. They meant no harm. They didn't think. One of the students was a leader, because he was older and stronger and belonged to a rich and powerful family. He found it great fun to chaff this solemn-faced, big-eyed, shy little chap.

"The river below the college ran very fast, though these lower rapids were not as strong as the upper ones. Still there were violent enough to mean destruction for any one who got in their grip. The shore here was rocky, and the water near it, calmer. The boys used to enjoy playing on these rocks. One day half a dozen of them were scrambling about on them, when the unexpectedly came on this odd chap. He had got to keeping out of their way, they annoyed him so much, and he had gone there all alone. So there he sat, perched on a rock by the roaring, rushing river all by himself. To the other boys this made him look comical, and it roused the fun-loving spirit of this ringleader, who chanced to be along. He saw a chance for something new.

"Aha!" he cried, "now we've got you! We aren't good enough for him to go with, fellows! I guess we'll have to throw him into the river," he continued, grabbing the small boy.

"Here goes. One! Two!"

"He did not get any farther. The small boy, in a panic of fear, struggled so violently that he not only wriggled free from his grasp, but made the bigger boy lose his balance. In stepping from one projection of the rocks to another, in his efforts to recover it, he slipped, and fell forward. His head struck the rock, so that he was stunned, and before any one could realize it he had rolled into the river himself.

"The small boy, panting over his escape, saw the tables turned in this way. He also realized the danger the other was in, and his generous nature had only one thought—to save him. He slipped into the water, and grabbed the half-dazed boy. His excitement gave him a nervous strength that enabled him to push the other near enough the rocks for his comrades to grab him and pull him out.

"Before they had time to do the same thing for the plucky rescuer the current had whirled him out into the rapids. His force, spent in struggling to save the other boy, left him too weak to resist. Hence, when the big boy, who had been lying flat on his stomach on the rock, raised himself up, his eyes rested on the round head, wild eyes and struggling form of the odd little butt of the school, bobbing up and down in the fiercely churning waters.

"Boys, I do not suppose one day of that boy's life since then has passed without his seeing that agonized face showing in that foaming mass of water.

"He tottered to his feet with a groan, and had not the other boys held him he would have sprung into the racing river to try to rescue the victim he had put there, or perish with him. But he was destined to the harder lot of living with that drowning boy for all the afteryears of his life.

"All this took only a moment. The child out in those angry tossing waves knew he was doomed. They heard him cry out shrilly above the roar. "Never mind, boys! You couldn't help it! Good-by! Tell my mother!" The next moment he was swallowed up in the seething rapids."

The rector paused and wiped his face slowly with his handkerchief. There was an awed silence on the part of the children, and the two women exchanged one glance full of significance. Then the rector went on, in his usual tone, but very impressively. "Children, those boys didn't mean any more harm than you did when you were fooling with Peter just now. If they had realized the suffering their fun caused their victim they would have been more considerate. I have told you the story that you may have more forethought. When Peter gets more experience of the world, and learns human nature better, he will stand up with the best of you. Give him a fair show. That other boy showed that he had the soul of a hero in him. He was courageous, forgiving, mindful of others, and cool in the very face of death.

"It poisoned existence for the big boy. Perhaps it has made his life more useful than it would otherwise have done. For he felt that after the destruction of that young life he could do nothing with his own but make it as helpful to others as was possible, in atonement. Yet he meant no more harm than you did just now, when you were amusing yourself by worrying Peter. Now we will go into chapel."

He rose, and walked toward the porch of the pretty ivy-clad structure holding little Peter by the hand. Together they passed out of the glorious sunshine into the dim tranquility of the church, and the hushed mob of children streamed in after them.

After services Miss Easton told Mrs. Williams she had to speak to the rector for a few minutes, and not to wait for her. She was in no mood for the other's garrulity and "Jim," Mrs.

Williams went her way rather ruffled, and recalled "Jim's" remark that "he thought Lucia Easton was a little stuck on the new rector."

When Miss Easton came out of the mellow dimness of the chapel most of the children had departed. The rector was holding Peter high in the air, as a valedictory ceremony. As he set him on his feet again he pulled his ears playfully, saying, with the most light-hearted gaiety, "Don't you mind the boy's tricks, Peter. Go in and be one of them. But if you are ever troubled or lonely, come to me and we'll talk it over; for I've been troubled and lonely myself. Here, Billy Stevenson, you and Peter go part of the way together. See that you get better acquainted. Good-by, Peter. Remember me to your father and mother."

Peter, already hardened by his friendly protector and with a new grip on life, trudged off with a stiffer backbone. His honest buttons glistened in the sun and his small legs were lost in the amplitude of trousers that sheathed them. The rector of Saint Gabriel's hardly knew whether he was worthier of a smile or a tear. He was spared the resolution of his doubt by Miss Easton's approach.

"Mr. Woodridge," she said, looking him in the eye with a trusting directness, "I want to shake hands with you, after that story to the children." Her glance and manner said so much more than her voice.

He took her hand gravely. "Thank you," he replied, with perfect simplicity.

"I wish," she continued, again her voice and manner imparting peculiar sympathy to her very conventional words, "that you would come and see me." Her hand still held his with a warm pressure.

"I shall do so very soon he added. She turned and walked slowly away. As the rector of Saint Gabriel's was about to enter the doorway of the rectory he paused, and looked at the graceful figure of the receding young woman. It was only for a half a moment. Then he passed in. But there was new springiness to his gait.

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