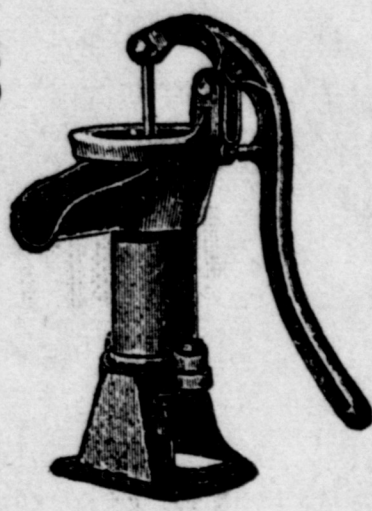


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THE LITTLE CURATE.

The curate and Miss Edmiston were walking down the main street of the village in conversation, which, being that of a recently affianced pair, need not here be repeated.

Miss Edmiston carried herself with an air of pretty dignity, made not less apparent by the fact that she was fully two inches taller than her lover, the Rev. John St. John. He was a thin, wiry little man, dark haired and pale complexioned, and was much troubled in his daily walk with a certain unconquerable shyness.

"Such a very uninteresting young man!" said the maiden ladies over their afternoon tea.

"So ridiculously retiring! How did he ever come to propose?" remarked the mothers whose daughters assisted in giving women an overwhelming and not altogether united majority in Broxbourne society.

"You're a dear little girl, Nancy," the curate was stammering, looking up to his beloved, when they were both stopped short on the narrow pavement. A burly workman was engaged in chastising a small boy with a weapon in the shape of a leather belt. The child screamed and the father presumably cursed.

"Stop!" cried the curate. The angry man smiled and raised the strap for another blow. St. John laid a detaining hand on the fellow's arm, the temerity of which caused the latter so much surprise that he loosened his grip for a moment, and the youngster fled bowling up an alley.

"What the—" sputtered the bully, dancing round the curate, who seemed to shrink nearer to his sweetheart.

"Let us go, dear," he said. He had grown white and was trembling. At this juncture two of the workman's cronies appeared at the door of the ale-house opposite and seeing how matters stood, crossed the road and with rough hands and soothing curses conducted their furious friend from the scene.

"Horrible!" sighed the curate as the lovers continued their walk. Miss Edmiston's head was held a trifle higher. "If I were a man," she said, "I would have thrashed him. I would indeed."

"You think I should have punished him then?" said the curate mildly. "He [was a much larger man than I, you know."

Nancy was silent. She was vaguely but sorely disappointed in her lover. He was not exactly the hero she had dreamed of. How white and shaky he had turned! "I don't think your cloth is an excuse anyhow," she blurted out suddenly and cruelly. The next instant she was filled with shame and regret.

Before she could speak again, however, the curate had lifted his hat and was crossing the street. An icy "Goodby!" was all he vouchsafed her.

Mr. St. John was returning from paying a visit of condolence some distance out of the village, and he had taken the short cut across the moor. It was a clear, summer afternoon, a week since his parting with Nancy. A parting in earnest it had been, for the days had gone by without meeting or communication between them. The curate was a sad young man, though the anger in his heart still burned fiercely.

To have been called a coward by the woman he loved was a thing not likely to be forgotten. His recent visit, too, had been particularly trying. In his soul he felt that his words of comfort had been unreal; that for all he had striven, he had failed in his mission to the bereaved mother. So he trudged across the moor with slow step and bent head, giving no heed to the summer beauties around him.

He was about half way home when his sombre meditations were interrupted. A man rose from the heather, where he had been lying, and stood in the path, barring the curate's progress.

"Now, Mister Parson?" he said, with menace in his thick voice and bloated face.

"Good afternoon, my man," returned St. John, recognizing the brute of a week ago and turning as red as a turkey cock.

"I'll 'good afternoon' ye, Mister Parson! No! Ye don't pass till I'm done wi' ye!" cried the man who had been drinking heavily, though he was too seasoned to show any unsteadiness in gait.

The curate drew back. "What do you want?" he asked. He was painfully white now.

"What do I want?" repeated the bully, following up the question with a volley of oaths that made the little man shudder.

"I'll tell ye what I want. I want yer apology"—he fumbled with the word—"apology for interferin' t'ween a father 'an his kid. But I licked him more'n ever for yer blasted interferin'."

"You infernal coward!" exclaimed St. John.

His opponent gasped. "Let me pass!" said the curate.

"No, ye don't!" cried the other, recovering from his astonishment at hearing a strong word from the parson.

St. John gazed hurriedly about him. The path wound across the moor, through the green and purple of the heather, cutting a low hedge here and there and losing itself at last in the heat haze. They were alone.

The bully grinned. "I've got ye now!" "You have indeed," said St. John, peeling off his black coat and throwing it on the heather. His soft felt hat followed. Then he slipped the links from his cuffs and rolled up his shirt sleeves, while his enemy gasped at his proceedings.

"Now, I'm ready," said the curate gently.

"Are we going to fight?" burst out the other, looking at him as Goliath might have looked at David. "Come on, ye—"

But the foul word never passed his lips, being stopped by a carefully planted blow from a small but singularly hard fist. The little curate was filled with a wild unholy joy. He had not felt like this since his college days. He thanked Providence for his friends, the Indian clubs and dumb-bells, which had kept him in trim for the past three years. The blood sang in his veins as he circled round Goliath, guarding the giant's brutal smashes and getting in a stroke when occasion offered. It was not long ere the big man found himself hopelessly out-matched; his wind was gone; his jaw was swollen, and one eye was useless. He made a final effort and slung out a terrific blow at David. Partly parried, it caught him on the shoulder, felling him to the earth. Now, surely, the victory was with the Philistine. But, no. The young man recoiled to his feet like a young sapling, and the next that Goliath knew was, ten minutes later, when he opened his available eye and found that his enemy was bending over him, wiping the stains from his face with a fine linen handkerchief.

"Feel better?" said the curate.

"Well, I'm—"

"Hush, man; it's not worth swearing about," interposed his nurse. "Now, get up."

He held out his hand and assisted the wreck to his feet.

"You'd better call at the chemists and get patched up. Here's the money."

The vanquished one took the silver and gazed stupidly at the giver, who was making his toilet.

"Please go away and don't thrash your boy any more," said St. John persuasively.

Goliath made a few steps and then retraced them, holding out a grinning paw. "Mister Parson, I'm—I'm—"

"Don't say another word. Good-by." And the curate shook hands with him.

The big man turned away. Presently he halted once more. "I'm beat!" he said. It had to come. Then he shuffled homeward.

St. John adjusted his collar, gave his shoulder a rub and donned his coat and hat. As he started towards the village a girl came swiftly to meet him.

"Oh, John, John you are splendid!" she gasped as she reached him. "I watched you from the hedge yonder."

"I am exceedingly sorry, Miss Edmiston," said the curate coldly, raising his hat and making to pass on.

Nancy started as though he had struck her. Her flush of enthusiasm paled out. In her excitement she had forgotten that even a week ago, but the cutting tone of his voice reminded her. She bowed her head, and he went on his way. He had gone about fifty yards when she called his name. Her voice just reached him, but something in it told him he had not suffered alone.

He turned about and hastened to her.

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