

# The Storyteller.

## THE LITTLE SACRISTAN.

'REMEMBER, Phil, be home before dark.'

'All right, mother; I'll be back by eight o'clock at the latest.'

Then with a hasty farewell the youth sprang on his bicycle and rode swiftly down the street under the shady maples, through whose leaves, already tinged with the beauties of approaching autumn, streamed down the brilliant midday sunlight.

Phil Seton was the only child of a widowed mother, and had spent all his fourteen summers in the pleasant little village of Exeter. A mighty bond of affection united mother and son. To her maternal care and solicitude he responded with a truly filial devotion. He was a sturdy, active lad, inclined to all manner of sport, and, indeed, his proficiency in this line was greater than in his studies, though Phil was nevertheless a diligent student. Being the son of a pious Catholic mother, he was intimately connected with all concerning the little parish church. He had lately been appointed assistant sacristan, and he took much pride in the performance of his duties.

'Oh! a goody-goody sort of a boy, this,' some of my readers will perhaps be tempted to exclaim. But no. Phil had his little faults; who has not! This, however, is not the place for enumerating them. We have another tale to tell.

Phil wheeled out to 'Elmgrove'—Harry White's home—and the two boys enjoyed, as only boys can, the delights of a day's tramp through the woods and fields. The day was drawing to a close as Phil remounted his wheel for the journey home, for, though earnestly pressed by his friends to remain and spend the evening with them, the memory of his promise would not allow him to accept the kind invitation. The last rays of the setting sun were gleaming through the tree tops, barring the long white road with the shadows of the great elms that skirted its borders. He had scarcely proceeded a mile, when suddenly he felt the rear tire give way. What was his dismay to find that it was punctured.

'Whew! this is a pretty fix, and I haven't my repair kit with me. It's a long walk back to Elmgrove—I have it. I'll just step into Mr. Cherry's house, which cannot be more than a quarter of a mile from here, and leave my wheel there until I can come and fetch it home, while I myself—'

Phil stopped. He was going to add that he could walk back to Exeter. But now it was dark and it would be a long, lonely tramp, while Mr. Cherry's hospitable family would be only too glad to retain him. Inclination pointed one way, filial affection and obedience the other. The struggle was short, for the thought of his mother's anxiety if he should not return effectually banished any lurking desire he may have had to evade the dreary walk home.

All this time Phil was proceeding towards the Cherry homestead, and by the time he had made up his mind to go home he was almost at Cherry's gate. Mr. Cherry, an old friend of Phil's father, welcomed him heartily and was loath to let him depart. But after Phil had gone he remarked emphatically to his wife:

'Sarah, mark my words! That boy's got the makings of a good man in him. It's not often nowadays you see boys so obedient to their parents. Seems to me children arn't as dootiful as when I was young.'

In which opinion, minus the characteristic grumble that accompanied it, Mrs. Cherry heartily concurred.

When our hero turned his back on the Cherry homestead the journey seemed far drearier than before. The long road stretching out before him into the increasing darkness formed a most dismal contrast to the bright and cheerful fireside he had just left. The nights were growing colder, and a keen breeze whistling through the tree tops swept down on the lad as he began his long walk. But, summoning up all his natural courage and buoyancy of spirits Phil resolutely faced toward home.

By way of short cut the boy turned down an old disused road leading to the left. He had gone scarcely 200 yards when a surprising sight met his view as he descended a small hill. Behind a clump of cedar bushes was a camp-fire, around which three or four men were seated.

'Tramps!' ejaculated Phil.

During the past summer Exeter had been tormented with the usual number of the tramping fraternity. The boldness and insolence of these Wandering Willies had grown intolerable, and finally they were strictly forbidden the town under pain of imprisonment. Recently burglaries had become numerous in the village and surrounding country, and it was thought that the perpetrators probably had a rendezvous in some secluded part of the neighbourhood. All efforts to track them hitherto, however, had been in vain.

'Well, what matter even if they are tramps. They won't hurt a fellow and they would hardly hold me up. They'd not get much for their trouble. I'm not going to go back for fear of them. I'll just walk right past them, and as likely as not they won't say a word.'

Still screened by the bushes he advanced. The men were talking in low tones, and when Phil was but a few yards from the fire one of the group, raising his voice, said:

'Well, that settles it. Jack will pick the lock and stand guard, while the rest enter the church and collar the swag.'

Phil's heart seemed to stand still as he heard those words.

'What, thought he, 'are these men going to break into the church? "The swag?" What do they mean? Surely they do not intend to lay hands on the sacred vessels of the altar.'

Yet that such was the awful deed they contemplated he soon had ample proof. With the most profane language they outlined their plan in all its terrible details.

Thunderstruck and horrified as he was, Phil could not believe the evidence of his ears. No time was to be lost. His duty lay plain before him; at all costs he must prevent this sacrilege. The only safe course lay in retracing his steps and going around by the road. He turned, but as he did so he stepped upon a dry twig, which broke with a loud snap. At once the men around the fire sprang to their feet. The leader's 'Who's there?' was unanswered save by the sound of some one running away. Phil was a swift runner, and with the start he had he thought he might be able to evade his pursuers in the darkness. Unfortunately he had gone but a short distance when he stumbled and fell. Before he could rise they were upon him. Our hero was led back to the light of the campfire. Here he was interrogated by the leader of the gang as to his eavesdropping, but he refused to give any information. Thereupon the worthies held a consultation with regard to what they should do with him. Finally they decided to bind him hand and foot and keep him there until they returned from their intended robbery. In the meantime Phil's mind was tortured with terrible anxiety. What would his mother think of his failing to arrive at the usual hour. And, oh, what if these villains should succeed in executing their awful purpose? What would he not give to be able to frustrate it!

It was now about 9 o'clock. They intended to leave for the village about midnight. Surely he could do something in three hours. If he could only free himself he might be able to reach the village before them. How to do this was the question, and Phil vainly tortured his mind for an answer.

The group around the fire passed the time in gambling and smoking, while occasionally a bottle was handed round. This latter naturally had its customary effect, and suddenly one of the men, an Italian, took offence at some saying of one of his companions. Angry words followed, and finally the Italian pulled out a long, dangerous-looking knife and threatened the other with it. Instantly all were on their feet. With a savage oath the leader sprang between the two men and knocked the knife from the Italian's hand. It fell near Phil, who, watching his chance, rolled over upon it to hide it from view. In the excitement of the moment his action passed unnoticed.

'Fools! What do you mean? Do you want to spoil our plans by your fighting? No more quarrelling or somebody will suffer.'

The leader's words had some effect on the gang, for they immediately became quiet again. The Italian, however, scowled darkly at his enemy, and luckily for Phil, his mind was so full of thoughts of revenge that he forgot about his knife. Our hero now cast off his despondency, buoying himself up with the hope that by this new-found means he might yet be able to thwart the burglars. His bonds caused him much pain, the strong fastenings cutting into his tender flesh. But he bore it without murmur. From his boyish heart he poured forth many a fervent prayer that he might be permitted to prevent this terrible sacrilege.

At length the time settled upon for the burglars' departure arrived. As soon as they were out of sight our hero prepared to free himself from his bonds. He had previously decided that the best way to use the knife would be to grasp it in his fingers and then try to saw through the fastenings on his wrists. It was a difficult task, bound as he was, but after ten minutes' painful labour he succeeded in freeing his hands. This accomplished, it was but the work of an instant to cut the things that bound his feet. His first act was to breathe a fervent prayer of thanksgiving. The next to restore the circulation in his cramped limbs by a brisk and vigorous rubbing. But time was precious. The distance to the village was about two and a half miles, and the men would easily get there in three-quarters of an hour. So that if Phil wished to arrive before them he must cover the distance in less than thirty minutes. The railroad track crossed the road at the end of the lane, so most probably the burglars would take to this, as it was slightly shorter and less public.

The task our hero had set himself was enough to daunt an older and abler person, but despite his sore and cramped limbs he resolved to do it if it could be done. 'I would gladly die,' he murmured, 'to prevent this act of profanation.'

And so the brave boy started on his race. Wisely reserving his strength to the last, Phil commenced with a steady pace, which he maintained till the final spurt. What a strange spectacle for men and angels—a young boy, panting and bleeding, swiftly racing along a secluded country road in the darkness of midnight. Past bush and creek and meadow he dashed without abating his speed a jot. Gasping for breath he uttered a little cry of joy as he at length reached the outskirts of the village. Putting all his available strength into one final effort he burst down the village street. He must give the alarm at the priest's house. But just as he reached the presbytery door he saw four dark forms skulking through the churchyard.

'Mother of God, am I too late? What can I do? It will take too long to rouse the house, and then—I must do something. Yes, I will try it. It may succeed.'

A sudden thought had struck our hero. He could not give the alarm by any ordinary means, so he must use extraordinary measures. If he could but get at the alarm bell in the church before the robbers forced an entrance he could easily rouse the village and frighten the church breakers away. This was the bold idea that suddenly had taken root in Phil's mind. He had the key of the sacristy, for, as we have seen, he was assistant sacristan. He now felt confident of frustrating the robbers' design. So proceeding cautiously to the rear of the church he opened the door and stole in.

Now he was out in the main building. His heart throbbed violently as he caught the faint rasping sounds at the main door. For an instant he halted to breathe an earnest ejaculatory prayer at the foot of the altar. Then with a quick bound he stood at the front of the church with the bell-rope in his hands.