

* * The Story Page * *

The Seventh Boy.

He came to church one morning with Mr. Hastie, sitting with him during the morning service, and the superintendent brought him to Miss Helmer's class after the opening exercises of the Sunday-School, merely saying, "Mr. McClintock, Miss Helmer; Mr. Hastie especially requested me to bring him to you."

A chair was placed for him, and the consideration of the day's lesson proceeded. Miss Helmer, outwardly calm, was inwardly apprehensive as to what this addition to her class might mean to her, in the future. For a new and a strange element this new boy certainly was. He was apparently sixteen years of age, tall, well proportioned and not ungraceful, and his big blue eyes met her with a frank friendliness that was reassuring, but his very red hair was long, and because of its curly bushiness, made his head look large; hands and face were freckled, and he was clothed in home-made butternut jeans, every article of which he had outgrown in all directions.

Now Miss Helmer was a true teacher, as well as a cheerful, devout woman, and a new pupil, however unpromising, was to her so much new material, and the contrast between her well-groomed boys and this uncouth figure would have troubled her little, only she did not feel sure of his treatment by the class.

Elder Hastie's good opinion was flattering, for he was quite an authority in our congregation. He owned a large stock farm a couple of miles out from the village, and in addition to being one of the most liberal supporters of the church financially, was a true Scotchman in devotion to all its work. So it was no light matter that the boy should be sent to her care.

The school looked up to Miss Helmer's class and imitated to some extent its very correct deportment. The superintendent depended upon it for much help on special occasions, as Easter, Christmas, etc., and these boys fast approaching manhood, occupied no small space in the teacher's interest. Always well and tastefully dressed, she often excused little extravagances in dress by the plea, "For the sake of my boys." She took journeys in one direction or another in vacation, on account of the boys. Attended conventions and institutes, read widely and carefully, collected curios, all that she might best please and teach the class. And in many ways it justified her interest. Four of the boys were members of the church, having grown up in the Sabbath-school, were students in the high school, and sixteen years of age; two were merchants' clerks, and a little older Cornelius Draper was with a clothing house and John Horton in a shoe store. All were well dressed, young Draper, who wore tailor-made clothing, a trifle over-dressed, unless he had commanded more salary. All were very respectful. The new boy was gravely attentive, but took no part in the lesson. After the closing exercises, Miss Helmer detained him in order to get his name, assign the lesson, etc. Finding that he would walk home, and their way would be the same for a short distance, she gave him her books to carry and proceed to improve acquaintance.

"Barzilia; that's rather a strange name, and McClintock is Scotch, is it not?"

"Yes'm. My father an' Mr. Hastie came from Scotland together, and I am from the mountains of North Carolina. My folks died when I was little. My mother's people raised me. Mr. Hastie sent for me; wants me to learn to farm, and to take care of stock."

"Do you think you will like to farm?"

"Yes'm. I like hawses, and there's some mighty fine ones out there! The tenants will do the hardest work, an' I am to take care of the old people. I like that. Mr. Hastie as good, but I jist nachelly love Mother Hastie! They both think it's a pinte shame for a big fellow like me to know nothin' of the Bible. I learned myself to read, but I don't know much more than that. They both said I was to come to you in the Sabbath-school."

"Why, I am pleased to hear it! I trust you were willing to come, Mr. McClintock?"

"Would you as lieve call me, Barzie, ma'am? That's what I am used to. Yes'm I'm going to do just that they think best. You know it isn't every fellow that gets such a chance."

All this was spoken in a soft, musical voice, with a strong Southern accent, and a drawl that was indescribable. And Miss Helmer realized that, however she might be able to build, it would be on new foundation. She was hardly prepared for the lifting of the battered hat and the courtly bow with which he took leave of her, but when she glanced after the tall, lithe figure, in the little brown coat and very short trousers, striding away, her heart failed her, and visions of mountain whites, moonshiners and feuds distressed her. If she had been right honest with herself (the rarest kind of honesty, by the way) she would have known Miss Helmer was as likely to withhold hearty sympathy from this mountain boy as was her class. If he had been a Chinaman, now, with braided queue and loose coat, respectful toleration should be compelled. But this uncouth, ignorant keeper of "hawses"! How would the boys treat

him? In this thought she wronged the boys. They deserved, after all these years of teaching, more confidence; not so much that she had a right to expect from young men in their station forbearance and help as that the warrant, "My word shall not return to me void," should have been enough assurance, should young McClintock prove stupid and rough.

There was, however, a little excuse for this lack of faith. She had her times of bitter discouragement, times when she was ready to despair, because she could see no little real fruit of her patient, faithful work.

The lessons as laid down, were fairly learned, questions correctly answered, memory passages committed but when she proceeded to practical application of principles, she could get no response.

She varied her methods, she told the story, hunted for familiar illustrations, and asked leading questions. Yet the occasions were rare in which a voluntary opinion found voice in the class. She could rouse no enthusiasm; they were duty lessons, and seemingly uninteresting.

The boys were fairly intelligent. Draper was well posted in newest scientific research, Horton authority in political and sporting news. Both were ready to speak on these subjects when opportunity offered, but so far as expression went, Scripture lessons had taken no root. Not very surprising when we remember that the prayer-meeting room is often filled with intelligent men and women who are mute as mice, when subjects rich in wisdom for every guidance are up for discussion. They won't even ask questions! I have often wondered why it is so. It may be reverence for the Book of Books. It is possibly distrust of worthiness or ability to hold or express opinions on sacred things. Be that as it may, it is discouraging to teacher or leader.

If Miss Helmer had known, young McClintock was on a sort of probation. Mr. Hastie had sent for the son of his old and valued friend with much confidence and very kindly intention. But he was by no means a man to decide hastily. Every new venture was entered upon only after due caution and "consideration," and the boy coming on the terms he had mentioned to Miss Helmer did not have a hint of what the childless old couple intended for him, should he bear their careful testing, honorably. So, when Mother Hastie proposed to fit him out with suitable clothing, she was met by prompt refusal.

"Na, na, wife. He's nae the waur for a few Sawbath's trial, though I doot me, 'twill be harder for you to see him in yon queer rig than for himself!"

And she was obliged to wait. So, for a month or more, he went out with the congregation, and only after bringing the team around and getting the old people started homeward, did he seek the class, so the rusty brown figure became familiar. Thoughtful people, observing the graceful, erect carriage, shoulders squared and head up, forgot the odd clothing, and the mountaineer never seemed to be at all conscious of it.

Perhaps, if his classmates had received or treated him with less courtesy, he might have been made painfully aware of his appearance, but the boys were his friends from the start.

And with the second Sabbath, began a new era for Miss Helmer's class.

Barzie, as he insisted on being called, brought to his first Scripture lessons intelligence of no mean order, and his interest was so keen and mind so hungry that the class was shaken out of its dutiful endurance of the hour. He was just as apt to appeal to the boys for enlightenment as to the teacher, and she encouraged them to answer him, wisely thinking that their minds were as likely to grasp his difficulties as her own; and there was no more listlessness, there were no dull lessons, and the boys not only expressed their ideas, but studied carefully how to express them clearly, and the allotted time for the lesson was always too short.

I can not forbear giving a few instances of the mode of reciting (?). Take the lesson on forgiveness. In order to vary the several ideas brought out by the text, Miss Helmer, said, "Boys, suppose some one has injured you. Some boy, perhaps, told lies about you, is unrepentant, and you are quite sure he only lacks opportunity to repeat the offense, what would be your best course?"

"Why, I think I would get me a club an' lay foh that fellow!" came in Barzie's musical drawl.

"For if ye forgive not men their trespasses, neither will your Father in heaven forgive you," one of the boys reminded him.

"Don't want him to. He wouldn't, nohow, if I kept on with the same old meanness!"

Then followed a rapid exchange of ideas, until it seemed that vigorous measures, used without malice, might constitute a good argument.

The lesson on the Sabbath, coming as it did, differing entirely from all preconceived ideas, was very interesting. Barzie took that home with him, and Elder Hastie was proud to hunt up for him a weight of authority.

When they came to the prodigal son, the young mountaineer was sorely perplexed.

"Why, I'd a set the dog on him! I pinte'dly would! Sassy to the old man, in the fist place, nothin' didn't fall to him, while his father lived! Then afe he'd played kyards like as not, an' caroused 'round, an' spent it all, to come sneakin' back! He didn't noways deserve for that poor old man to be glad to see him. I can't undeestand how it was!"

So the teacher carefully explained how the story was told that the Jews, and now, all men, might understand the love of God. Barzie felt somewhat enlightened. It the father in either case saw fit to restore the son, it was clearly the elder son's duty to agree, but then, "That triflin' younger son wasn't fittin' to wear a good coat or gold ring, or eat any fatted calf, either!"

Then Horton took him in hand, "Barzie, suppose some day the bay colt gets out of the barn lot, and canters off down to the neck of timber by the pond—"

"Wouldn't want him to go there. Pond is swampy!"

"Yes, danger that he mire down and be lost in his foolishness."

"You go and coax, try to tole, and finally to drive him home, all to no purpose; night and storm coming on, you are obliged to give up and go home."

"I wouldn't though; I'd stay with him!"

Horton went steadily on. "There's a thunder shower and hail and, before you are out in the morning, you hear the colt whinny at the bars. He is cold and hungry and thoroughly subdued by what he has passed through but would you go out and set the dog on him?"

"Why, John! I wouldn't! That colt is valuable! I'd rub him down, an' blanket him, an'—"

"Lam him, I suppose?"

"No, sir! I like that colt. Most likely I'd give him a lump of sugar, I'd be so glad to get him home safe."

"Likewise there is joy in heaven over one sinner that repenteth," quoted Horton reverently.

Draper and Horton had made the acquaintance of the bay colt when they had been invited out to the farm, after prayer meeting one night. They had enjoyed the early breakfast and a drive afterward, with the old gentleman and Barzie, over the fine farm, and had much admired the "hawses," and particularly the vay colt, Barzie's pride.

Soon after this young McClintock presented himself at the "Emporium" with an order for a suit of clothes, and Cornelius Draper never waited on a customer more carefully, nor with greater pleasure, indeed, he was the more critical of the two.

Though Mr. Hastie had set no limit to expenditure, both boys knew he would expect full worth, and knew, too, when he got it, so Barzie fared very well. A well-fitting gray suit, a pair of nearly white, negligee shirts, a suitable hat and tie, a pair of large, thin, colored handkerchiefs, and lastly, some leather gloves. Obtaining leave, Draper went with him to a shoe store, to see him shod properly, and then to a barber shop, where he carefully superintended some hair dressing, and Barzie was a gainer in good looks, for enough of wavy red hair remained to really adorn the well-shaped head. His purchases were approved of at home, item by item, until the gloves. Mr. Hastie exclaimed, "Why, boy, what will you be doing wies thes heavy things i' the simmer?"

"Why, I didn't know; but Draper said I ought to take better care of my hands and neck, for Miss Helmer's sake, that she likes us to look nice."

"Ah, the Dandie! He shall no make a fop of you, Barzie!"

And Barzie felt ashamed of having listened to suggestions, as he had never before thought freckles an inconvenience. He had always been scrupulously careful to have clean hands, and took good care of his even, white teeth, but now, if Mr. Hastie disapproved—he would wear neither handkerchief or gloves! But Mother Hastie came to his aid.

"Coom awa, father. Draper is richt. Wie sue bonnie a teacher as yon, the boys should aye laik their best, an' oors as braw as ony. But, laddie, ye well know that 'tis your ways that mak ye dear to me, laik as ye will!"

Mr. Hastie said no more, and Barzie was comforted, and enjoyed Mrs. Hastie's comments on his improved looks, when arrayed in his new suit. She carefully turned him about to see that he was "all richt," but after that he was no more conscious of the new clothes than he had been of the old. He was thinking of weightier matters. Though he understood the class lessons more readily, he was gathering stores of knowledge from the sermons he heard, taking home with him any perplexing ideas, where Elder Hastie was usually able and always glad to help him, and his old friend at last sent him to "talk wies the meemister." When by prearrangement he went to the pastor, Horton and Draper went with him, the two former well founded in the truth, their friend more ignorant, but making up for it in his zeal "to know him and the power of his resurrection."

Barzie has had a few years at school, but he is a stock man and farmer, and is the stay and comfort of the old couple, who gave him his chance. —Journal and Messenger.

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