

The Storyteller

THE ONLY SON.

The young husband hummed the words of a quaint old ballad and bent to kiss his wife's pale cheek. Outside, the shadows of the great oak trees, beneath whose overhanging boughs so many generations of Sweynsons had played, since the ancestor of the family, Swen of the Red Beard, had come from Denmark in Canute's train and settled on the lands of some conquered Saxon thane flecked with darker patches the dazzling green of the lawn. The cattle rested in the sunny meadows further off, the deer peeped from the forest glades, the birds sang, and their song found an echo in Sir Eric Sweynson's heart, for it seemed to him as if they, too, were rejoicing with him over the coming of the wished-for heir. He had been so earnestly desired, so fervently prayed for, so long waited for—six whole years—and now that he had come, the ancestral trees and the sunshine, and even the gray old walls of the stately home that was to be his, seemed to bid a welcome to the unconscious little stranger from far away, who lay in his silk-lined cot by his mother's bed, and knew as yet nothing of the destiny to which he had been born.

'Well, dear, what is it to be?'

'What is what to be? I do not understand.'

'Listen,' and Sir Eric repeated again the couplet 'In plain English; don't you want to know what I have brought you from town?'

'From town? I never thought of your bringing me anything—except yourself.'

'Well, you see that I am generous. Besides my worthless self, I have brought you this,' and he drew from his pocket a velvet-covered case, opened it and displayed a coronet of diamonds, which sparkled in the light.

Lady Gertrude gave a cry of girlish delight—she was but 21—and taking out the coronet, held it up to allow the sunshine to play on the sparkling stones.

'See how well it will look in your hair. You must wear it often, not leave it shut up in a bank like those silly old family jewels of ours, of which I never can feel that they belong to us at all. Why, what is the matter, dear? Are you not well?' For the brightness had faded out of his wife's face and a look of distress had succeeded it.

'Eric dear, don't think me ungrateful, but I had rather not take the coronet,' she said.

'Not take it? Why not? Don't you like it?'

'Because—don't be vexed. Promise me that you won't be vexed.'

'I won't, indeed. As if I could be vexed with you little woman. Tell me your reason.'

'Well, it would seem—remember that you have promised not to be vexed—it would seem to me almost—a little bit—as if I were selling my boy.'

'Selling him? What an absurd what a fantastic idea to come into your head! How on earth—'

'Well, don't be vexed. I know that it is very silly, but I can't help it, and, indeed, I had rather not take the coronet—at least, not now. When I am well again, perhaps I could go with you to town myself and select something else.'

The last words were uttered hastily, and Sir Eric, although more annoyed at the 'silly fancy' than he cared to show, felt that in his wife's weak state it would be useless and even cruel to argue with her further, so he replaced the coronet in the case and the latter in his pocket, and turned the conversation by some inquiries regarding the baby.

Often in the months that followed did Sir Eric press his wife to fulfil her half-given promise and to come with him to select some ornament instead of the rejected coronet, but she always made an excuse for delay, and he soon saw that the mention of the matter really distressed her, so he alluded to it no more, and gradually all recollection of it faded from his mind.

Meanwhile little Gabriel—he had been born on St. Gabriel's Feast, and his mother, with gentle insistence, opposed Sir Eric's wish to name him after one of his fierce viking ancestors, and had, after the manner of women, got her own way in the end—grew and flourished. From an infant, lying in his nurse's arms and gazing with solemn stare at the great new world, he developed into a blue-eyed toddling laddie, endearing himself daily more and more to his parents by his lisping baby accents and his caresses, and then into a little knickerbocker boy, who asked strange puzzling questions and struggled to lift down from the library shelves the big dusty folios and quartos, over which he would pore for hours, spelling out tales of adventure and of heroism from their pages.

A quiet, thoughtful child he was, not robust in appearance, though never ill, caring not much for outdoor games and sports. Amiable and friendly with other boys of his own age when brought into contact with them, but not caring for their society. At home he had no young companions, for no second child had been born to Sir Eric and Lady Gertrude, but with his parents he was always content and happy. His early lessons he learned from his mother, and it was she, too, who took him with her to the little oratory and told him tales of the Blessed Virgin and of the saints, particularly of his own patron St. Gabriel, who, clad in dazzling white robes, looked down on him from the stained glass window which Lady Gertrude had caused to be placed over the altar shortly after her son's birth. Gabriel loved these tales better even than those of Old and Sween Fork-beard and Ragings and pirates marauding expeditions and martyrdoms, fierce old heathen warriors and Christian virgins crowned with lilies of pure white roses, mingled strangely in his half-waking thoughts, as they did afterwards in his dreams.

By-and-by the time for more regular instructions came and a good old priest, who had taught his father before him, came to live in the castle and be his tutor. Gabriel learned to decline, mensa, and to conjugate, amor, and that the angles at the base of an equilateral triangle are equal, and many other things which little boys are expected to acquire. They did not give Gabriel much trouble, he learned quickly and remembered well. In other matters, too, he proved himself a docile pupil, and the old tutor soon grew very fond of him, and told his mother that he was a 'saintly child' which saying Lady Gertrude kept to herself, not feeling quite sure that her husband would be pleased at such judgment passed on his son. Like too many other men he was apt to regard piety as a quality suitable only in women.

Indeed, Sir Eric sometimes wished that his heir had been in one or two respects, somewhat different from what he was—more boyish, as he told himself. Gabriel's gentleness, his dread of inflicting pain on even animals, struck his father as bordering on effeminacy. Once he took the lad with him when he went shooting, but he never repeated the experiment. 'I thought

he would have fainted,' he told his wife afterwards. 'It was really absurd. Why, at his age I was quite a good shot.'

On another occasion Gabriel interrupted one of the Viking stories with the remark, 'But it was very wrong of the Norsemen to kill these poor Saxons.'

'They were their enemies—it was in war,' his father explained.

'Still, it was wrong and cruel.'

'But a soldier must kill his enemies, it is his duty.'

'Then I should not like to be a soldier. I would rather cure people than kill them.'

'Do you want to become a doctor, hey?' Sir Eric spoke in jest, but there was a note of real annoyance in his voice.

'A doctor? I do not know about that. I am not sure.'

'You are a silly child, and do not understand what you are saying.' With this remark Sir Eric put the boy down off his knee and went himself out of the room.

It was some consolation to the father to find, as he did a little later, that Gabriel, in spite of his gentleness, was anything but a coward. For hunting he did not care, but he would ride his fiery little pony at the biggest jump that his father would allow him to attempt, and as he grew older the groom often declared that for 'schooling' a young horse there was not the equal of Master Gabriel in the whole country. Once, when he saw a savage dog worrying a new-born lamb, he rushed to defend the helpless animal, and not having even a stick in his hand, he could think of no way of making the dog relinquish his prey except that of catching him by the throat. Of course he was terribly bitten, but the lamb was rescued. To his mother's tearful reproaches, the boy, scarcely ten years old at the time, only answered: 'I could not let him kill the poor lamb, you know.'

When Gabriel had entered on his thirteenth year his father considered that it was time to send him to college. There were family traditions on such matters, and this was the age at which the young Sweynsons for many generations had usually entered the great Jesuit College of Saxonhurst.

So the time passed on and Gabriel was now eighteen and in the top class of the college. His father began to think of his entrance into Sandhurst, and afterwards into the army. That, too, was a Sweynson tradition, the oldest son always went into the army, at least for a few years.

The Easter vacation was nearly over, and Gabriel was to return to College for his last term. He was in the library, collecting some books which he wished to take back with him, when his father entered.

'Well, my boy,' he said, 'this is the ending of your school life. You have made good use of your time, I must say. Your masters seem all to be pleased with you; but everything must end. When you come home in summer we must think of getting a grinder to prepare you for Sandhurst. You should enter there in September or October.'

Gabriel paused with a great bundle of books in his arms, then he came slowly forward to the library table, and, laying them down, faced his father, his face pale and his lips trembling.

'Father, I don't want to go to Sandhurst,' he said.

'You don't want to go to Sandhurst? Why not?'

'I don't want to enter the army.'

'That is nonsense, Gabriel. Your old dislike of killing, I suppose; but such considerations should not prevent a man from doing his duty to his country. Besides, there is no war now, nor any sign of one. Probably you will not be called upon to shed anyone's blood during your few years of service. I don't want you to be a soldier all your life. When you are 22 or 24 you must settle