

The Storyteller

THE NEW BOY

'You had better eat meat, you know, Rodgers,' said Monks.

'Monks is a terror,' whispered another; 'you had better

'I can't,' expostulated Rodgers. 'Catholics can't eat meat on Fridays.'

'But you'll have to,' continued Monks.

'I shan't,' was the quiet answer.

'See here,' said Monks, 'if you don't I'll make you. We shall stand none of your bigotry here.'

'Try.'

Monks reflected, made a mental estimation of the new-comer's fighting powers, and seemed to hesitate, then stammered: 'Well, I would, only I don't like to hurt you.'

Rodgers smiled. He was a new-comer at Seaforth's Boarding School. Seaforth's, you know, was one of the most successful schools in the colony. It was a Presbyterian school; but professed to be perfectly impartial in matters of religion. To this academy Willie Rodgers was sent by a father who was ambitious that his son should carve his name on the future history of Australia. Mrs. Rodgers ventured to expostulate. She had been so careful of her son's training from the cradle that she looked with some anxiety to the prospects of his living in such an un-Catholic atmosphere as a Presbyterian boarding school. Her husband was inflexible.

'My dear,' he said to her, 'you shut your eyes to Willie's best interests; the boy has talent, remarkable talent, and it would be unfair to him as well as to ourselves, if we were to deprive him of the advantages of such an education as may be had at Seaforth's. There are already plenty of Catholics there. Major Hardy told me last summer he was sending his two boys there.'

So Willie was sent to Seaforth's, late in the term, too, which caused everyone to talk of the new-comer. He had been put on to bowl at cricket the first day, and took Monks' wicket the first over. Everyone was delighted except Monks; for Monks was a bit of a bully, and was, of course, secretly hated by the boys.

His first night the new-comer knelt down by his bedside to say his night prayers, as was his unflinching custom. There was a titter in the dormitory. Someone threw a pillow at him, another hit him with a sponge; but he didn't appear to mind. Monks hit him with a slipper. That hurt. 'Twas mean, too. Rodgers seemed vexed when he looked round, and Monks pretended to be engaged with his toothbrush, but the night prayers were finished without further interruption. This was the beginning of it, but the real trouble came on Friday.

On Friday the new-comer found that no provision had been made for any one who did not wish to eat meat. The dishes came one after another, but with the exception of some vegetables and a potato, he found there was nothing he could eat. This was hard for a hungry youth like himself. Potatoes and vegetables are never satisfactory in such a case. It was still harder to see his neighbors on all sides watching his evident discomfort. They were staring and sneering at him so. He could hear whispered remarks and polite inquiries about his health and appetite. He felt the shame burning on his cheeks at so much attention being paid to him; yet it no more occurred to him to eat meat than to cut off his head. At length Monks, the biggest boy at the table, took it upon himself to compel the new-comer to eat his meat. His attempt failed ingloriously, as we have seen above.

After dinner Rodgers found himself in the midst of a crowd of boys regarding him with feelings of mixed wonder and curiosity, as the boy who cheeked Monks and refused to eat meat on Friday.

'What a silly ass he is,' he overheard one say.

'Oh, yes, a little bigot,' responded another; 'this is the first time a Catholic refused to take what he got on Friday. We'll soon teach him better.'

'Oh, let him alone,' said a bigger boy, who just joined the group. 'He will soon get tired of his abstinence. He will eat meat like the rest next Friday. Let the youngster alone. It's not quite fair to a new-comer.'

The majority of the boys began to feel ashamed of themselves, and hurried off to their cricket and tennis, leaving their recent victim in peace. He repeated more than once, 'He will eat meat, like the rest, next Friday.' Why, what a stupid lot of dufers they are, he thought, not to know that a Catholic can't eat meat on Friday. But I wonder if it is true that the Catholics here eat meat. Here comes Hardy. I'll ask him.

Hardy had been a distant, former acquaintance, and had acted as the new-comer's patron since his arrival at

Seaforth's. Great, then, was Rodgers' surprise when this young gentleman called out:

'What the dickens did you want making such a fool of yourself in the refectory to-day? The sooner you drop such nonsense and do as everyone else does the better. I thought you were a fellow of some sense.'

'Sure, Hardy, you don't mean to say you eat meat to-day (Friday)?'

'Why, you little idiot, do you suppose one can live on potatoes and bread? One can abstain on Friday at home if he likes, but in Rome one must do as the Romans do. Have a little sense in future, Rodgers.'

'And you call yourself a Catholic, Hardy?'

There was such a degree of contempt in the voice and gesture of the new-comer that Hardy blushed for very shame. Muttering something about narrow-minded bigotry, he hurried away to hide his confusion.

As Rodgers knelt by his bed that night he was assailed with quite a shower of stockings, sponges, pillows, etc. Without showing the slightest alarm or irritation, he finished his prayers. Many whispered from their beds, 'The new-comer is a plucky fellow, at any rate.' Henceforth he was seldom disturbed at his devotions.

There was trouble yet in store for him. He found next day that many of his friends looked coldly at him; some even refused to let him join in the games, alleging that they wanted no bigots there. He found a few, indeed—and in every school such a few will be found—who showed him some kindness and defended him from the worst of his enemies, though they persisted in advising him to give in. But what grieved him above all was that he had to suffer most from his fellow-Catholics. They persecuted him most unrelentingly, and tried to make his life as miserable as they could. They little knew the strong character they had to deal with. Rodgers weathered this storm. He had many qualities that endeared him to the schoolboy heart. Sharp and quick of intellect in class, in the playground he promised to become a champion. He was overflowing, too, with good nature, which no amount of annoyance could stamp out. Before many days had passed he was popular among an ever-widening circle of friends. Friday came, however, bringing with it a fresh load of troubles.

There was some excitement in the refectory as all eyes were fixed on the new-comer to see if he would stick to his colors. The soup was passed to him.

'Go it, Rodgers, or 'twill be worse for you,' said Monks.

'Don't be an ass, Rodgers,' Hardy shouted up from the end of the table.

Some whispered, in friendly tones, 'Just take a little on your plate; it will do no harm.'

He passed on the soup untouched to his neighbor. Monks looked angry. Hardy said something ungentlemanly. Some thought it was 'cheeking the school'; others only laughed, but from that moment the new-comer was more popular than ever. The bigger boys, who had up to this regarded the whole affair with indifference, did not conceal their admiration for the plucky youngster.

'He's a bigoted little chap,' they said, 'but he has plenty of grit. If they let him alone he will do just as the others do after a time.'

But Willie Rodgers did not do as the others. Friday followed Friday; the systematic persecution from the clique which seemed bent on his conversion never ceased, but neither did his resolution even falter for an instant. They tormented him in many ways, striving to prevent his getting vegetables or bread on fast days, not passing him the meat on other days; still his good humor did not forsake him. They called him nicknames, to which he replied with interest. They cut endless jokes at his expense, he joined in the laugh. They did their best to sit down on him at cricket, but he soon became a leader there. Beaten at every point, Monks and his crew had sadly to confess:

'No, there ain't no flies on Rodgers.'

Strange to say, they never tried to make him attend their religious services. Perhaps they saw how useless the attempt would be; perhaps it was only the fasting that wounded their 'amour propre.' But, nevertheless, scarcely a Friday passed without its trials.

Finally Lent came, bringing with it its numerous fast days. Rodgers grew rather thin, as time went on, from the constant worry and abstinence, but his spirit never wavered, his cheerfulness remained constant. In his letters home there was not a single line of complaint of the treatment he was receiving. In his class he made steady progress, and at cricket it was whispered he would be one of the 'eleven's' bowlers in the coming year.

Good Friday proved to be the last day of his trials. On that day he absolutely abstained from anything except a piece of dry bread at breakfast and dinner. It was rather a feast day at Seaforth's. In the refectory the boys were watching his table very quietly and in