

# Saint John

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## The Old Fisherman's Story.

That was a pleasant summer's evening in the warm, sultry August—just five years ago to-night. How distinctly and freshly it comes to my memory now, with the recollection of the happy and joyous faces around me as we stood on the long piazza in front of the hotel at W— Beach, gazing out on the gently heaving ocean that mirrored back the rays of the full moon, which had risen out of the eastern waters. The day had been sultry, and now, as the evening breeze swept in from the Atlantic, all who had congregated at that seaside resort, left their rooms eager to breathe the fresh air.

"It is a sad story," said the old fisherman, when I had gained courage to advance to the pillar against which he leaned, while the wind played against the scanty gray locks about his weather-beaten temples, and the drooping brim of his tar-paulin covered many a seam in his wrinkled forehead—"a sad story—and you are too young, child, to listen to an old man's sorrows." But I love to talk of my poor little Eddie; he seems a child to me still, though twenty years have rolled round since I lost him, and he would be a man now if he had been spared me—I love to talk of him, and on evenings like this—just such a night as I came home to find your house desolate—and he pointed away to the little cabin down the beach—"I always think of my poor little Eddie."

"I have not always lived here, nor always been Jerry the fisherman," he went on, after a little pause, in which he strove to gather calmness, and I saw the convulsive working of his mouth. "There were years in my early manhood, when the world looked fair and bright as it does now to you or any of my young group of young people chatting so gayly together there. And there were years, too, when I was happy in my home. It matters not now that I should speak of what once was, a wronged, disappointed, desolate man, without faith in God or love for any human being save my boy, whom I had seen worse than orphaned by the same stroke that left me worse than helpless."

"Was Eddie's mother dead?" I asked, not comprehending the meaning of his words.

"Dead! Worse than that! Av, would she had died!" he answered bitterly. "But why do I speak of this, and to you, except for the sympathy that I read upon your face? No wonder in your youth and inexperience of the ways of the wicked world, you ask me if she died! No, child, she was not dead to the wicked world, but to her child and to me. The law severed us—she, a divorced wife—I, a wronged husband, and our boy an innocent child, whom I was anxious to bear away from the country where dwelt one who had forgotten what was due to the holy name of woman. To this wild, desolate coast I brought my boy. There were no other cabins here but my own tent. No public house stood here, and no visitors in summer disturbed these solitudes, save occasionally a chance traveler, to whom my hut gave shelter and rest. The village yonder, three miles away, then, as now, I visited to buy my stores of provisions, for I had come penniless to this solitude—and the ocean gave me employment for my weary hours. Day after day in summer I used to row Eddie over the waters, now dragging my net for fish, now idly floating for hours from wave to wave."

"Three years went by in this manner, and though I had learned to love my solitude, I began to think of leaving the coast for some inland town in order to give my boy, who had begun to manifest fondness for books and to ask questions about the world, the privileges of schools and association with children of his years, when suddenly the blow was struck which left me old before my time." And the old man buried his face in his hands while memory went back into the past.

"But I must tell you how Eddie died. He went on, after recovering himself. That summer a gentleman who had been traveling through Maine, and found his way to this then unrequented beach, left with me for a few weeks his son, a pale, delicate boy, only three years Eddie's senior, in hopes that the bracing sea air would strengthen his fragile form. The gentleman, Mr. Eustace, was from the South, and had taken his boy North by advice of physicians—and leaving him here, he proposed returning for him when he should have finished the transaction of some business which took him

down to St. John's. So I received the little fellow as Eddie's companion, and a happy time the two boys had, climbing over the rocks, and strolling down the smooth beach gathering shells and seaweed.

"Eddie had never attempted going out in the boat unaccompanied by me, and so I had not thought it necessary to charge him against it; nor did I on that pleasant summer's afternoon when I found him paddling on the bank down there where the boat lay, and finding my way over to the yard, I was surprised to find some one there. The tide was not high, and I thought that the boat had floated off before my return, for there had been a strong easterly wind lately, and the flow tides never ran higher on this coast."

"When the afternoon had almost passed, and I was on my homeward way, I noticed a small cloud, scarcely bigger than a man's hand, which grew rapidly till it overspread the heavens. My practiced eye saw that a sudden storm was rising, and I hurried on remembering how alarmed the two boys might be at finding themselves alone in a tempest. The rain came down in torrents before I got in sight of my home, but I hurried on, passing the bank where my boat had been drawn up, scarcely glancing that way for thinking of the boys. I entered the house—they were not there. I ran down to the little grotto under the ledge where they often played—but there I did not find them. I called aloud, but no answer!

"A sudden thought struck me. The boat! In an instant I gained the bank. God of heaven, the boat was missing! I thought I should go mad. I called aloud—shrieked till I was hoarse, calling their names. But the wind and thunder only hurled them back to my lips again. The tempest still raged as the night fell. I could not enter my house—I could not leave the beach to summon any of the villagers—and all night long I paced to and fro, now cursing my folly in leaving those two children together; now moaning feebly in my anguish. I had no other boat to try the billows, or I should have put out in night and darkness in quest of them. So, all that terrible night I heard but the roar of the raging breakers beating against the shore.

"Morning came, and I was prepared for the sight. With the incoming tide, along with great drifts of tangled seaweed, came fragments of children's clothing—a torn straw hat, the boat oars, and by-and-by the boat came drifting in, upturned and empty. Later, when the storm had wholly died away and the sun shone out in mockery in the clear blue sky—and when a few men had come down from the village to see the effects of the high tide—then, while we watched and waited together, the two boys were cast upon the beach—pale, drowned, with sweet smiles on their dead faces, locked in each other's arms.

"The current that always boils around the point of the note, I remember pointed out to the high reef that projected away into the sea, now faintly seen by the moonbeams—that current never beat so madly as my heart against the decree of my Maker, when the sympathetic village neighbors bore my Eddie in their arms down to my cabin. I prayed aloud for death, but it was not granted.

"After that came calmness. Another father had been bereaved—I was not alone in my terrible sorrow. When Mr. Eustace came, what answer had I to make to his query for his boy? None, save to lead him to the little grave on the hillcock behind the ledge, where, in one coffin, we had buried the drowned boys. They had closed their eyes clasped into each other's arms—they slept together. But Mr. Eustace's grief was not so violent as my own. The bolt had entered his heart, but he was a silent, reserved man, and he did not speak his sorrow. Yet, when that night of anguish succeeded the knowledge of his boy's death had bleached his raven hair white as our winter's snow, I knew he had suffered terribly. He did not blame me, and when I cast blame on myself he silenced me, saying—'God took them.' But we went together and wept over their grave. For more than twenty years the grass has grown there, and I have watched and tended their sleeping place. This is my home now. I have never had a desire to leave it. I shall die here. And every summer until this, has Mr. Eustace come North to visit his child's grave. He always spent one day and night in my cabin—then returned to his home again. He was a rich and honored man, but he told me last year he would have given all his possessions for the life of his only son.

"Perhaps I shall never make the journey again," said he to me then, 'for I am growing old and feeble; but you will never forget to plant the spring flowers over my Robert's little grave.' His prophecy was true. He died last winter in his distant Southern home. And I know I shall soon go the same journey," continued the old man after a pause. "There is a water-ocean than yonder, we must all cross. Some set sail earlier, others later, and all will meet at last on the further shore. In my dreams I always see Eddie standing there waiting for me. I dreamed of him last night—I may see him soon. I like to talk about him when I find such a listener as you. Pardon me if I have wearied you. I will go. Good night." And old Jerry gave me his hand, hory had a moment, then turned away.

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