

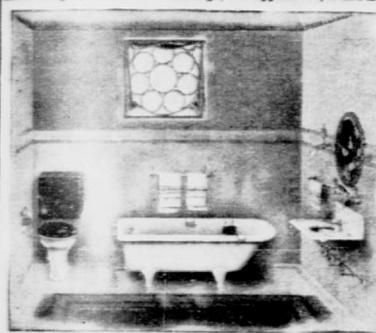
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THE KIDNAPPER

(Continued from page 6)

at all. "Come on now!" Michael commanded fiercely.

"Aw, Michael—let me—I didn't—aw—please; aw please!"

"Shut up! You gotta come!"

And by dint of threats and pushes and slaps, Percy at last did come, sobbing bitterly, in fear and anger, kidnapped, in broad day, in Hatchville, by Michael Dempsey!

Michael dragged his victim relentlessly along, wasting not a word. In the far corner of the field wherein he had eaten out his soul was a hay-barn. For this he made, "snaking"—that's the only word for it—the wretched Percy behind him.

There was no time to be lost. Once inside, he set into operation his nefarious scheme.

"Take 'em off!" he said rudely.

"Wh—what?" chattered his prisoner.

"Take 'em off—them clothes!"

Percy grasped dimly the indignity he was about to undergo. He threw himself on the barn floor screaming passionately: "I won't! I won't! I won't! I won't! Help! Help!"

"Take 'em off or—" Michael raised his fists threateningly.

"Please—please, Mike!" Percy sobbed miserably.

"Take 'em off, an' you better be quick about it! One, two—"

Trembling with humiliated fear, Percy's fingers fumbled with the first button, while the tears rolled dirtily down his pretty pink cheeks.

It soon was over, and Percy Willets stood at last, clad in only one gauze garment—the one despised of Michael Dempsey.

"You can keep them on; I don't want 'em."

When Michael Dempsey entered the school-house, the exercises had begun. In fact, the Methodist minister, Mr. Packer, was just finishing what the program, neatly written on the blackboard by the teacher, announced as the "invocation."

Michael stole unobtrusively to a seat. Miss Stringer smiled at him pleasantly. She was agreeably surprised to see him dressed so immaculately. He was all in white—neat white knickerbockers, white blouse, with a broad, flowing red tie—and there were stockings and low patent-leather shoes on his feet. He conducted himself with great modesty and virtuous demeanor.

A class of girls sang a song about swinging 'neath the bows of the old apple-tree. The room was filled with parents who clapped noisily, with genial, patronizing remarks under their breath. After that the prize speaking began.

Miss Stringer looked sweet in a new white lawn dress and light-blue ribbons. She walked about a great deal on tiptoe. Whenever anyone was speaking she followed anxiously with her eyes, and her lips formed the words with the speaker. It was nervous work for her, especially when she had to prompt. A great deal depended, she considered, on the success of the contest, for Mr. Willets sat in her own desk chair in the front row. He had the hiring of the teachers.

She tiptoed up to him several times and whispered. Each time he looked impatiently around, and twice he rose and went to look out of the door.

Presently Miss Stringer called: "Barbara Freitchie," by Percy Cheeseman Willets! No one responded. She glanced nervously at Percy's father, who shook his head uncomprehendingly.

Everyone waited to see what was going to happen. Miss Lucy coughed behind her handkerchief, and then said "As Percy Willets is not here, we shall go on to our next! Song, 'Fairy Moonlight,' by a class of boys."

They went through the whole program faithfully; on the faces of the performers, grim, strained fear and embarrassment; on the faces of the audience, warm, per-

spiring approbation. Then came Michael Dempsey—the last.

He squeaked to the rostrum with a face devoid of the least expression. His was the hardened indifference of a campaign orator. He began it "Forward the Light Brigade," in a clarion tone that made two old women jump in their seats.

Mrs. Dempsey leaned forward, too, her eyes starting from her head. She gasped feebly, pressing her hands on her chest.

"Glory be!" she ejaculated in bewilderment. That boy in spotless white, Michael Dempsey, her Michael? She could only lean far forward, grasping the desk in front of her, and stare.

Well, it is safe to say that the Light Brigade never went to a gallanter death in Hatchville than on that historic afternoon of the "Prize Speaking Contest." There is a tradition to this day about it.

Michael Dempsey spoke as he never before—or since, I dare say—spoke. He yelled the charges till the room echoed, his eyes flashing, his hot Irish blood leaping in his veins, his round, freckled face fiery red with the excitement of it. Miss Lucy tingled with admiration and pride. When he finished they gave him a burst of applause that would have stirred older and even more worldly hearts than Michael Dempsey's.

He crept to his seat, blushing with the shame of his publicity, and covertly relieved his feelings by pinching the leg of his neighbor.

Mr. Packer, who was judge of the contest, and had kept making notes all the afternoon on a little tablet, presently stood up with a gratified and kindly smile.

"You all will agree with me," said he in a mellifluous voice, "that the prize of

the afternoon shall be awarded to our young Demosthenes, to our talented young friend, Michael Dempsey. Michael, come forward!"

With one hand heavily on the head of the inscrutable Michael he made him a little speech, in which he referred to the noble lives of the "Great Departed Ones" of history, and their footprints on the sands of time. He suggested that Michael had that day laid the cornerstone of an edifice more lasting than temples of marble and bronze. He ended by putting into his hands the volume of "Selections for Young Declaimers"—a nice book bound in red and yellow.

In the ensuing confusion of departure and congratulations, when the citizens and their wives of Hatchville were congratulating the now tearful and dazed Mrs. Dempsey on the handsome achievement of her son—who up to this time had been popularly regarded as rapidly ripening for the county jail—Michael, the prize-winner, escaped, none knew whither. It might be added that Mr. Willets had stalked, somewhat pettishly, away as soon as the contest ended. There was, too, on his expansive face, a frown of perplexity.

Some hours later Percy Willets ran panting to his home, clad in a dirty, soiled white suit—his own. In a tempest of tears he threw himself into his mother's lap and poured forth a shocking tale of practically naked confinement in a barn, of his inability to escape clothed, of the modesty that forbade him calling for aid. Mrs. Willets fainted.

His father, without a word, but with a face of dreadful wrath, clapped on his Panama hat and sought the home of Mrs. Dempsey then and there. The scene he made was terrible. But the culprit was not to be found.

He did not return to his mother that night, nor, indeed, until the evening of the following day.



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