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The Gadianton: A Story of Zarahemla, Chapter I

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The Gadianton

A STORY OF ZARAHEMPLA

By E. Heloise Merkle

I

At some little distance outside the limits of the great city of Zarahemla there stood the remains of a spacious garden. Elaborate fountains had once played in shining rainbows or moonlit crystal drops within its bounds. But the fountains had fallen into decay, their sources had been cut off, and three tiny streams wandering among the fallen stones of the ancient palace were all that remained of them.

The most beautiful and delicate of cultivated flowers had once blossomed there luxuriantly. But neglected, and choked with weeds, they were fast giving place to the hardier blooms that grew native to the nearby forest.

Trees transported from long distances when they were tiny, had mingled the foliage of north and south, east and west, above the fountains and flowers. But of the rare specimens once cultivated so carefully, only one remained. As though it found here the climate and soil more to its liking than what it had known in the north land, a giant oak spread its branches royally and with its grateful shade seemed endeavoring to hide and compensate for the ruin about it. For this once lovely home had been leveled in hatred by the bands of Gadianton robbers and murderers who infested the mountains, and the forest was swiftly completing the work they had so cruelly begun. In a few more years, unless the oak survived, there would be nothing to tell the stranger that civilized people had ever lived here.

Toward this lonely spot a young man and a young woman were approaching. The man came from the mountains and crept stealthily toward

the great oak with alert eyes glancing continuously in every direction as though fearful of being detected by an enemy. For he was a Gadianton spy, and knew that he was drawing too near the walls of the city to be entirely secure. The young woman came from the city. She was not alone, nor did she seem to have a care or a fear in the world. She walked gayly and laughed and chatted merrily with the group of children accompanying her.

The young man reached the ruined garden and sat down under the oak to enjoy a scant dinner from the small scrip that was slung about his neck by a leather thong. But he had only taken out the food and was in the act of lifting it to his lips when his quick ears caught the laughter and clear voices of the children. Hastily replacing it without tasting what he appeared to be almost famished for want of, he sprang to his feet, with the tree between himself and the approaching party. Then he turned as though to retreat into the forest whence he had come, but the sound of light feet running toward him behind the ruins of the old house warned him that he could not reach the forest before he was discovered.

Unable to see who else might be coming with the children he heard, he hesitated, and then, as the first child rounded the corner of the ruins, he sprang lightly upward, caught the lowest branch of the tree with one hand, and swung himself on to it. Reaching up with the other hand as his feet found the branch, he swung himself upward again, and still again, with all the skill of a practiced acrobat, and did not pause until he was so high that

he knew the foliage must completely hide him from the view of those below. Then he settled himself comfortably and surveyed the party that had interrupted his lunch.

He was humiliated and disgusted to discover that only a girl and some children had been the cause of his retreat, but caution warned him that they might have friends of a more formidable nature following, and he remained quietly where he was. But the girl and her little charges set about preparing their picnic lunch from the baskets they carried and did not wait for anybody to come to share it with them.

Thus reminded of his own gnawing hunger, the Gadianon again opened his pouch and discontentedly munched his dried meat while he enviously watched the disappearance of the delicious foods and well cooked dainties below. He found his appetite so stimulated by the tempting appearance of the viands the children feasted upon that he even wished they might become sated and leave some of it behind. But healthy youngsters who have just walked a long way on a hot afternoon seldom leave anything eatable on a picnic ground and he was forced to sigh as they crammed more and more of the goodies into their apparently unlimited interiors.

At last they were forced to stop for lack of more to eat, and then the young girl insisted that they clear everything up neatly and prepare the baskets for their return home before she would consent to yield to their clamors for a story. When it was all done, they gathered expectantly about her, and quieted by their condition of over-fullness as well as by the musical tones of the story-telling voice, they sat in an eager group and listened to story after story.

Almost equally fascinated, the spy risked his neck time and again, trying to see the face of the girl. Her voice came to him distinctly, now low and thrilling with the danger of some

favorite hero, now rippling with suppressed mirth at the relation of an incident that made the children laugh, and again smooth and sweet in a part of a story that had no significant emotion accompanying it. Beyond doubt, the spy told himself, it was the sweetest, the most richly modulated, and the most tantalizingly inviting voice he had ever heard. It maddened him with the desire to see whether or not her face suited it. He told himself that a girl with a voice like that must be very lovely, and then he contradicted the idea by thinking that no human being could have every grace at once and so she must be very homely to compensate for the delightful tones she could produce. But ugly or beautiful, he wanted to see her face.

Wearying of telling before her hearers wearied of listening, the girl suggested games. In the races and lively sports that followed, her hair became loosened, and laughingly she picked a thorn from a nearby bush and pinned the higher tresses at the back of her head so they could not fall into her face, leaving the rest hanging in a curling mass of burnished gold half way to her feet. One little girl, with adoring eyes lifted worshipfully, caught both hands full of the silken stuff and caressed it with her cheek. A sudden, inexplicable rage shook the young man above as he observed the action. He wanted momentarily to choke the child for daring to profane those shining tresses with her smudgy little hands and cheek. In a second the emotion passed, and in its place came disgust with himself for feeling it. Why should he care how many dirty handed children touched the hair of this girl whom he had never before seen, and whom he probably never would see again?

And then he was shaken by a wild delirium of joy, because the girl, wearied from her racing with the children, flung herself lengthwise upon the grass and he could see her face.

Again the children gathered about her and she led them in songs they apparently loved to sing. But he did not hear the songs. He was gazing too intently upon the face turned upward in the shadow of the tree. He was telling himself that it was the loveliest face he had ever seen. He was leaning far over and gazing at it as though he never could look enough.

She was not more than sixteen, in the flush of fresh young womanhood. Her skin, as befitted one with golden hair, was so clear and whitely transparent that it seemed one could almost see the red blood coursing below it. The flush of her exercise was dying away, leaving only the two spots of delicate pink that marked her cheeks, and the deeper red that was her mouth. Above the softly curved lips, her nose was lightly outlined by the shadows and in turn her deep grey, expressive eyes glowed softly beneath fine brows. But it was not in clearness of complexion or modeling that her chief beauty lay. It was in the expression of the face. It seemed a face made for laughter and song and love. A brow that had never learned to scowl, lips that had never pouted, cheeks never touched by tears. And yet, below the youthful freedom from care and sorrow he fancied he could trace a strength of character, a high spirit and a courage that circumstances might yet bring out to add beauty to what was yet merely pretty.

One little boy who seemed to have no slightest love for music slowly detached himself from the group and wandered toward the ruined wall, stooping to pick up stones and throw against it as he walked. The older girl watched him, but did not call him back, and as he reached the wall he stopped and stared at a group of approaching horsemen, shading his eyes with his eyes. Then he yelled shrilly.

"Gidgiddoni! Here comes Gidgiddoni!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

Startled, the singers stopped their music abruptly. The scout realized that he had been enjoying it as soon as it ceased, and again had the impulse to choke a child. Why should the young scamp spoil it all that way? For it was very evident that it was spoiled. The children shouted and ran to join him and call greetings to the horsemen approaching rapidly, and the girl gathered up baskets and followed them more slowly.

She had not reached the old wall when the leader of the riders arrived, and rode past the children toward her. She dropped the baskets and reached her arms up to him so eagerly as he came to her, that the spy in the tree above thought it must be her lover, and for a second a dull ache of jealousy gripped him. But it passed as he heard her voice exclaim, "Father! How did you happen to come here today?"

Gidgiddoni, her father! It was nothing to him, he knew, who her father might be. But he wished with all his heart that it had been anyone else in all the world except Gidgiddoni, the Chief Captain of the Nephite armies. Gidgiddoni, whom every true Gadianton hated with a hatred that knew no limit because it had been in conquest against them that he had won the distinction that had made him Chief Captain. Gidgiddoni, whom he especially had cause to hate, having been told from infancy by his mother that it was supposed Gidgiddoni himself had been the only Nephite strong enough in battle to overcome his father and leave him an orphan. He had never seen the Nephite captain before, but he had always hated his name since he was old enough to feel that emotion. And now he found the hated Gidgiddoni to be father to the girl he had been watching so eagerly all afternoon. So he must hate her, too. In spite of her lovely voice, her mass of golden hair and her face that was the sweetest he had ever seen, he must hate her for her father's sake.

The general caught his daughter's hand as she asked her question and lifting as she leaped, had seated her before him on his splendid horse, which, however, did not seem at all excited at his double burden. The spy fancied it must have borne them both many times before. And still his curiosity prompted him to stare downward. For he would see the face of the man he hated so, that he might remember it and some day perhaps take revenge on the one supposed to have killed his father in battle. He noted instantly that Gidgiddoni was much larger than the average man, and that every line of his body as he sat on the spirited horse, seemed drawn to inspire obedience. So erect did he sit that the spy could distinguish his face fairly well, and the features, from the broad brow to the firm lips, bore out the declaration of his body that here was one made for command.

But so softened was the expression of his face as he lifted his daughter before him that in spite of his traditional hatred for this man's name, the spy knew that here was a man he could love and follow blindly, regardless of danger, wherever he might lead. And when he spoke, the deeper tones of his voice were fully as pleasant to listen to as were the lighter melodies of his daughter.

"I came to get you, Orpah," he replied, gravely, "and to warn you that you must never come here again."

"Never come here again!" the girl exclaimed, "Why not?"

"Because the Gadianton's grow bolder every day."

"And what has the daughter of Gidgiddoni to fear from the Gadiantons?" she asked, gently pulling the light beard that half concealed the lower part of his face.

"That which the daughter of any honest man should fear from them, and which is far worse than death, my child. Promise me, please, that you will stay within the city walls."

The tone was gentle, but no shout could have been more commanding.

For a second the girl hesitated, glancing rebelliously at the loveliness of the surrounding spot, and then, after a serious look into his steady eyes she replied, "Oh, very well, if you think it necessary. A week from today I shall entertain the children in our own garden."

Having won his point, Gidgiddoni dropped the subject and his daughter sprang lightly to the ground and again gathered up the baskets. Then, distributing them and the children into the charge of the other men, she mounted once more before her father. The tired children gladly accepted the offered rides with the others, and soon the entire party disappeared from the sight of their hidden observer.

Dropping quickly from branch to branch and then to the ground, he turned his back toward the city they were approaching and started for the mountains. It was well for him that no dangers found him out today for so engrossed was he with the thought of Orpah, daughter of Gidgiddoni, that he would have fallen an easy prey to them.

That the first girl who had ever seemed to him lovely or desirable should prove to be the daughter of the man he had been taught all his life to hate most devotedly, was to him a problem not to be lightly set aside. For in the time he had sat and looked down upon her, he had formed many a plan of abducting first and winning later. Such a procedure was not at all unusual with the Gadiantons, whose life in the mountains encouraged any sort of savagery. He had heard many a story of how a maiden had been stolen and then had lost her heart to her robber suitor. They were the only kind of love stories he had ever cared about. And never before had he seen a girl who could make him think even of them.

But as he drew nearer to his moun-

tain fastness and farther from the memory of Orpah's beauty, he found it more easy to forget such foolishness and remember only that she was Gidgiddoni's daughter, and therefore to be hated. By the time he had eaten supper with his mother, and gone to the council called by his chief, he was thoroughly convinced that he felt toward Orpah no emotion other than hatred.

He noted little of the proceedings, taking his place mechanically among the less important Gadiantons and listening half attentively only to the counsels that were sought and given in the rich court held by their fierce leader. But suddenly he was roused by the name of the man he had thought so much about in the last hours.

"What does he say about Gidgiddoni?" he asked eagerly of his nearest neighbor.

"Listen and see," was the ungracious

reply, because his neighbor had several times attempted to talk to him and had received no courteous response save abstract yeses and noes that did not fit the occasion.

"And, so, if any of you can suggest a means of heaping upon Gidgiddoni's head any insult worthy the name, or of causing him any personal grief that he may know the Gadianton's have not forgotten the grudge they bear him, let him speak."

So much the young spy heard. And before any of the older and more renowned robbers had a chance to speak, he sprang impulsively forward, exclaiming, "I have a plan."

"Speak, Jarom!" Giddianhi commanded, in spite of his surprise. And Jarom, stammering a second at the realization of his temerity, gained courage after a moment to speak.

(To be continued)



"When they heard the king, they departed; and, lo, the star, which they saw in the east, went before them, till it came and stood over where the young child was."—Matt. 2:8.