

# O'Hara's Easter Guest

O'Hara's Easter Guest

By Theodore Roberts

TAKEN FROM "METROPOLITAN MAGAZINE," APRIL 1906

For miles and miles up and down the valley of Dead Wolf River and away on either hand, the wilderness lay imprisoned under a shell of silver crust. The crust was the result of a March thaw followed close by a nipping frost. So tough was the crust over all the long drifts, levels and sharp brows of the wind-packed snow, that a heavy man might run across it in his moccasins.

Mike O'Hara sat before his lonely hearth on a certain Saturday night. He was brooding sullenly over a shortage in his season's take of fur and over the trespassing of Micmac Jim upon the great tract of wilderness which he considered, by the right of long usage, to be his own trapping ground. Humped there, with the yellow firelight in his face and the gloom on his shoulders, smoking his black pipe in slow and audible puffs, the big trapper of the Dead Wolf region was not a pleasant fellow to the eye. His frame was fairly gigantic. His shoulders bulked against the light like a haystack. His body and arms were long; his legs were short and slightly bowed; his big head was overgrown with a tangle of gray-shot hair; his face was a jungle of untidy whisker, tobacco stained about the lips; hard gray eyes and massive features warned one of a will as powerful and unrelenting as shoulders and back were strong.

"I've spoke four times to that thievin' injun," muttered O'Hara. "I've told him what I'll do if he don't get out. Well, God help him if he don't hit the trail by daybreak."

He got heavily to his feet, shook the ash from his pipe into the palm of his hand and laid the black clay tenderly on the shelf that crossed the bulge of the chimney.

"That was a sweet smoke," he murmured. "I wonder if Micmac Jim be drawin' on his old T. D. to-night. If he don't mind hisself, he'll—he'll lose his taste for good baccy afore this time tomorry."

He threw aside a few outer garments, rolled a log of birch into the back of the fireplace, and retired to the gloom and blankets of his bunk.

Outside a pale radiance lay over the black and white vastnesses of the wild. The

vague illumination was not suggestive of either moonlight or dawn. It was as if the whole soft dome of the sky gave itself to the bestowing of a tender half-light upon the sleeping world. Perhaps the stars were the cause of it, shining above a high, thin veil of indefinite mist. So calm and breathless was the air, so still were the spires and buttresses of the forest, that it seemed as if the whole wilderness slumbered. But many little hunters of the night were abroad, footing along hidden and silent trails.

In a shack on a knoll above the white valley, Micmac Jim kept vigil. He was a young man with a dark, pathetic eye and lean features.

“O’Hara him tarn beast,” soliloquized Jim. “What for him tell me no more trap on Dead Wolf? Him no own dis lan’—not much! Him no pay Governor nor nobody for trap an’ shoot up an’ down Dead Wolf! Ugly man, dat Mike O’Hara! Oh, yes! But Jim no pappoose—hell, no! Jim no scare at dat tam Irishman.”

But, in his heart, the young redskin feared the big trapper; and it was only stubbornness and the strength derived from the knowledge that right was on his side, that kept him in the good fur country about the valley of Dead Wolf River.

Every scurry of a wood-mouse across the floor, every rustle of tiny feet under the eaves, set Jim’s heart fearfully astir in his breast. Suddenly he got up and examined the wooden bar across the door.

“By tam,” he cried, “me shoot, too! Me sit up all night an’—an’ shoot first, maybe! O’Hara no feel bad if he kill me! Den why me care if O’Hara get bullet in hees belly? Dis beeg wilderness don’t b’long to no dirty Irishman. All trapper got good leave to take pelt here.”

Mike O’Hara sat up sharply and tossed his blankets aside in the same movement. A second before, he had been deep in dreamless slumber. He paused, listening keenly, one leg across the edge of the bunk. There it was again: A weak, appealing rap, rap of knuckles on the planks of the door. He crossed the cabin noiselessly and took up a heavy sheath-knife from the table.

“Who is it?” he asked, with his lips to the frosty crack of the door.

“A stranger to this country side, David Brant, in want of food and shelter,” replied the untimely visitor.

For a heart-beat the big O'Hara stood uncertain. Then he tossed his sheath-knife behind him, dropping it among the blankets of his bunk with sure aim, and drew back the bolt.

"Ye be welcome to what food and shelter I have," he said, peering into the unreal light beyond the gloom of the doorway.

"Give me a hand," said the stranger.

With a flutter of curiosity at his tough heart Mike assisted David Brant across the sill and shut the door after him.

"Set down an' make yerself easy," he invited, "an' I'll be havin' the water boilin' in no time at all."

He threw dry wood across the red coals on the hearth. He lit a battered lantern and set it on the table against the wall. Then he turned and surveyed his uninvited guest. What he saw was a slim man in garments of gray blankets, red stockings and moccasins. The face was bearded and thin and tanned. It carried signs of age and suffering, indications of youth and hope, in equal measure. A meager pack, blanket-rolled and backed with snow-shoes of the Micmac pattern, lay at his feet. Belt-axe and rifle leaned against the log wall.

"D'ye know," said O'Hara, "that when I heard your voice it seemed familiar like. But I ain't seen ye before, have I? Ye're a stranger about these parts, I take it."

"I have been away to the westward," replied the other. "Now I am heading for the salt water. My grub ran out yesterday."

"Lord, b'y," exclaimed O'Hara, "then ye've tramped all day on an empty belly! Help yerself to a taste out o' that bottle beyant the big painted almanac there." He laughed good-naturedly. "That almanac," he continued, "was give to me by as pesky a little pink-faced missionary parson as ever I see. That was five year ago." He laughed again. "An' while ye take a nip, I'll put on the kettle an' the bacon," he concluded.

David Brant stepped over to the corner-shelf whereon stood a highly-colored church calendar propped against a black bottle. He glanced at the calendar; then he uncorked the bottle and set it briefly against his lips.

For hours the two sat before the fire, though the matter of eating was soon over with. Brant did the talking; the big trapper puffed at his pipe, leaning back in his rough seat and chuckling freely at Brant's stories. All the time he kept his eyes on his soft-voiced guest.

Some of Brant's stories were purely humorous; others were keenly pathetic; all were homely—of the hearth, the cabin and the soil. At first his talk dealt altogether with the wilderness and frontiers of the Eastern Provinces, of Newfoundland and of the desolate Labrador. Bulked forward in his chair, with his beard in his great hands, O'Hara gave his undivided attention and seemed to catch, in the stranger's voice, the accent of many vanished companions of camp and trail. He wondered at that, but with no disturbing curiosity.

Later, David Brant changed the scene of his stories to a certain tiny harbor on the east coast of Newfoundland; and O'Hara, with his eyes half closed, went back, by faint trails of memory, to the gray fish-stages and the clustered cabins. He nodded and nodded. His great face settled between his hands, and a dream of youth led him away from all the harshness and greed of the later years.

Of fire and opal and pearl was the lift and growth of the forest dawn; but Micmac Jim, peering from the one tiny window of his shack, thought nothing of the glory of God's morning. He snatched his Winchester to his knee; his thin lips hardened; then his brows wrinkled for a second, only to smooth themselves immediately. He sighed with relief and laid his rifle along the door.

"Good," he muttered, "O'Hara, he forgot hees gun. He look tam jolly, too!"

Mike O'Hara advanced, unarmed, up the hillside clearing. He rapped awkwardly on the door, with a mittened hand. The Micmac opened to him cautiously.

"Mornin,' Jim."

"Momin'."

"Have ye seen a stranger go by?"

Jim shook his head.

"Not one by name David Brant?" asked O'Hara. "He mugged up at my shanty las' night. I took a nap—and when I woke he was gone."

“T’ief any grub?” enquired Jim.

“No—oh, no,” replied O’Hara. He gazed about the quiet edges of the forest. Then he looked squarely at the Micmac.

“If David Brant ever routs ye out, Jim, don’t grumble,” he said, “for he’ll lighten the heart of ye wit his talk. An’ look a-here, Jim—will ye come over an’ mug-up with me? It’s Easter Day, ain’t it?”

“I guess so,” stammered Jim, perplexed.

“Easter Sunday, for sure,” remarked O’Hara.

Suddenly he pulled off a mitten and extended his hand. Micmac Jim took hold of it very cautiously.

“There be plenty o’ fur hereabouts for the two of us,” said the Irishman.

The Reverend David Brant, breaking trail through the snow-hung wilderness, smiled as he looked abroad over the white and blue.

“I think I softened the fellow’s heart,” he murmured, “and that’s not bad for a ‘pesky, pink-faced missionary parson.’”

He laughed quietly and gave a hitch to his pack-strap; for his Bible, making a sharp lump beneath the rolled blanket, galled his shoulder.