A TRAVELER'S STORY.

It happened one time that in traveling across a tract of country where I had business I got benighted, and about 8 o'clock, myself and my horse being tired and pretty nearly worn out, I drew rein before the door of a comfortable looking farmhouse, and dismounting knocked at the door with the handle of my whip. It was opened by a little girl, who stood in the doorway holding a candle in one hand and keeping back her thick curly hair with the other, while she looked at me half shy, as if demanding my business.

"My dear," I answered, to that questioning look, "is there any one in the house besides yourself?"

"Yes there is," she answered; "father and mother and the boys."

"Well, ask your father to come here a moment; I want to speak to him."

She retreated, and entered the room behind her, and in about half a minute the farmer came out. I made known my business, explained that I had been overtaken by the night, that my destination was several miles distant, and that both my horse and myself were unfit for further traveling till we had procured food and rest.

With the hospitality common to all farmers, especially American ones, my host for the night bade me welcome, conducted me into a large kitchen with a floor so white that you involuntarily pitied the hands and arms that had brought it into such a state of cleanliness, and bade me seat myself before the blazing fire while supper was being got ready; and then, not forgetting my horse, he told one of the "boys" to feed him and take him to the stable.

After supper, as I felt unusually tired, I asked to be shown the place where I was to pass the night, and was conducted to a comfortable room with a downy bed, white counterpane and curtains, upon the second floor, by my host himself, who, after bidding me "good night," left the candle with me and departed, closing the door after him.

Tired and sleepy as I was I hurriedly undressed, went to bed, and in five minutes was soundly sleeping. A grinding, grating sound awoke me—at what time I don't know—but the moon, which did not rise till very late, was fully up, its bright rays streaming in through the window, from which I had purposely looped back the curtain that the first streak of daylight might wake me, as I was anxious to proceed upon my way. There, sitting full in the moonlight, was a man with a long carving knife in his hand, which he was leisurely sharpening upon a piece of grindstone, and which I now perceived made the sound that had awakened me. I thought surely I was dreaming; or, if I was awake, what in the name of heaven meant what I saw? And still the man leisurely ground the blade of the knife, and in a perfect stupor of amazement I lay perfectly quiet with wide open eyes looking at him.

In a few minutes he stopped grinding, and passing his finger carefully along the edge of the knife he shook his head knowingly, to intimate to himself that he had brought the blade to a proper degree of sharpness. My blood ran cold; a kind of panic seized me when I saw that action, and the cool, calculating smile with which he held the knife up between him and the full moonlight, looking at it with the air of a connoisseur. Then he leisurely got up, stepped over to the table where I left the candlestick and began looking around for something—a match I conjectured.

While his back was turned the idea of slipping from the bed and bolting out at the door suggested itself to me, but before I had time to act upon it the match was found, and holding the candle in one hand, the match in the other, and the handle of the knife between his long, wolfish teeth, he came over toward the bed. Even then I might have attempted to escape by rushing at him, wrenching the knife from between his teeth, and so getting the advantage, but that I was not capable of so overcome was I by the surprise and horror of my situation, and through all such an insatiable curiosity possessed me to know what he was about to do, for as yet I could only conjecture that his purpose was to murder me.

He struck the match against the wall and lit the candle, and then took the knife from between his teeth and took firm hold of the handle in his hand. I felt faint and sick when I fully realized then that my last chance of escape was gone. He bent over me, flashed the light full upon my eyes, and, perceiving that I was awake, exclaimed with a wild laugh:

"Ha! ha! Awake, eh? Ha! ha! Glad of it, sir. I meant to wake you. If you hadn't done it yourself. I consider it cowardly to kill a sleeping man."

And he laughed at me again, and peered into my face with his red, hot, burning eyes.

I could see at once he was mad, and I saw that the horror of my situation was increased. At first I had thought him a robber—I hardly know what I thought—but now I knew that he was a madman. From his own words, too, I knew that it was his intention to murder me, and I felt that little short of a miracle could save me.

After he had taken a good look at me he sat down upon the bed, and to my intense horror began slowly running his fingers with great care along the edge of the knife—evidently he had no intention of suffering by the experiment—and then he said:

"I don't intend to kill you just now—perhaps not for half an hour—perhaps not for an hour—but I guess that's about the longest you have to live. First, I mean to have a talk with you. Do you know where I came from?"

I did not, indeed, and I told him so, wishing within myself with my whole heart that he would take it into his crazy brain to find his way back there and leave me to sleep in peace.

"You don't know, eh? Well, I don't mind telling you. Don't you see that church spire away there to the left?"

No, I didn't see the church spire nor anything else in the world at that moment but the burning eyes of the maniac; so I told him I didn't see the object he spoke of.

"Don't see it, eh? How blind! Why, see there!" And to aid me in discerning this imaginary object he rose and went toward the window and looped the blind still further back. "There—see it now?"

"No," I said, "I don't see it yet," and I hoped he would try to pull the curtain still further back, or pull it down, or something—anything to divert his attention from me a moment longer, that I might leap from the bed and bolt out of the room.

I was already sitting up, and to glide down upon the floor was the work of an instant; but at that moment the madman, annoyed that I couldn't see the church spire, dropped the blind, turned round quickly, muttering, "Blind, blind," and instantly comprehending my intention to escape bounded toward me with a spring like a wildcat, and catching hold of me with his bony hand waved the gleaming knife over me in such close proximity to my face as to be anything in the world but pleasant.

"O you will, will you? Just lie down there; still, now, still, or I'll kill you before the half hour is up. Lie down."

And with herculean strength he lifted me up with his one hand—and I was no feather in weight, I can tell you—and bounced me down with a force that shook the whole bed.

I did lie down, and seeing that I was inclined to obedience, he directed my attention to the window again by inquiring:

"Do you see the church spire now?"

I didn't see it any clearer than before, it being slightly impossible, as no church spire existed within ten miles. But I saw that the maniac was getting irritated at my want of capability to see what did not exist, so I thought it might be as well to keep upon good terms with him, and to his question this time I admitted I did see the spire.

"Ah, good, good. Well, under that spire is a church, and around the church is a graveyard. There I live and there I came from. It's very lonesome sleeping there in the damp, cold ground, and the grave worms—ugh!—to feel them creeping along over one's skin, so slimy and slippery and cold, banqueting upon the warm flesh of the dead. They say the dead are cold; it's a lie, sir, a lie! Feel my flesh; is it cold?"

He bared his skinny arm and forced me to lay my hands upon it.

"There, is that cold?"

I told him no.

"Is it warm?"

I replied that it was, and he continued:

"They make it cold, the grave worms do. They make it cold and slimy as the crawl over it. Did you feel the grave worms on your flesh?"

I shuddered with disgust as I told him "No."

"You didn't, eh? Lucky dog! lucky dog! But you're not dead yet; wait awhile, and you'll feel them just as I do. Pretty soon."

And he whirled the carving knife round and round his head and then brought it down with a sudden swoop till he grazed my throat.

With a cry of agony, not for the slight scratch, but the horror of mind under which I was, I recoiled from the glittering blade, shuddering as if I would have sunk down through the bed—down, down through the floor. How I wished in my soul that I could have done so—down anywhere out of that horrible presence! With a loud laugh the maniac observed my terror, and then he said:

"Frightened, eh? Frightened? I won't kill you for half an hour yet. I'm going to experiment upon you. I think I'll bleed you to death, just to try how long it will take you to die. Eh? what do you think of it?"

What did I think of it? My God! I thought nothing, only that I would soon be dead, or as mad as my companion, if some deliverance was not soon opened up. I never prayed much—God forgive me!—but just then I breathed something, I scarcely know what, for aid, for help, for deliverance. I know that I dared not attempt to escape. My first movement would have been the signal for my death blow, and if I called aloud I might not awaken any one in the house, but merely infuriate the madman to such an extent that he might immediately butcher me. What under heaven to do I knew not, and if the maniac in his desire to "experiment" should open a vein I must inevitably bleed to death. Meantime he was waiting for an answer to his question, which he repeated rather angrily.

"What did I think of his proposal to bleed me to death?"

I was about answering something desperate, and giving myself up for lost, when a bright idea flashed across my troubled brain. O how devoutly I thanked heaven that I had read the "Arabian Nights" in my boyhood! There was my idea, which as yet only heaven knew whether it would be successful or not; I would tell him stories and beguile his fancy until morning, and then, surely, I would have some means of escape. I answered his question by another.

"Suppose I tell you a story about bleeding to death—or rather about a man who supposed he was being bled to death and died from the fright?"

"Died from the fright, eh? Well, let's hear it."

Very gladly I began, making it long and adding as much as I possibly could to the original, which was something I recollected long ago to have heard about some one who wished to "experiment," and had a man blindfolded, his arm bandaged and gently pricked, but not sufficiently to bring the blood, and then heard the regular drop, drop of blood—or what he supposed to be his own blood, though in reality only water, till he died from the mere supposition that he was being bled to death. I forget the story now, but it is familiar to every one. When I concluded, I suggested to the maniac that he should try this model experimenting and see how long I would take to be frightened to death.

"Yes, yes," he answered, with a sly, cunning laugh; "very good, very good," and seeing through the darken, with the cunning of madness, he laughed again as he said, "Very good, sir, very good. And you would take till morning to die, and meanwhile I want a companion in the churchyard yonder, down among the grave worms. Come, bare your arm, and let me do as I said. I'll bleed you. I intended to have taken your head off first, but I've changed my mind, because I wouldn't like to have a headless companion. Bare your arm."

God! what was I to do! I felt my brain seethe and whirl, as though I, too, were going mad. With a desperate effort to be calm I said:

"Suppose I tell another story first?"

"Oh, no; you can tell while you bleed."

"But I shall want to watch the blood flow, too," I said, with an effort to refrain from shuddering.

"True, true," he answered. "Well, let's hear your story—quick, begin."

I waited for no urging. I was too glad to find him in the humor to listen, so I began and related every story I could think of—as soon as one was done beginning another—and in this manner nearly two hours passed. As I was about to begin another story he stopped me peremptorily:

"No, no; no more! I won't listen. I've listened too long already, and I've no time to bleed you either! I may take your head off, as I first intended, disagreeable as it is to have a headless companion!"

Around and around his head again went the glittering knife, coming down in a direct line with my throat; and then, as the edge, sharp as a razor, touched my skin, I forgot the prudent considerations that had hitherto kept me silent, and gave vent to my horror and terror in a cry so loud and long, so shrill and ear piercing that the maniac started back in affright, and actually trembled at the unearthly sound. No wonder! I tremble this moment, myself, when I think what an awful cry it was, and I almost fancy I can still hear the sound of it when I close my eyes and shudderingly look back to the hour.

The effect upon the madman was not of long duration. A third time he waved the knife around his head, and was just preparing for a spring forward when the farmer and his eldest son burst into the room. The effect that these new actors upon the scene produced upon the madman was strange and almost incredible. The knife remained uplifted, and the hand in which it was held seemed suddenly petrified and unable to move. He cowered beneath the gaze of the farmer, as a child might do under the eye of a master, and without the slightest resistance allowed the knife to be taken from his hand and himself quietly led from the room by the farmer and his son.

Then when I was left alone the reaction after all my terror, horror and excitement overpowered me and I sank back upon the bed, almost insensible. I thanked God for my escape, and hardly conscious of my own feeling or actions I lay quite still, awaiting what was to follow. I felt that there was no farther cause for alarm, and in a dreamy sort of a way I tried to account for the adventure. I looked around upon the room and all seemed so like a dream that I could almost have persuaded myself that I was the victim of an unpleasant illusion; but then, to bring me back to the reality of all that had transpired, there was still the light burning upon the table, and I knew I had put out the light before retiring, and another proof that I was awake, and had been for a couple of hours past, was the scratch upon my throat where the knife had grazed it, and I shuddered to think how nearly my thread of life had been cut in two.

Presently the farmer and his son returned, and I was informed that my terrible and most unwelcome visitant was an unfortunate brother-in-law of the farmer's, who had been crazed for some years past; that during certain seasons, especially at that phase in which the moon then was he was quite mad and dangerous, though at other times harmless. Unfortunately for me his door had been neglected that night, and instead of being locked had been left open. I listened to all these explanations, and received my host's apologies and expressions of regret for my disturbance and peril by making a mental vow never to sleep with my door unlocked in a strange house, and if ever placed so I should be obliged to crave the hospitality of strangers to make particular inquiry whether any mad person, brother-in-law or other, dwelt in the house.—True Flag.

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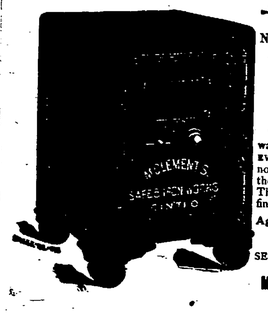

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