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THE SOMNAMBULIST; OR, A NIGHT WITH ABRAHAM THORNTON.

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The Western World, which spreads wide her giant arms to shelter alike the oppressor and the oppressed, where the early pilgrim found a peaceful haven, and the blood-stained regicide a sanctuary, still contains, within its forest depths, the homes of many long forgotten in their father-land; or remembered but as the mourned, or execrated, of the past.

In the autumn of the year 18—, I traversed a portion of that extensive tract, stretching westward from the Alleghany mountains to the vast waters of the Mississippi. I travelled on horseback, and the delights of the daily wild and solitary gallop, more than compensated for the rugged hospitality and comfortless menage of the rude hostleries of the prairie.

It was sunset as I breathed my horse on the brow of a steep hill, and perceived below me, with considerable satisfaction, the habitation designated in my route as my resting place for the night. It was a solitary house, standing about fifty yards from the road, surrounded by all the appurtenances of a flourishing establishment; the proprietor of which apparently combined the employments of innkeeper and agriculturist. An unusual quiet pervaded the place, my loud calls were unheeded, and I looked in vain for the appearance of the "human face divine." I dismounted and advanced towards the door—it was opened at that moment by the landlord—deep grief was depicted in his rugged features; death was within the house; his wife had just breathed her last, and his children were in the fierce grasp of a dangerous and malignant fever. Of course it was no resting-place for me; and with difficulty, amidst the bustle and excitement of the house of mourning, I procured information even as to the mean of obtaining a shelter.

"There's Job Harrison," at length said one rough fellow, (who in the affliction of the family had appropriated to himself the privilege of questioning me of my "where-about,") "he'll give you a bed, for the night, I guess he'll be glad to see a countryman." To my question as to the distance, "Oh," replied he, "just grazes us here; you've only to ride seven miles on the high road due west; then throw a rifle shot over your left shoulder as you pass the swing-bridge on the swamp, and you're at his place." Having ascertained with such exactness the location of my countryman, I had no more to do but mount and away; and following the direction of my informant, which, however unintelligible to my reader, was perfectly correct, after half an hour's hard riding, I found myself approaching, through a thickly-wooded plantation, the residence of Job Harrison.

It was a large substantial building, more like like an English farm-house than any I had seen in this part of the country; I knocked loudly at an outer gate, and was answered by a negro, to whom I consigned my horse, and walked up at once to claim the hospitality of the proprietor. He advanced to meet me; I told my story; and with a constrained civility, and rather an ungracious manner, he bade me welcome.

He preceded me into what appeared to be the common sitting room, and arousing a woman who was sleeping in an arm-chair by the fire, roughly ordered her to bring refreshments, and prepare a bed for my accommodation.

I had now leisure to observe the extreme peculiarity of his appearance, he was a man not exceeding forty years of age, cast in a gigantic mould, and had been at one time of his life excessively corpulent; but now his flesh hung loosely, and gave a tremulous motion to his whole frame, which seemed wasting beneath an unnatural and premature decay, whilst it fell, like dewlaps, from each side of his heavy, sallow, and unmeaning countenance: his hair was silvery white; but his eye, the only feature which redeemed him from disgusting ugliness, was bright and sparkling. Yet strange and unpleasant as was his appearance, he excited an interest in me for which I could not account, further than by a vague idea that I had seen him before; his sepulchral tones seemed familiar to my ear, connected with some circumstance of horror, the particulars of which (like a dream we strive in vain to recollect) I could not embody.

His conversation was coarse, although not illiterate; he asked me some questions about English affairs, but they were principally confined to agricultural subjects. An excellent supper was placed upon the table by the female whose slumber I had disturbed, with the exception of the negro who had taken charge of my horse, the only domestic I saw about the premises. Although everything bespoke plenty, even to profusion, an air of gloom and desolation pervaded the whole establishment, which seemed reflected on the

lowering brow of my moody and disagreeable host. Brandy and other spirits were placed upon the table, of which he drank largely, but they produced no exhilarating effect upon his spirits. In the course of conversation he asked me of what county in England I was a native, and on my replying Warwick, he looked at me wildly, and slightly removed his chair; I took no notice of his emotion, but proceeded to state that I was born in the immediate vicinity of the village of Erdington: a livid hue passed over his pale cheek, and his eye flashed on me with an expression of terror and defiance; at that instant the female entered, and, in a grumbling tone, hinted at the lateness of the hour: I requested to be shown to my apartment, and, bidding him good night, gladly availed myself of the opportunity of retiring.

She conducted me up a flight of stairs into a large and convenient room, on a level with a verandah surrounding the house, placed a candle on the table, and bidding me; in an emphatic tone, to lock my door! left me to my reflections.

There was something in this woman's manner as disagreeable as her master's; and her last words, blended with his strange conduct, produced in me a feeling of uneasiness.

I had no inclination for sleep; I was fevered, and felt as if the cool night air would relieve me: the communication with the verandah was from the passage; I unlocked the door, which I had fastened according to her direction; it opened outwardly, but was obstructed by some heavy body, which I found to be a piece of furniture, evidently placed there to prevent my egress! it yielded however to the force I applied, and I passed out into the verandah.

The moon shed its silvery light through the tall pine-forest, and no sound broke the stillness of the night, but the rustling of the crisp decaying leaf, yielding to the chill breeze of autumn. It was a scene of wild and majestic beauty, but its gloom aroused a train of thoughts which had been whirling in my brain, and seemed, in their complicated machinery, to be developing some hideous drama in which I was to bear a part. At length, finding myself drowsy, I returned to the room, and resolving to frustrate any attempt at confining my actions (which appeared to be intended), I left the door unlocked, which was immediately opposite the bed, on which I flung myself partially undressed, taking the precaution of placing my pistols under my pillow.

Overpowered by fatigue and excitement, I slept; but my dreams were wild and startling: I was in England—I was on the ocean; at last I thought I was in a court of justice, and arraigned for murder; I heard the charge recapitulated, and the usual question of guilty or otherwise. "Not guilty," I replied. "Not guilty!" echoed a deep sepulchral voice, which awoke me at once from my restless sleep. I grasped a weapon, whilst the life-blood rushed startlingly to my heart; for there, within a foot of the bed—full in the pale moonlight—with no covering but his disordered night-gear—stood the ghastly form of my mysterious host! My finger was on the trigger, when I perceived by the fixed glare of his dark eye, he slept.—"Not guilty!" repeated the fearful somnambulist, making an action as if drawing a glove upon his right hand, and flinging its fellow upon the floor; then raising his form to its full height, whilst a smile of demoniacal triumph curled his pale lip, he stalked slowly from the room!

I locked the door, and breathed freely again; I was right in my conjecture; my dream seemed to have aided my memory, and every circumstance came clearly to my recollection. It was in a court of justice I had seen this man, whose crime (dark as his escape from its consequence was extraordinary) had stained the annals of my native country; and in the strange action rehearsed in sleep, I recognised the judicial form of the gladiatorial law, of which he was the latest claimant.

I was dressed with the first ray of morning. The woman was up. I declined taking any breakfast, but, leaping on my horse, galloped rapidly from the contaminating atmosphere that seemed to hang around the domicile of

ABRAHAM THORNTON.

NOTE.—On the 5th of August, 1817, Abraham Thornton was capitally indicted at the Warwick Assizes, for the wilful murder of Mary Ashford, near the village of Erdington, under most aggravated circumstances.

From some discrepancy in the evidence, he was acquitted, but again taken into custody on an "Appeal of Murder," prosecuted by William Ashford, the brother and heir-at-law of the deceased.

The prisoner Thornton is thus described:—"He was about twenty-five years of age, five feet seven inches in height, and of a ferocious and forbidding aspect. His natural thickness was greater than common, but excessive corpulency had swollen his whole

figure into a size rather approaching deformity. His face was swollen and shining, his neck very short and thick, but his limbs were well proportioned. He was a great adept in gymnastic games, and accounted one of the strongest men in the country; so athletic was his form, that his arm-pits did not possess the usual cavities, but were fortified with powerful ligaments."

He, conscious of the decided advantage which his uncommon personal strength would give him over the dwarfish and delicate frame of the Appellant Ashford, had determined on availing himself of the barbarous privilege extended to him by the antiquated and absurd law under which he stood appealed, known as "*Trial by Wager of Battle*."

On the 17th of November the proceedings were resumed in the Court of King's Bench, in Westminster-Hall, London, where the Sheriff of Warwick appeared with Thornton as his prisoner. When, in the proceedings of this day, he was asked, in the form of the court, if guilty or otherwise, Mr. Reader, one of his counsel, put into his hand a slip of paper, from which he read "Not guilty; and I am ready to defend the same with my body." Mr. Reader likewise handed him a pair of large gauntlets or gloves, one of which he put on, and the other, in pursuance of the old form, he threw down for the appellant to take up. It was not taken up. And thus did the rigid application of the law a second time snatch this man from the punishment which, even on his own admission of guilt, he had so fully incurred.

Finding himself an object of dread and terror in the neighborhood of his family, he, a few months after his liberation, succeeded in disguise in procuring a passage to America.—See *Criminal Trials*.

THE POSTMASTER OF ROUVRAY.

The career of Napoleon inspired a degree of enthusiasm in the breasts of the people of France which had never been known to exist before under any—the most fortunate circumstances. From the peer to the peasant, all idolized their hero, and Napoleon never discouraged the manifestations of affection with which he was greeted wheresoever he went; indeed, he gave such license to his people, even after he had become emperor, that their familiarities often became unpleasant and inconvenient. Among the most enthusiastic of his admirers was the postmaster of a small place in Burgandy, bearing the name of Rouvray, who upon two or three occasions had the honor, personally, of driving the emperor's carriage, and had been spoken to by him familiarly. His first meeting with Napoleon was under circumstances calculated to awaken a lively feeling in the breast of the emperor, for the postillions who were driving his carriage to Rouvray had fallen asleep, and the horses, instead of going direct to the post house, had wheeled round, and the night being dark, they had nearly precipitated carriage, emperor and all, from a bridge. As it was, the carriage was nearly overturned, and the postmaster happening at the moment to be returning with two of his men from the next town, perceiving the danger, rushed towards the emperor's carriage and prevented the accident from occurring. The emperor, expressed himself grateful for the assistance rendered by M. Bizouard, and intimated that he would not forget the circumstance.

Bizouard never importuned the emperor; he was indeed delighted if he got but a nod of recognition; and as nothing pleased Napoleon so much as fanatic devotedness, he was always glad to see the postmaster and hear him give vent to his enthusiasm. M. Bizouard had access to the Tuileries, and he never visited Paris without paying a visit to 'his friend, the emperor,' which he did with less ceremony than when he had to wait upon the director of the post office department.

One day, on alighting from the diligencé, in his usual travelling dress, he proceeded to the palace to visit his imperial friend. His sang froid, as he inquired whether the emperor was at home, astonished the guards and officers of the court. Some laughed, others desired him to go away; and when he became importunate they swore and threatened to send him to the guard-house. This roused all that was lion-like in the disposition of M. Bizouard, and he cried—

'Ah, ye cockcombs! if you dare to threaten the postmaster of Rouvray'—

'And who's the postmaster of Rouvray?' asked one of the officers on duty.

'Let me have pen and ink, and you shall see!' exclaimed M. Bizouard, in a voice of thunder, 'let me have pen and ink, and I'll write to the emperor! Ah, you may stare!—I say, to the emperor!'