

A NIGHT'S ADVENTURE.

To one who has been absent from home for any length of time, what is more pleasant than the news that he may return earlier than he had planned?

Fred Boylst had been in Auckland for three years, being the New Zealand agent for a New York firm. He had been expecting to return at the end of the third year. October came, and though three months yet remained, he was both surprised and pleased to receive an order from the firm for him to return at once.

Up to this time the novelty of being in a strange land and the importance he felt in the work being done, and the pleasantness of the social life, prevented even a shadow of homesickness from disturbing him.

But, on the sudden realization of an early return, a little village in the Vermont hills seemed to show itself with surprising distinctness, and a snug little house seemed to stand out more plainly than any other. It was the scene of his childhood. He had never left it more than a month at a time until when, three years before, he had bade goodby to his parents to start on what then seemed a journey of indefinite length.

With these thoughts now presenting themselves so vividly, the few days that remained at New Zealand seemed more agonizing and interminable than any he had ever spent.

The time was more than filled with little odds and ends of business and a host of goodby calls.

Soon Fred found himself on the broad Pacific, journeying toward San Francisco. Owing to the suddenness of his departure, it had been useless to write home of the change of plan; and, instead of cabling, Fred thought it would be a good joke to surprise them by arriving unexpectedly.

The steamer, however, did not hasten across the Pacific. Some of the machinery was disabled by a heavy storm that drove the vessel out of its course. This necessitated a stop at the Sandwich Islands to do some repairing, and two weeks later than was expected the Golden Gate was entered. Six days more were used in crossing the continent, and on a cool morning late in December Fred arrived in New York.

A thousand times during this long and wearisome journey had he pictured to himself his return. Sometimes he thought he would arrive in the early morning, and suddenly drop in upon the family at breakfast. Again and again he pictured to himself the happy but astonished expressions on the faces of his father, mother and little sisters. Sometimes it was at noon that he would arrive, and unceremoniously walk in while the family were at dinner. This plan did not suit very well. In going through the village street many old friends would be met, who would delay him when he was hastening to see his mother once more, and also possibly the news might go before him.

On the whole, the evening seemed the best. In the darkness he could pass unrecognized through the village, and reach the house undelayed. Arrived there, he could enter the family circle around the pleasant fireplace in the sitting-room, and spend the rest of the evening quietly at home. If he arrived during the day, the house would soon be crowded with friends eager to see him, and the first moments with his parents could not be enjoyed alone.

On arriving in New York, Fred went immediately to the firm to report. Mr. Clairvoy, the senior partner, was out of town, and would not return until later in the day. Fred must wait. The trip had seemed long enough, but now to sit down and wait, no one knew for how long, was absolutely cruel. There was nothing to do, so he sat down, and alternately consulted his watch, and looked at the door through which Mr. Clairvoy must come to enter his private office. Every time the outer door was opened he could not help going to see if the absent senior partner was entering. Each time for four hours he was disappointed. At last Mr. Clairvoy returned, and after the business at hand had been transacted, Fred hastened to the Grand Central station.

In planning his return, Fred had paid little attention to the time of arrival of trains. On reaching the station, he found that the first train he could take would reach the much thought of village at 12 that night. Several hours' delay would be caused by waiting for the train that arrived in the morning. This delay would surely be the last straw, and could not be endured.

He therefore took the first train. This would really be much more of a surprise than any of the others. He knew that his parents were sound sleepers. He knew also how the house could be entered at night. "I will crawl in quietly, spend the remainder of the night in my room, and come down to breakfast with the rest."

Slowly the afternoon passed away. The beastly supper, typical of all New England railroad restaurants, was served in a dirty little station. The evening passed more slowly than the afternoon. At least when sleep threatened to become master of the situation, he ordered his berth made up, and soon turned in, strictly charging the porter to wake him at 11:45.

In the midst of a pleasant dream of an indescribable mixture of things, far foreign to the thoughts that were uppermost in his mind when awake, he was rudely aroused. A dark woolly head with two bright, shining eyes, peered in between the curtains, and a voice said:

"Quarter of twelb, sah! Bleeb you wanted to woke at quarter ob twelb, sah."

A week of sleeping car life prepares one for anything, and without taking an extra doze, Fred immediately dressed, neither bumping his head nor putting his right foot into the left shoe.

As usual the train was late, and it was 12:30 before it stopped by the small station of the slumbering village. A very sleepy railroad official, surprised that any one should leave the train at that unseasonable hour, stood waiting upon the platform. Fred left his trunk in the care of this man, and with his valise in his hand, started to walk to the house. A good mile lay between this and the station.

The night was beautiful. The moon, slightly on the wane, re-enforced by countless stars, made the snow covered ground resplendent for miles around. A good path had been trampled in the road, rendering walking comparatively easy.

Three years had made no difference in the quiet village. All the old landmarks remained undisturbed. The houses with which he had been familiar all his life, were in their accustomed places, unchanged. In one field, for years unused, stood a modern Queen Anne cottage. In no less than 10 letters from friends at home had this been accurately described, for it was the only house that had been built since his departure. The old white church stood out, hideous in its plainness, with its ghastly spire pointing toward heaven. The town hall, with its row of half-gnawed horse posts coated with ice, and the town pump, kept free by perpetual use, were as natural as ever, and numerous other familiar objects brought back pleasant memories and recollections.

Not a soul was moving. The stillness was broken only by the occasional bark of a dog in some distant farmhouse, or the subdued moo of a cow, disturbed, possibly by a draught through some neglected crack. It was with a feeling of unspeakable happiness that Fred tramped along over the slippery ground. How much longer seemed the mile to-night than in the days of his childhood, when with his companions he lagged along to the district school.

At last the old homestead was reached. Dark and still it stood as if deserted. No friendly light, no friendly sound, to welcome home the traveller. His mother and father slept within, little dreaming that at that moment their son stood outside the gate. Now to enter the house unheard. Every door was bolted and barred, for although in the country, there were too many valuable things in the house to permit of any risk being run. Nevertheless, with all the care that was taken, there was one weak point, known, however, to the family alone. By the use of a knife blade from the outside, a catch on one of the dining-room windows could be easily unfastened. It was one of those little things about the house that had needed attention for years. It had been neglected, as all things are when it is everybody's business to have them repaired.

The crust of the snow in the yard seemed to snap with unusual noise as Fred carefully made his way around to the window. The valise was put down in the snow, and after some trouble the window was unlocked with a jack-knife. The window was an old-fashioned one, without weights, and, although raised with the utmost care, it creaked unmercifully. A forked-shaped button held it in place when open. It was a long reach from the ground, and before the window was secured it very nearly dropped back again. A bang so caused would awaken all the inmates of the house. After the window had been secured, the valise was quietly lifted in, followed by its owner. First the head, then the body, then two long legs came silently in. Once more Fred stood in his father's house. He closed the window and prepared to go to his room.

But suddenly it occurred to him that his room might not be in order. Not being expected for two months, the furniture might possibly have been moved out, and certainly the bed would not be made up. At the head of the stairs was a room that was invariably kept in readiness for unexpected guests. It would be far better to spend the night there.

Also, as this necessitated the climbing of but one flight of stairs, there would be much less danger of his being heard.

As he started to leave the room he stubbed his toe against a chair. He held his breath and listened. There was no sound, and again he started into the hall. Slowly and carefully he climbed the carpeted stairs. He held the valise behind him that it might not bump against the wall of the balustrade. He had nearly gained the top when another thought presented itself. What if some guest was at that moment occupying the room? There would be nothing then to do but spend the night on the floor in his room or go down to the sitting room and sleep on the lounge. Why had he not thought of that before? He would have made much less noise and would have been sure to remain undiscovered until morning. But as he was so near the chamber, it was best to ascertain if it was occupied. Fortunately the door was open. He put his valise down on the outside and listened for the breathing of a sleeper. All was quiet save the thumping of his own heart, for although at home, there was somewhat of an exciting sensation caused by prowling about in the dark in so secret a manner.

Feeling sure that the room was unoccupied, he entered, and with little difficulty found the centre table. He had but lighted the lamp upon it, when an indescribable sensation came over him. It was the sensation one feels when suddenly realizing that some one is watching. He raised his eyes toward the door at the opposite side of the room, and was startled to see entering, a strange young lady dressed in a long wrapper. In her left hand she held a lighted candle, in her right hand a cocked revolver. The latter was aimed unpleasantly in the vicinity of his head, and considering discretion the better part of valor, he jumped into a small closet at his side and closed the door. The next instant he heard a knee pressed against the lower part of the door, and the key turned in the lock.

His first impulse was to prevent any firing that might take place, and he hastened to cry:

"Don't shoot!"

"I have no intention of doing so," answered a voice from the outside. "I think I have you very securely now, and will be able to keep you here as long as I wish."

Here was certainly a peculiar position. To be locked in a closet in his own home by an absolute stranger, was hardly the reception he had expected to have on his return. But he was greatly perplexed to know how to begin a conversation with his fair captor. At last he said:

"Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

"That is a nice question for you to ask. I think it would be more sensible if I asked you that."

This was logical. He had made a fool of himself in beginning, but would try again and endeavor to do better.

"I am the son of the house and have just returned from a journey."

"That is a very likely story," she replied. "It is more foolish than your first remark. The son of the house is now in New Zealand, and will not return for two months or possibly a longer time. If he did, he would not be very likely to come at this unseemly hour and enter in this unceremonious manner."

This was as logical as her first remark. Circumstantial evidence of the most convincing character was certainly against him.

"But won't you tell me who you are?"

"Certainly I shan't. What good will it do you to know who I am?"

It would, indeed, be hard to make her understand the reason. Nevertheless, something must be done and be done quickly. Although living in the country, Mr. Boylst enjoyed all the modern improvements possible. The house was heated by steam, but owing to its having been introduced many years after the house was built, the pipes were not so conveniently arranged as they would have been in a new house, built to accommodate them. The pipes to the third story passed through the corner of the closet in which Fred was imprisoned. The closet was small and filled with dresses, and there was barely room for a person to stand inside. The poor fellow was uncomfortable, to say the least.

"You don't seem to realize that the steam pipes pass through this closet. I shall suffocate if you don't let me out."

"I am perfectly well aware of the position of the steam pipes, but I have no intention of letting you out."

"But I must have air."

"Well here it is," she said, and taking the bellows from the fireplace, she fitted the nozzle into the key-hole and blew a lot of air into the closet. This had little effect, however, and it seemed necessary that he should start off on a new tack.

"Why don't you call my father? He could certainly help you."

"I don't need any help," she tersely replied.

"But if he was here I know he would recognize my voice."

As she had him in such absolute security there seemed to be no harm in telling him that there was no other man in the house. It would also be best to tell him the truth. Undoubtedly he had heard of the absence of both Mr. Boylst and his son, and had broken into the house in consequence.

"Mrs. Boylst was unexpectedly called to the bedside of her mother, who was suddenly taken seriously ill. Mr. Boylst accompanied her."

"The surprise has greatly exceeded my fondest expectations," thought Fred. "Did they take their daughters with them?"

But thinking the conversation had been carried on far enough, she did not answer him.

Again he was forced to consider how next to approach this invincible jailer, who would neither believe his statements, nor take pity on his sufferings. The heat of the closet was oppressive and something must be done to relieve him.

"I tell you I am the son of the house," he resumed. "I found that I should be able to leave New Zealand earlier than I had expected to, and so came home without cabling them of my early departure. Unfortunately I arrived at night and decided that I would wake no one, but surprise them all in the morning."

"That is a poorer attempt than you have yet made. I suppose that if I had found you down stairs with all the silver and valuables in a bundle, you would have claimed the same thing and explained that you were only making a little surprise for the family. It is of no use for to argue. I shall on no condition release you, and you may as well begin now to wait patiently until morning. At the first opportunity I will hail some passing farmer and have you conducted to the sheriff's house."

That would be well, because any farmer who would pass the house on a winter's morning would be some neighbor who would recognize him. But the thought of spending four or five more hours in that oven, was unbearable. If he did not die for want of fresh air, he would certainly suffer greatly.

Suddenly a happy thought struck him.

"Outside the door you will find my valise, I think its contents will convince you that I am Fred Boylst."

"I shall not leave this door for any reason."

This was discouraging. Then another happy thought appeared.

"I have in my pocket a letter from my mother. If you will open the door I will show it to you."

"On no condition shall I open the door. If you have any letter you would like me to see, you may thrust it under the door."

Painfully in the small space allowed, Fred stooped, and with much difficulty succeeded in forcing the letter through the small crack between the door and the sill. Then he eagerly waited her reply.

"This is written to Fred Boylst, but it is dated in Columbus, O., and signed by a man entirely unknown to me."

"Then, in the dark I have made a mistake, and given you the wrong letter. Please examine this one."

Again he stooped and managed to thrust a second letter out into the room, and nervously waited for her to answer.

"Yes, this is from Mrs. Boylst to Fred Boylst. I recognize the handwriting. But it proves nothing. How can I tell that you are Mr. Fred Boylst? Possibly you have



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