

### The Home Circle.

#### The Fatal Test.

An aged man, my fellow-traveller, related to me the following story, as we sat in the warm chimney corner of a comfortable country tavern, after a day's travel in a stage-coach. He assured me that the test was tried during his father's time, with such results as are here narrated:—

The snow was falling thick around a small house at some distance from the little village of—, in Massachusetts, on a Christmas Eve seventy or eighty years ago. The widow within did not give it a thought, for she expected the arrival of no husband, and her children were snug and warm by the fire.

There came a knock, however, and she answered it speedily, with an exclamation of surprise at such an occurrence on such a night.

A youth stood without, who asked permission to warm himself, as he felt the death-sleep creeping over him. Instantly the widow's eldest son drew him into the house, and taking the reins of his horse from his stiffened hands, zealously attended to the comforts of the beast. The eldest daughter prepared some hot coffee, and the mother herself took off the stranger's hat and coat. Everything that kindness could suggest was done for him; and when he had become in some measure comfortable, questions as to his inducements to travel were put with an earnest simplicity which rather warmed his heart than gave offence.

He had been several times much moved by the tenderness shown him; and he did not hesitate to tell them frankly about his affairs. He was a very handsome stripling; his name was Arthur Vernon, the only son of a rich widow. He was now on his way to New Hampshire, taking a large sum of money from his mother in Boston to his aunt, who was left in debt by the sudden death of her husband. The stage routes were impassable from the deep snow, and he intended, as the need was urgent, to perform the journey on horseback, then the most common mode of travel.

He had stopped at the village tavern at—, having determined to spend the night there; but as he imprudently mentioned the money he carried before several travellers in the bar-room, the landlord privately advised, even urged, his riding on as fast as possible, that he might not be obliged to travel the next day with those who had heard his rash words; and that while they supposed him asleep, he might be on his way far from them and possible danger. Arthur was still cold and his horse fatigued; but the landlord supplied him with another and sped him onward.

The deep snow of the road was entirely untroudden; therefore he had ridden slowly and become chilled. Thinking it better to risk the danger of delay and of being overtaken in the morning than to become sleepy and fall from his horse to certain death by the wayside, he had concluded to stop and warm himself by their fireside before he entered the forest through which the road now led. The little family had listened breathlessly, and for some time the silence was unbroken, until Mary said, with a shudder—"It's a horrible road. People say—"

"Hush, dear," said her mother; "Don't repeat those idle tales. No sensible person, such as this young man, would believe them, to be sure; but when he is riding through the woods alone, they may seem fearful to him."

Arthur asked for pen and paper, to write a few words to his mother, and Charles promised to take the letter to the village post office.

"I will not lose what is perhaps my last chance of letting her hear from me," he said.

When he had finished the note he insisted upon continuing his journey, and they did not urge him very much to remain, trusting much to the wisdom of the landlord. Charles Morrison brought his horse, and after a farewell, almost as affectionate and sad as if he belonged to the family, he departed, Charles accompanying him to point out the entrance to the wood, and Mary calling after him to "ride fast."

He said, just before leaving the door, "Oh, how unwilling I am to leave you! But go I must."

When Charles returned they talked until bedtime of their admiration of the stranger and their pity for him. Mary's heart bled for the poor youth, hastening onward through the winter's night, haunted by a dreadful fear.

Early the next morning, Charles Morrison stopped on his way to school to inquire of the landlord concerning the stranger who had so deeply interested them. He learned joyfully that the horse, which Arthur had promised to leave at the next tavern, had been found there and brought home, thus making it almost certain that he had escaped danger, at least for that night.

No one at the tavern, however, had seen the youth, but it was probable he had feared to enter, and, after putting the horse in the stable, had sought shelter at some hospitable farmer's. He would be likely to continue to do so, and for a day or so avoid the inns.

The landlord, who feared losing custom if he displayed such a suspicious temper, swore that young Vernon was a fool who could not keep his tongue between his teeth, but must needs betray the friend who, out of prudence for him, had risked getting into trouble himself. He protested he suspected none of his guests of any design upon the young man's money, but thought it best to send him on, as he himself had led to his imprudently mentioning his business before strangers. But when Charles took a private opportunity of questioning him, he confessed that he felt uneasy when he saw an ill-looking man glaring at young Vernon several times. After he had sent the youth away, he took occasion to say, at the supper-table, that the poor fellow had fallen asleep on his bed without undressing, "just for a blind." He noticed that the suspected man's attention was attracted. Soon after he had missed him, and learned that he had been to the stables, and had been told by the hostler of Arthur's departure. When the fellow returned to the bar-room, he said he had been so refreshed by the supper and something warm that he believed he would ride on.

"I shook in my shoes, Charley," the landlord concluded; "but I should have been 'most too smart if I'd meddled, for it's all turned out all right. That man stopped quietly all night at the next tavern, and Vernon left my horse there all safe."

Charles ran home light-hearted with the news, and Mary sang for joy.

"If he only don't dog him and catch up with him yet," muttered her brother.

A few weeks afterwards came two men with eager inquiries about a young stranger called Arthur Vernon, who had left home on a journey into the interior of New Hampshire, and of whom the last news came from this village. They could trace him no further, and were obliged, after a vain search, to return to his sorrowing mother without any clue to the mystery of her son's fate. Neither could they discover anything about the suspected stranger, except that he had gone through several villages on the road to Maine.

The landlord really grieved over the poor youth. He feared that he had lost his way and perished with cold. The widow's family would not believe that he could meet a fate so hard, and thought him ill in some out-of-the-way place.

The winter passed away, and the matter was still a mystery.

The deep snows of a New England winter lingered till late in the spring in the wood near Widow Morrison's house. It was totally unfrequented, as it was believed in those superstitious times to be haunted by a murdered woman, whose cry of dying agony still resounded through its depths.

Charles, however, was free from fear, and he often roamed through it in search of game.

He was out with his gun one day in spring, when, attracted by the screaming, hovering crows, he approached a wild, rocky spot, and saw, gleaming among the loose stones, long, golden hair. He believed he recognized it. Another glance, and he turned sickened and sorrow-stricken to haste to the village and direct the proper persons to the spot.

A rifled pocket-book, with the name of Arthur Vernon upon it, left no doubt of the identity of the body. A fractured skull and a hatchet lying beside him made it almost certain that he had been murdered. Yes, murdered almost within sound of a pistol-shot from the widow's cottage, so that death had been waiting for him just outside its hospitable door. Charles and Mary remembered how his last words had been of his unwillingness to leave them, as if his instincts told him for what he was exchanging their warm shelter.

Many years passed. Charles Morrison became the schoolmaster in—, Mary was married to the young orthodox minister, and the landlord still welcomed travellers. It was November. Again

the snow fell in driving waves, and pattered like hail against the windows of the little cottage, where the enlarged family of Morrisons dwelt in love together.

There came a knock at the door, and the widow, saying it reminded her of poor Arthur's knock, sent one of her sons to open the door. The hostler from the tavern said he wished to see Charles immediately. His coat and hat were on in a moment, and he followed the messenger as rapidly as possible.

The landlord was awaiting him in a private room, and told him that the man whom he could not help suspecting to be Arthur's murderer had arrived, and taken a room for the night. He confided to Charles his plan for his detention by an old superstitious test. He felt so sure that the murderer was now in his house that he had sent for Charles and several other men of the village to witness the conviction, and secure the guilty.

Supper was not yet ready, and though the stranger was very hungry and impatient, the landlord hoped to detain it long enough for the others to arrive.

As each came, he was informed of the suspicions the landlord had formed—and then they dropped into the bar-room as if accidentally. All entertained full belief in the efficacy of the means proposed, though Charles in a different manner from the others. When he entered the room he stamped the snow from his boots, and drew near the blazing wood fire, beside which sat a stout, grizzled man, of dark and savage aspect, gloomily playing with the tongs.

"A cold, stormy night," said Charles.

"Ay," answered the traveller.

"And one to make a man fear evil things, have strange fancies, and look on the gloomy side."

"More cause for shutting up about it!" was the surly reply.

When all were assembled and drawn around the fire, Charles led the conversation to a natural topic on such a night, when the driving storm without seemed like infernal revels to the witches of olden time. There were those present who still believed in them, and this led by apparently natural transition to ghosts and to haunted places, among which Morrisons' woods were mentioned. The sullen stranger seemed displeased with this turn in the conversation, and for the first time opened his lips to protest with an oath his disbelief in ghosts.

"Stranger," said Charles, "you will not find many people about here to agree with you in your disbelief. Many a person who has been along the wood-road after dark has heard what they dare not talk about in a lonely place—neither can they disbelieve. But I have not heard it, and those who have are here to tell for themselves."

"No; let's be done talking about it," said the stranger to the old Justice, who was giving a preparatory "ahem."

He would not be silenced, and began in a weak, trembling voice, "I have heard it, and since neighbour Wright goes home my way, and I'll have company, I don't mind telling you about it, though I think it no shame to be prudent."

"About what?" said the stranger, fiercely.

"Well, I had to come through the wood that night, and I was determined to close my ears to every sound, but I was not more than half-way across when it came, and I trembled like a leaf. It was the most dreadful cry—"

"Who cried? Did you say anyone cried or groaned?" broke in the greatly perturbed stranger.

"I don't say who, but it was a long moan or wail, that sounded as if it gurgled through blood. Ugh! it makes me shudder now!"

Charles narrowly watched the stranger. For a moment he seemed almost paralyzed with dread. But he rallied, shook himself slightly, as if to loosen the fetters of fear, and asked, sneeringly, if that did not happen long ago in old times, when such things were common.

"No," said the Justice; "I heard it myself, stranger, and not three months ago."

Gloom again sunk upon his brow, and he remained silent. The conversation was resumed and the topic still discussed, the stranger seeming to listen with secret uneasiness and terror.

"Heaven is just," said Charles, "and that is why murders will out. The very stones would cry out, or perhaps the bones of the murdered testify, as they really do according to the belief of the people here, when the murderer touches them."