

[FOR THE CRITIC.]

AN EVENTFUL CHRISTMAS.

I am an old man now, and as I sit musing by the fire the memory of a former Christmas eve comes back to me. It was in this wise:

I always had a taste for farming, and, seeing in a newspaper an advertisement of a farm for sale, not from fault of the ground, but on account of the death of its owner, I immediately made arrangements for its purchase. I had a little capital, enough to buy the farm and set it going. There was quite a roomy house on the property, and in this I and a man-servant lived.

The first three years had passed away leaving me a much richer man than I started, and on Christmas eve I was sitting in front of a blazing fire watching my two great mastiffs, Ajax and Cato, lazily snapping at the sparks that now and again spluttered forth on the bearskin rug. My man had gone to town 12 miles away to spend Christmas with his mother, and I was all alone in the house, not quite alone though, for were anyone to lay a finger on me in anger those two huge hounds would make him rue it.

A storm was rising, and already the wind whistled drearily through the trees. Suddenly Cato growled. Hark, somebody was knocking at the front door. I started. Who could this be coming so late at night? Not without some misgivings I opened the door and in stepped a man. Before either of us could utter a word the dogs rushed to me and stood with bristling hair snarling at the stranger. "Down, Cato! Back Ajax!" I cried, and turned to apologize. The newcomer stood with a look of unpleasant surprise on his face. "You keep some fine dogs," he remarked, and then continued, "I have come to ask a night's shelter, for from the look of the sky we shall have a regular blizzard before morning, and the town is far from here."

Now to the reader this might seem an imprudent request, but, out in the thinly settled parts of Canada, a man's house is a free hotel, and one never thinks twice about asking for a night's lodging. Still, all alone in the house and being of a timid disposition, I felt rather uneasy. Ideas of tramps, burglars, etc., filled my mind. A glance at the man reassured me. He was fully fifty and small of stature. His clothes were seedy, but he certainly was no ordinary burly tramp. The most peculiar thing about him was his eyes. Coal black and small, they seemed to search your very soul; one could not tell a lie looking this man in the face, his eyes compelled the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"Certainly," I said, extending my hand. "Your name?" I asked. "Henry Burnet," he answered. "Well, Mr. Burnet, I can only offer you a very indifferent meal and a clean bed, but if you will accept them, together with a warm welcome, I shall be delighted."

"Thank you," was the reply, "I will avail myself of your kind hospitality for to-night."

During the evening he told me his story. It was the old, old tale, he had hoped to make a fortune in a day, with the same almost inevitable result—ruin. He was now tramping to A——, a town 60 miles away, in the hope of finding some employment.

At bedtime, after showing him into his bedroom, it struck me that it might be just as well to secrete my valuables. So, although at the time I had not the slightest suspicion of the man, I took my savings, some \$5,000 in notes, out of the desk where I usually kept them and deposited them in a small, secret cupboard that I had made under my bed. To make it doubly safe there was always a carpet on the floor, so that to get at the closet the carpet had to be raised at one corner. This done I turned in.

I woke with a start about two o'clock under the impression that I had heard a door creak; I listened, but no sound came to my strained ears, so closing my eyes I was soon back in the arms of Morpheus.

In the morning when I went downstairs everything was just as I left it. I was beginning to examine the safe to see if it had been tampered with when my lodger's voice sounded behind me "Merry Christmas," he said, and added: "My thanks are due to you for a very pleasant night, I slept like a top till about a quarter of an hour ago, when I heard you taking your morning tub. Beastly weather, isn't it." Indeed it was; during the night about two feet of snow had fallen, which rain and sleet were now fast converting into slush. "I suppose, Mr. Burnet, you will have no objection to spending Christmas with me?" I asked. "Oh no, thank you," he replied. "I really must not trespass on your hospitality any longer." "But it is not trespassing," I persisted. "It is doing me a personal favor, I am all alone here, and I should like to have some one to talk to, on Christmas especially."

By dint of much persuasion, I prevailed on the stranger to stay another night.

The day passed quickly as happy days do, and soon we found ourselves lighting the lamps and preparing the tea-table, for out in the west a man is cook, housemaid and proprietor all in one. Later on in the evening Burnet proposed a game of cards, from cards we passed to tricks, and indeed my eyes were opened at the way this man manipulated the pasteboards. I simply sat still and stared. Then he led the conversation by natural stages to ghosts and spirit rapping. "Do you know a really good ghost story?" I queried. Burnet laughed. "Well, I hardly know what your conception of a really good story is, but, if you mean one that will make you feel creepy for the rest of the night, I fancy this one will suit." Forthwith he started, and well did he fulfil his word. For fully half an hour I sat entranced. Burnet seemed to throw his whole soul into the story. A chilly feeling came over me. His eyes seemed to grow into two balls of fire, and as I gazed upon those lurid orbs that gleamed as the entrance to the lower world all power of volition passed from my mind. I felt like a man

who, on the edge of a whirlpool, is drawn unwillingly by an irresistible power to be sucked down in the vortex. And still those two strange baleful eyes seemed to burn into my very soul, a strange humming noise buzzed in my ears, my brain felt numb, I saw nothing, all consciousness left me.

When I awoke I was still sitting in the chair, but only dead ashes filled the grate, and in the east the scarlet-tinted sky heralded the advent of the Aurora. I felt tired and my head was aching. Gradually the events of the previous evening came back to me. "Burnet," I cried, but the only answer was a whining noise in the room where the mastiffs usually slept. I opened the door and the two dogs sprang out to greet me. My mind full of misgivings I hastened upstairs to Burnet's room, it was empty, the bed had never been touched; next I entered my own chamber. Behold! the carpet torn up, the secret cupboard open and empty. It was a mystery, to me at least.

It was a great loss, and it was hard to think that the savings of years were gone never to return. But I never abandoned hope, somehow I felt certain that I should meet this man again, and so it proved.

Two years afterwards in the great city of London I saw Henry Burnet. He did not recognize me; I followed him to his lodgings, and then, after introducing myself, I threatened to hand him over to the police if he did not make good the theft and tender an explanation. Burnet started, but quickly recovering he advanced. It seemed that the scene of long ago was to be acted over again, for a kind of mental paralysis came over me as I saw Burnet gazing at me. Struggle as I would I could not speak. Then I heard Burnet saying quietly, "You will let me go." I was dazed, I could not stop him; strange to say, I did not wish to. He was gone.

I hurried to Scotland Yard and related my story to an inspector. He laughed. "You have been mesmerized," he said. "But—how—the secret cup—" I stammered. Forthwith the detective launched forth into a full explanation of that mysterious power some men possess. "You see," he said, "Burnet probably knew that you had some money. The step you heard the first night was the scoundrel coming back from searching the safe from which you had wisely removed all valuables. The following evening he mesmerized you and found out the whereabouts of the notes, and then after shutting up the dogs he decamped."

It was all clear now, and I went down those steps with a firm determination to keep out of Burnet's way, which resolve has prospered better than the majority of good resolutions do, for from that day to this I have never set eyes on the rascal.

ALGERNON CROFTON.

A DANGEROUS CHILD.

Little Willie Ainsworth perched himself on big Will Hartley's knee, and proceeded deliberately to his self-appointed duty of making that gentleman uncomfortable; although, to do the youngster justice, he hadn't the slightest idea of what he was about.

"Mr. Hartly, do you know what my sister Nell says you are?"

"Mr. Hartly's face told of both ignorance and interest. Truth to tell, Miss Nellie Ainsworth's opinion was then of considerable importance to him.

His small companion scarcely waited his negative, but went on.

"She says you're a lazy spendthrift. What's that, Mr. Hartly?"

The gentleman's handsome face flushed hotly; and without answering the child's question he put him hastily down and rose to his feet.

He would probably have left the house without waiting for the lady whom he had called to see; but at that moment she entered. He scarcely touched her outstretched hand; but, after a very distant greeting, said—

"Miss Ainsworth, will you please tell me upon what premises you base your conclusion that I am 'a lazy spendthrift'?"

One glance at her little brother's tell-tale face revealed to the young lady the whole state of the case.

Certainly she was courageous, for she answered immediately.

"I think you are lazy, Mr. Hartly, because you are well and do nothing. I think you are a spendthrift, because—"

Here she hesitated, and glanced far more expressively than she was aware over to the little alcove where, in their delicate brown wicker framework, the rarest of exotics danced in the pleasant breeze.

"Oh, I understand," said he, in a sort of proud bitterness, interpreting aright both her hesitation and her glance. "Perhaps some day you will find that you have done me injustice. Until then I will bid you good-bye."

And with one little frigid exclamation, Mr. Hartly had gone.

Left to herself, Miss Nellie Ainsworth, with most humiliating inconsistency, burst into tears.

"The idea," she murmured between her sobs, "of my daring to criticise Will Hartly! And I didn't know anything about it either—only what Aunt Nancy said; and she don't like him, just because she wants me to marry somebody else. I ought to be ashamed of myself."

And under the influence of this last emotion, Miss Ainsworth sat down to her writing-table, and hastily dashed off the following little note:—

"I am sure that I have done you injustice, and write to beg your pardon. That speech was a hasty one, and was made in consequence of reports which I had no business to credit. Will you forgive me? And allow me to be

Your Friend,

NELLIE AINSWORTH."

She finished this with a sigh of satisfaction, then, after folding and directing it, left the room.

A moment after Willie Ainsworth entered, and, looking at the envelope lying so innocently on the rosewood desk, he said—