

THE LANCASTER INTELLIGENCER

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THE SIREN BELL.

I dreamt that I heard a siren bell, With a silvery echo, and a low, And a musical cadence soft and low,

And a siren bell, and a siren bell, And a siren bell, and a siren bell, And a siren bell, and a siren bell,

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ing at him, wrenching the knife from between his teeth, and so getting the advantage; but even 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 lighted the candle, and then took the knife from between his teeth, and took firm hold of the candle 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 kind of laugh—

Ha! ha! Awake, eh?—Ha! ha! Glad of it, sir; I meant to awake you, for, 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 that he was mad, and I saw the horror of my situation was increased. At first, I had thought him a robber, or a hardy knave who I thought I might have been able to fight, but from his own words, he ended to murder me, and I felt that little stroke 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 finger, with great care along the edge of the knife—evidently he had no intention of suffering by the experiment. And then he said—

Do you intend to kill me, you know—perhaps not for an hour—perhaps not for a day, but I think you are 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 my wishing within myself, with all my heart, that he would take it into his crazy brain to find his way back there and leave me, to sleep in peace.

Yes, you know, eh? Well, I don't mind telling you. Don't you see that 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? How blind? Why see there? And to aid me in discerning this imaginary object, he rose and went toward the window and looked back the blind still father 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 my work of an instant; but at that moment the madman, annoyed that I couldn't see the church spire, dropped the blind, turned around quickly, muttering,—blind, blind, and instantly comprehending my intention to escape, bounded toward me with a spring like a wild-cat, and catching hold of me with his bony hand, waved the gleaming knife over my face as if to anything in the world but pleasant.

Oh, you will, will you? Just lie down there—still now—still, or I'll kill you before even 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 he bore 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 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 here in the damp, cold ground; and the grave worms—ugh! to feel them creeping about one's skin—so slimy, and cold, 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.

It is cold, is that cold?

I replied that it was, and he continued—

They make it cold—God forgive me—they make it cold and slimy as well, crawl over it. Did you ever 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 a while, and you'll feel them, just as I do, pretty soon."

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

With a groan 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, 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, oh? 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 knew what, for aid, for deliverance. I knew 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—

and 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. Oh, how devotedly 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 till 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 led to a death, and died from the fright, eh? Let us hear it."

He gladly began, making it long, and adding as much as possibly could to the original, which was something I collected 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 bleed 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 fright, which he was being led to death. I forgot the story now, but it is familiar to every one. When I concluded, I suggested to the maniac that he should try this model experiment, and 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 device, with the cunning of a madman, he laughed again as he said—

Very good, sir, very good. And you would tell me the story, and meanwhile I want a companion in the church yard 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."

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 you 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 said, "Well, let's hear your story—quick, begin."

I waited for a moment, as I was to find him in the humor to listen, and I began and related every story I could think of—as soon as one was done beginning with another—and in this manner nearly two hours passed. As I was about to begin another story, he stopped me peremptorily.

No more; no more! I won't listen! I've listened long enough already, and I've no time to bleed you further, 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 loud, and so piercing, that the madman 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 his hand round his head, and was just preparing for a spring toward me, 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 covered beneath the gaze of the farmer, as a child might stare under the eye of a master, and without the least resistance, allowed the knife to be taken from him, and he 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 feelings 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 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 realities of all that had transpired, there was still the light burn upon the table, and I knew I had put out the light before retiring; and another part of me was awake, and had been for a couple of hours past, was the scratch upon my throat, which he had grazed it, and I shuddered to think how nearly my thread of life had been out in two.

Presently the farmer and his son returned, and I was informed that my terrible and most unwelcome visitor was an unfortunate brother-in-law of the farmer, 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 for me, his disorder had been neglected that night, and instead of being locked up, he had been left open.

I received all these explanations, and listened to 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 the hospitality of I should be obliged to crave, I should be obliged to make particular inquiry whether any mad person, brother-in-law or other, dwelt in the house.

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