

Select Tale.

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DOGGED BY SIN.

A TRUE TALE.

It might be questioned whether fiction, with all its extensive command of means to stir the soul and to fix it in breathless abstraction upon its verisimilitudes that are 'liker' than the truth, and with all its large range of action, so much larger than the truth's insomuch as the ideal outstretches the real—whether, with all this illimitability of power and domain, it is superior to the truth in its impressions and efficiency. In fiction we thread with strained and anxious sense the mazes of artful plots, start and wonder at strange coincidences, revel in sympathy with ardent passions, luxuriate in the sweet richness of Elysian happiness; but through all is diffused a cooling sense of airy unreality, such as accompanies our own day-dreams.— And always the warmer glows our sympathy the nearer the tale approaches to known truth; the more it assumes the character of a development of one of Nature's great laws, or the more the parts begin to form themselves into a faint image of some scene in our life's history. But when in fact itself the hands of Providence silently work out, with all the preciseness and unity of a well-thought novel, one of those wonderful sequences that seemed to us possible only in romance, we are startled as if we meet embodied in solid, palpable matter the varied phantasms of our sleep.

The following story is an example of the execution of one of those heavy-dooms that hang over sin, wrought out to a completeness on this side 'the veil,' which novelists have sometimes made the plan of their most powerful romances, speaking the voice of Nature with more than Nature's forbiddance. Here Nature has, for once at least, loudly and clearly declared herself, and her own great voice strikes us with greater awe than the smaller tones of her half-guessing interpreters.

The chief personages of the story are, so far as known, men living in the lower western corner of Maine, and the near portion of New Hampshire, and would wonder to see detailed by an unknown hand a passage in their life over which memory broods in sadness.

Some fifty years ago, there lived in a town in the south-east corner of New Hampshire a young mechanic, just beginning to earn his own subsistence, and promising, through wise frugality and strict fidelity, to accomplish this easily, and lay in store enough for his old age and bequests to his children. He was of instinctive good manners, frank in his communications with society, kind and sympathizing in his feelings. In form he was tall and symmetrical; his features finely cut, of a soft, dark hue; his eyes black and sparkling, deep set under a high forehead, upon the arch of which strayed curls of rich chestnut hair. His was just that appearance that suits the word man. He had been but a short time in the village before he began to attract the attention of the gentler sex.— The more they grew to know him the stronger became their liking to him. With the old women he was the sum of all the virtues, and with the maidens the object of many a soft dream and warm desire. There was many a bright eye peeping round the inside window frame as he passed to and from his labor, and many a glance at church, that ought to have turned to the preacher, shot a-slant to the young mechanic. In the cool of a summer's eve the voices whose hum came through the open doors and windows, were not unfrequently the old women's, chanting the praises of James Atwood; and to these the hearts if not the tongues of the listening maidens chimed in tuneful accordance.

One morning Mr. Gilder, one of a firm of jewelers of the town, found on opening his store that the door had been forced and a quantity of jewelry, in value from four to five hundred dollars, had been carried off. Strict inquiries were made, but no trace of the thief could be found. Certain small incidents led Mr. Gilder to fix his suspicions on James Atwood. He, with others, had always held James in good esteem, and he had not of course escaped the favorable influence that the strong siding of the gentler half of the village had had upon the sternness; but from causes that to others might seem worthless, and even to himself, on strict reflection, of uncertain weight, and from a feeling of assurance, as if he were on the right track, Mr. Gilder began to entertain gloomy doubts of the integrity and honorable dealing of the young mechanic. The expression of these doubts on one or two occasions set the houses of the village buzzing like rapped bees. So Mr. Gilder was fain to keep

silent, though none the less there brooded in his mind these dark suspicions that scowled heavily at James Atwood.

Thus things stood for some months. One morning there was a stir in the village, and a running from house to house. A horse had been stolen from the house where James Atwood boarded, and James himself was missing. This time there was small room for doubt. Indignant house-wives now opened, restless batteries of invective against the double-faced hypocrite; and the reluctant heart of the maiden was forced to banish from the pure shrine of its affection the image of a fugitive horse-thief. On hearing of this occurrence, Mr. Gilder determined to pursue some course by which he might bring the thief to justice. On talking with the owner of the horse, and considering the long start the thief had, even if he were certain of his track, he thought it best to wait and decide his plan according to circumstances that might transpire. The man whom James lived with told him that the young man had left all his clothes in his room, and it seemed not unlikely that James would steal back some night to recover them. 'If he does,' said Mr. Gilder, 'whether it is candle-light, at midnight, or in the morning, I want you to call me, and I will follow him.'

CHAPTER SECOND.

One spring morning in the early part of March, long before daylight, the Jeweler heard a loud rap at his door. On opening the window he found the owner of the horse below, with the news that James had been at his house during the night and gone off, taking his clothes with him. Little delay made the Jeweler in dressing himself and harnessing his horse.

The roads were just bare and the mud a good foot deep. The footsteps of the flying man were plainly to be seen, but they were all on the side of the road, where the grass and ice made firm footing, while the horse must go in the middle of the way. Through the whole day Mr. Gilder followed the tracks without catching a glimpse of his man.— With difficulty did his horse plod twelve miles during the hours of daylight. At last, just at night-fall, he came to a man building fence by the side of the road. Stopping his horse he addressed him:—

'Have you seen a foot-traveler along this way, Sir?'

'Yes, Sir; there is one in the house now, eating a bowl of bread and milk,' was the answer.

The Jeweler dismounted and stepped to the door, and opening it—there was no porch to the house—his eye fell on James Atwood. At the moment of recognition James sprang from his chair, and, seizing a stick that lay by his side, made for the door. The Jeweler sprang at him as he approached, warded off the blow that James aimed at him, and, seizing him by the collar, with the exertion of all his strength, brought him to the floor upon his back. Then, jumping upon his breast and planting his knees upon his chest, with both hands he grasped his throat and throttled him. Not a word passed between them, but they lay glaring into each other's eyes.

At the noise of the scuffle, the old woman of the house came running in, with both her hands clasped tight before her, and her eyes bigger than nature ever made them.

'What on airth is the matter? What on airth is the matter?' exclaimed she.

'What are you doing there, Sir?' growled the old man from the other door.

'Don't be alarmed, my good people,' answered the Jeweler; 'it is only a horse-thief I have caught.'

'Oh! a horse-thief!' said the old woman, letting down her hands, and letting in her eyes with a sigh. 'Well, I'm glad you got him, then.'

'If it's a horse-thief,' said the old man, 'I won't have anything to do with him.'

Means were taken to secure the captive for the night. In the morning the Jeweler was at a loss how to carry the criminal safely home. After a little meditation he cut the lacing that tightened the waist-band of the young man's trousers above his hips, and in those days supplied the place of suspenders. Thus letting down the pantaloons below his feet, he seated him on his horse, sure that if James got off the horse and tried to run he would find himself like a fly in molasses or like 'pass in boots.' No trouble occurred on the journey. James resigned himself with all the passiveness of sin in despair.

At the next session of the Criminal Court James Atwood was found guilty on two indictments—for horse-stealing and burglary.— In those days the penal code of New England generally retained that harshness and inequality of punishment which it had derived from England, and which till very lately was a part of the judicial system of the latter country. James Atwood, as a horse-thief, might be branded in the forehead or sold to

service as a marine. There was no chance for the prosecutors to avail themselves of the latter alternative, and when they thought of the youth of the accused, and looked at his manly features, they could not bring themselves to scorch in his brow the stigma of crime, which like a cancerous spot must always be eating in and consuming the high ambitions and strong hopes of vigorous manhood, and mar to all observers the pleasing handiwork of nature. The two accusers agreed to release the young man on condition that he would give them each a bond to pay them sums of money as he was able, until a certain amount was completed. To this the condemned assented, eager at any risk to escape the hard fates of servitude or branding, which the law threatened him with; and only too joyful to evade the necessity of seeking the better of two such hopeless prospects, on terms so easy and so flattering to his self-pride.

Alas! for James Atwood the day that he bound himself to pay in silver the losses and penalty of his sin! He thought his whole crime lay between man and man; and when mutual agreements had quieted the difference between him and his prosecutors, then all things were reinstated. He forgot the offended majesty of Nature, who offers but one way of pacification. The Nemesis, in her inexorable justice, was to be satisfied by complete self-abasement alone. Well for him if he had utterly subjected himself in self-contempt and lowliness, till he felt a warm glow of saddened contentment growing up in his heart. Nature's pledge that she was satisfied, and not to think that by the sacrifice of the mere good of this world he could hold to the dignity of a manhood he had dishonored; that he could save a wounded sovereignty with dollars, and ward off the iron blow of the stern Guardian of the moral laws by the bending straw of human adjustments. Hear the rest of his history, and see how the Nemesis repaid on him at last the penalty of his sin a double portion in her aggrieved vengeance.

CHAPTER THIRD.

Soon after agreeing to the terms of his release James went to Boston and began his business there. His affairs soon prospered, and his old hopes and imaginings stole back into him. The sin of an impulsive and thoughtless youth buried in the dust, he would begin thereon to build the structure of his life in strength and beauty. He did not think the dead might turn in its grave with superhuman strength and shake to ruins the fair building over it.

For two or three years things went on quietly, and with his increasing ability to appear in neat habit and in respectable relations in society grew his hopefulness and self-assurance. At his employment he stood among his fellow-workmen as an equal, and his faithfulness and zeal made them look upon him with more than mere indifferent tolerance. He came by degrees to assume the superiority that lay implied in all their demeanor toward him: In the world outside, when each threaded among the mass toward his own peculiar ends, he went with the others, a single self among the thousands, treated with the forbearance and careless courtesy that the unknown, self-wrapped passers yield to a similar alienate mystery that stalks in living body by them. Thus grew up a dignity of thought and feeling of self-sufficient power within him which belongs to healthful manhood, and is the stimulating principle of forcible action, the foundation that supports all hope and contentedness.

One day as he was passing through the streets, a form went by unnoticed like many others, and James was going on his way in his own thought, when a voice sounded in his ears that set his knees trembling under him, and drew a curtain like night across his eyes. It seemed to him like a voice calling away out of his past years, full of boding to him:—

'James Atwood! James Atwood! where are you going so fast?'

He needed but to turn to see what he felt, the presence of the Jeweler beside him.

'Well, my boy, you are finely dressed up, ain't you? Where did you get this smooth gandy coat, this dainty umbrella, and the watch that I suppose hanging from the end of this chain? Haven't forgot some jewelry of mine you made acquaintance with once, have you? Come, I'll take these things, and any money, too, if you have the article. I don't know but, according to agreement, the clothes ought to be thrown in also.'

According to agreement he had no right to claim a single thing in this way. But James was amazed and bewildered, and felt himself in the Jeweler's power. He gave him his pocket-book and umbrella, but he held the watch close in his hand.

'Come, come, give us the watch. A horse-thief has no business to carry a watch. How-

est men can hardly do that.'

'It is my brother's, Sir, and I cannot give it away.'

'Give it away! ha! ha! You owe it to me, man. Let me have it, I say. If you want it again, why just leave twenty dollars at my hotel, and I will leave the watch for you.'

Thus they separated. What black, crushing incubus lay on James Atwood's heart none but the doomed can tell. The young dawning brightness that was just cheerfully lighting up his inner being was swallowed up in a black night. Two heavy hands seemed pressing in the walls of his brain, and he cared not if they fell inward.

The next day the Jeweler found twenty dollars at the office of the hotel left in lieu of the watch.

The Jeweler returned home congratulating himself with his shrewdness and his success. He had made a journey to Boston and back and made money by it. The purse he had expected to empty had grown fuller, a thing that did not happen often short of fairy land.

CHAPTER FOURTH.

Time went on. Days and even years as they came and went found the Jeweler seated before his shop window, prying with goggled eye into the yellow machinery of a watch, and with shining steel tool in his hand picking among its dainty bands and wheels, and so they left him. The dust was gathering on his upper shelves on old yellow-looking silver castaways; in white begrimed cases brass wheels were staring through glass faces down upon the customers, and half-legged or headless images standing in noble defiance through the minute fall of dust that was constantly showering upon them. The Jeweler himself was growing more crooked, and the events of his youth seemed to him like pictures through a mist. Old familiar faces would come at stated hours in the day and, resting on the door to his sanctum at the end of the counter, tell him gossip just as they had done for years, and the Jeweler would answer them with one eye shut and the other squinting through a microscope.

One day a man came in with an umbrella in his hand and a great coat on, though 'twas neither cold nor raining. He looked over the railing into the Jeweler's coop, and seeing the Jeweler there over a watch,

'Halloa! neighbor Gilder,' he bawled, 'how are you to-day?'

'Halloa! halloa! neighbor Smith, when did you come from down East?'

And so they went on asking and re-asking, till the whole list of acquaintance on each side and the remarkable events in each town were run through.

'One thing, though, I forgot to tell you,' said Mr. Smith, laughing, after they were through with all there was to tell, and he could think of nothing more, 'our neighbor had an increase the night before I came away; Deacon Stone's daughter presented her husband with a little music-box in a flannel wrapper.'

'Deacon Stone's daughter? Whom did she marry?' said Mr. Gilder.

'Oh! I forgot. You had a little interest there in your younger days, didn't you?—Why, she married a young fellow that came down our way. Fine fellow he was, too.—Deacon Stone took a liking to him and set him up in business. Mary didn't think that

was reward enough for his merits and good looks, and so she gave him herself. His name is Atwood—James Atwood.'

'James Atwood!' said the Jeweler, as if musing; 'James Atwood! When do you go back again, Mr. Smith? Perhaps I'll go with you.'

'In two or three days. What's started you so quick?'

'Oh! nothing. It seems to me as if I should like to see the old place.'

Would that he had wanted to see nothing more!

The first thing the Jeweler did on arriving 'down east' was to ask the tavern-keeper where James Atwood lived. It was quite late in the evening, and the landlord told him that the very man had just gone out of the bar-room, and if Mr. Gilder would wait till morning he would be sure to find him at the house. Mr. Gilder concluded to wait, soon after went to rest for the night.

In the morning, as he was standing on the platform in front of the tavern, the landlord came out, and pointing him to a man that stood a little distance off, told him that was Mr. Atwood. The man was standing with his back to Mr. Gilder, and the latter was close upon him before he spoke, and bade him 'Good-morning.' The man turned and politely answered the greeting, but with a look of wonder and inquiry.

'Don't you know me, James? I am Mr. Gilder. You remember me at P—'

the man's face, and he fell to the ground as if a heavy blow struck him. Mr. Gilder was alarmed.

'Don't be afraid, James, I won't hurt you. Be a man and get up.'

'For God's sake, Mr. Gilder, what do you come hunting me up for? If you have any mercy for me, any sympathy with a husband and father, keep this miserable secret quiet. I will give you all you can ask; my store with its goods is free to you; all that you can take without exposing me is yours if you will only go off and leave me alone.'

Mr. Gilder was avaricious, but, somehow or other, he didn't feel like taking all James offered him. If James would make him up about a hundred dollars in money and goods he would be satisfied.

In a day or two all was arranged, and Mr. Gilder departed for home. The stage he rode in was heavy with his luggage. He could hear parcels jumping on the stage-top, feel it swaying the stage from behind, and his finger ends in his pockets could feel the swelling in his pocket-book. But this feeling and hearing made him sort of uneasy; he had rather beat with his fingers on the elbow-rest, and look out of the window at the landscape. He didn't see but he had a right to the property; there was the agreement between him and James Atwood in his breast-pocket, where was written in as plain terms as a lawyer could write it, the promise of James Atwood to pay him certain sums of money, with James Atwood's own name underneath in his own hand-writing. And had he not let it run on for a long time without being so strict as the law allowed him to be? And then, when he applied to James Atwood hadn't he let him pay in goods what the law said was to be wholly paid in money, and that, too, without taking all the law allowed him? He didn't know why he should feel so uneasy, when there was so little to blame himself about. For all his reasoning the thought, and more still, the feeling of his baggage made him fidgety. He was experiencing, what too many experience without profit, that 'the law' and the conscience are not always the same; that a principle of generosity and broad-heartedness enters into the justice of the natural constitution; that the gross material system of human judicature could never hold in its artificial syntheses; that the human soul with its laws was framed long before man legislated, and its object of obedience was rather its own moral sense; and that, transfer its fealty as much as you can to the worded principles of legal right and honesty, the divine consciousness of the soul makes a sigh in the heart when the standard of obedience falls short of its first implanted ideal of duty. Alas! that Mr. Gilder was not the only man that has felt this incomplete satisfaction of duty; and alas! that he was not the only man that has been blind to the cause of it. Alas! that the pack, ages on top that at times went to pounding the roof like fifty frantic base-drummers, were beating to him a far-off and indistinct tune!

When Mr. Gilder arrived at home and had gotten all the thing nicely set in a row in his store-room, and had hung up a smooth Sunday suit of clothes in his chamber closet, he began to feel a little pleasanter. Eaten the sight of them would diffuse a soft, warm glow round his—stomach that would make his palms itch to be rubbed together.

CHAPTER FIFTH.

Some years after, Mr. Gilder was, to be found still working back of his front shop-window. His hair was turning white now, and his tongue getting all the garrulity of old age. He liked to talk of things he had seen or heard; and would tell old stories by the hour to the friends that dropped into the shop, working away all the time at his watches and jewelry, and they leaning on the counter or railing, quietly drinking in his words, or listlessly dreaming with him, but of something else.

One day an acquaintance came in and sat down by the side of him to pass away a leisurely hour or so, and soon, from interchange of questions and remarks, the old man was led into a whole maze of past events, which came forth for the edification of the neighbor. His mind was away in the midst of the scenes of his tales; and forgetting all present scruples or determinations, he came upon the events of his past life with James Atwood; and the more interest the hearer showed at the narrative, the more minutely did the old man picture the details. Mr. Gilder never once thought, nor did anything but the reminiscences of the events dwell in his mind for after-thoughts; so he never recalled that the man who was his listener was the son of the neighbor from whom James Atwood stole the horse, and who received a bond equally with him. This son had found among his father's papers such a—, but did not then—, and in. He—, to the Jew-