

A STRANGE EXPERIENCE.

As Related by the One Who Passed Through It.

CHAPTER I.

My name is not Norval, nor have I ever in away been associated with the Grampian hills—but my name is Oscar Hockersmith. You will at once perceive that there is nothing in such a name, but if any man has ever passed through an experience similar to the one which I am going to relate, he would do me a great kindness by at once communicating with me.

One day I arrived at Cregmore, a little old town on the upper Arkansas river. After taking breakfast at a hotel, the proprietor of the house came to me and said as I had no baggage, I would be compelled to pay in advance.

"Baggage, indeed!" I exclaimed. "Have my trunk sent up, if you please."

"You brought no baggage, sir." "Then it has not arrived. It will soon be here, for I am sure it arrived, having seen it delivered to a wagoner at the depot. I have no money with me. I hope that you appreciate my position, sir."

He doubtfully shook his head and walked away. This annoyed me not a little, and I wondered if the fellow who had my trunk had run away with it. I had no check, and I knew that I might have trouble in recovering my property. Just as I turned to go out, an old gentleman whom I suddenly encountered threw up his hands and exclaimed:

"My God!" "What is the matter?"

"Oh, sir, if I did not know that my son Norval was dead, I would think in you he had returned. He was killed in the army."

He regarded me closely, and in a quieter tone continued:

"I have never before seen such a resemblance. Same eyes, nose, mouth—everything. Will you please do an old man a favor?"

I replied that I would favor him in any possible way.

"Then come with me to my house. I want my wife to see you."

I told him of the perplexing situation in which I was placed.

"Here, Mr. Bunoh!" he exclaimed calling the proprietor. "Look at this man. Doesn't he look exactly like my son Norval?"

"Exactly, only he is much older."

"Yes, but you must remember that it is more than twenty years since Norval went into the army. 'Poor boy, he was killed at Antietam. I want you to go home with me, I will stand good for your bill.'"

"I feel under many obligations to you, old gentleman, for I am really in an embarrassing position. I fear that fellow has stolen my trunk, but if you will go with me to the town officer, I will afterwards go with you."

He agreed and we called upon the Town Marshal, who, after listening to my statement, looked at me suspiciously and said:

"You didn't come in on the train."

"But, sir, I know that I did. I delivered my trunk to a tall negro who walked with a limp, and who, if I remember correctly, had an impediment in his speech. The trunk—and I would know it among a thousand—was a large one, covered with black leather."

"Look here," said the officer, "you came up on a boat, for I saw you when you got off; besides, you could not have come by rail, for as there are several wash-outs above and below here, there has not been a train in for two days."

This statement was insulting, yet I struggled to conceal my resentment. Officials, in small towns, are generally narrow-minded, dogmatic men, and I cared not to dispute him farther than to reaffirm that I came in on the morning train. Then, turning to the old gentleman whose name I had learned was Metford, I announced my readiness to accompany him. He had been so absorbed in the contemplation of the resemblance between his son and myself, that he had paid but little attention to the disparity of statements

concerning the manner of my arrival.

Mr. Metford lived in an attractive old place, not far from the river. When we entered the gate, a woman came out on the gallery and in a moment, after seeing me, clasped her hands and leaned against a post.

As we approached, she uttered a shriek and sprang toward me. The old gentleman, gently taking hold of her, said:

"Come, Mary, don't give way to your feelings. This is—you have not told me your name, sir. Ah, yes," when I had told him, "this is Mr. Oscar Hockersmith. I wanted you to see him on account of the perfect likeness he bears to Norval. Come in, sir," he continued, leading the way. We entered a comfortably furnished room. The old lady could not keep her eyes off me.

"Poor Norval," she repeated over and over again. "Poor child. Oh, sir, if I did not know that he was killed—oh, sir, are you indeed he?"

"Be quiet, Mary," said the old gentleman. "Don't become excited. Let us make it pleasant here for Mr. Hockersmith, and perhaps he will remain several days with us. Tell us something of yourself, Mr. Hockersmith?"

"I was born in Richmond, Va.," I replied, "and my parents died when I was quite young. I went into the army and was wounded by a piece of shell at Shiloh. After the war I went home, but found that the uncle with whom I had lived was reduced almost to a penniless condition. He did not long survive, and there being nothing in Richmond to particularly bind me to the place, I wandered away and have never returned. I have come to this state to look after the land interest of a corporation, and as soon as my business is completed, I shall go back to St. Louis."

"Until then," said Mrs. Metford, "you must remain at our house. Although I know you are not our son yet to see you here revives and illustrates a memory that is so dear—here the poor woman completely broke down."

"Mary?" said the old gentleman, approaching her and stroking her hair. "don't give way to your feelings. I would not have urged him to come but I knew that if I did not, you, in the event of hearing of this wonderful likeness, would never forgive me. Don't give away, now."

She became calm, but every time she looked at me, I could see her lip quiver. "What a pity that I am not your son," I mused. "Any man, aside from natural affection, would feel proud of such a mother." I thought of the dead son and of what a splendid home his death had made cheerless, and I almost wished I had told the old couple that I was really their Norval, whose death was erroneously announced.

After dinner, to which I was induced to remain, we were sitting in the parlor when a loud knock on the front door, caused a momentary flutter of excitement Mr. Metford, who answered the summons, soon returned accompanied by the Town Marshal. Approaching me, and placing his anguished hand on my shoulder, he said:

"I want you." "What me?" I asked in surprise. "Yes, I want you."

"What right have you to want me, as you term it?"

He took out a paper and handed it to me. It was a warrant, arresting me on a charge of wilfully and maliciously deceiving the people of Cregmore. It was useless to resist, and although the old gentleman and his wife protested against such an indignity being imposed on a guest of their house, yet by the feelingless ruffian I was led away and lodged in jail.

CHAPTER II.

The next day I was arraigned before a justice of the peace, who requested me to make a brief statement of how I came to town. I did so, telling him to the best of my recollection. I told him about losing my trunk, and I ventured to take to task a village that would stubbornly shut its eyes and allow the perpetration of such outrages. The Town Marshal swore that I did not come by rail, that no train had come in

since two days before; that I had come on a steamboat, the "Farmer Boy"—the Captain of which steamer was present—and that I had no trunk. The Captain a very gentlemanly looking fellow, arose and astonished me with the following statement:

"Just before leaving Little Rock, day before yesterday, this man, who calls himself Hockersmith, came to me and said that he would like to go up the river as far as Cregmore; that he was employed by a St. Louis land corporation, and that as his passage had somehow failed to arrive, he was without money. Of course I could not allow this story to affect me into the generosity of presenting the man a ticket, nor to tell him that he might take his own time in paying me; but I did tell him that he would be compelled to pay his passage in advance. He declared that he had no money, but that if I would let him come up as a passenger, he would, upon reaching this place, get the money from a friend and pay me. It's only a small amount and I should not have mentioned it but for the fact that the Marshal came down and asked me about the strange fellow."

"What have you to say concerning these statements?" asked the Justice. "Nothing, only that they are not true," I replied. "As I tell you, I came here by rail, arriving here yesterday morning."

"But no train arrived yesterday morning."

Then I became indignant. "All right, have it your way," said I. "One man can not stand up against so many. If I deserve punishment, fine me and I will go on the rock pile or the convict farm and work it out."

"I don't exactly see how you have violated the law," replied the magistrate, looking at me with almost an expression of pity. "You have not obtained money under false pretenses."

"So far as his passage is concerned," remarked the steamboat man, "I am not anxious. I would not have him punished for that."

The town marshal shifted and twisted himself in his chair. I could see that he did not like the change that had come over the court.

"Your honor," said he, "this man also made false statements to Mr. Bunch, proprietor of the hotel. He obtained board under false pretenses."

I understood him. He would urge charges against me merely to defend his own position.

"Judge," said a voice that I knew. Looking around I saw Mr. Metford. Every one waited for him to speak. "I met Mr. Hockersmith at the hotel yesterday morning. On account of the wonderful resemblance which he bears to my son Norval—"

"Yes," replied the judge. "Poor Norval, I saw him buried."

"On account of that resemblance," continued Mr. Metford. "I invited Mr. Hockersmith to accompany me home. He explained his embarrassment, and I told Mr. Bunch that I would stand good for the bill. So, that charge is wiped out."

"That's all very well, gentlemen," exclaimed the town marshal, "but we can't allow fellows to come in this way. I believe that a man should be punished for lying just the same as he ought to be for stealing. That's my ticket."

"I am glad to hear you speak so courageously," rejoined Mr. Metford. "You borrowed ten dollars of me about two months ago, vowing that you would return the money within a week. Yet, notwithstanding the fact that you have had money to bet at poker, you have failed to keep your promise. Yes, it is a very good idea to punish men for lying; and now, since you have reminded me of your untruthfulness, I think it would be well to act upon your conception of justice. Your honor, make me out a warrant of arrest, please."

For a time the marshal knew not what to say. His face grew red. "You all know me," he replied. "I am not a stranger. I didn't come here and try to beat any of you. I'll pay the ten dollars; don't fret about that. I don't think it is right to hop on a man that's trying to protect the

community against fraud. I've got nothing against this fellow and am willing to see him turned loose."

"I am glad to hear you say so," rejoined Mr. Metford. "You needn't make out the warrant, Judge. Well, Mr. Hockersmith, turning to me, 'as there is nothing against you here, you will please accompany me home.'"

When we again went to the house Mrs. Metford's lip trembled. They would not hear of my leaving them, so I remained all night. The next morning I awoke with a burning fever. Then I went into a state of delirium and for several weeks knew nothing. When I regained consciousness, my mind was so confused that I could not think. I knew that I talked incoherently, therefore I said but little.

One day while I was sitting in my room, a man was shown up by one of the servants. Mr. and Mrs. Metford were away from home, having gone over to a neighbor's house.

"Don't you know me?" said the man. "I don't think I ever saw you before," I replied.

He looked at me and smiled sadly.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "I mean nothing offensive. You know Abe Catham?"

"Never heard of him."

"I am sorry, for I had hoped that you would recognize me."

"How can I recognize you, sir, when this is the first time we have ever met?"

He shook his head and muttered something which sounded to me like "poor fellow." Then he startled me by saying:

"I have been your keeper for years."

"Yes; I am connected with the Missouri Insane Asylum."

"I don't dispute your position as keeper, but I can assure you that I have never seen the institution. I am a St. Louis man."

"Let me tell you something which has just come to light. You were wounded at the battle of Antietam."

"Shiloh."

"At Antietam. You and a young Virginian, who to some extent resembled you—a man named Hockersmith fell close to each other. In the report of the killed and wounded you were put down on the dead list and this man Hockersmith was reported to be wounded. You had been struck by a piece of shell and was, upon recovery of the wound, found to be hopelessly insane. You went to Richmond, but your supposed relatives spurned you, so I have heard; and, after wandering around, you went to Missouri and was placed in an insane asylum, where you remained until a few weeks ago when you escaped. Your name, I have learned, is Norval Metford, and I have come to tell your parents, after satisfying myself that it is you—"

The room began to turn round. The man's voice sounded away off at a great distance. He seemed to be shouting, but I could not catch his words. Then some one, dressed in red tight breeches, came in and danced on the back of a chair. A blacksmith led in a horse and began shoeing him. His bellows roared and his anvil rang so loud that I had to put my fingers in my ears. His fire began to gradually darken and, with a sudden puff, it went out, leaving me in a blackness of atmosphere. I groped around, but could find no opening in the wall. I cried aloud for a lamp and I cursed the blacksmith for allowing his fire to go out with such a cruel puff. Crawling around on my hands and knees, I found a match. I kissed it. I pressed it to my heart. "Thank God!" I cried. "Thank God that once more there shall be light in the world!" Tears streamed from my eyes. I tried to light the match. The tears had dampened it, and with the feeblest little glow, it died away, leaving me in despair. I heard a voice, low and sweet.

"Who are you?" I asked. "A tear fell on my forehead, and clasping my hands, I turned my face upward. 'Whose tears are those falling upon me?' I cried. The

voice, soft and sweet, sang, but the tears continued to fall. "Oh, can you not give me a lamp?" I cried in agony. Something touched me. It was a lamp, cold and dark, but I hugged it close to me and took care lest my tears should fall upon it. I placed it on the floor, and with my hands clasped around it, I lay down and prayed. A feeble little gleam flickered between my fingers. The lamp grew warm. I removed my hands. The little blaze flickered, and then, yes, oh, glorious Heaven, then—there came a grand burst of light, a flood of magnificent illumination. I lay on a bed. The sun shone into the room. A face—my mother's face—was bowed over me. "Thank God!" she exclaimed and encircled my neck with her loving arms. My father was there, too, looking upon me.

"There, dear," said my mother, "keep very quiet. For weeks you have hovered between life and death."

I closed my eyes and warm recollections poured over me. I could remember it all; how I left that dear home and went into the army.

I am sitting in my room looking out on the grassy slope where I played so many years ago. There is the old tree where I used to swing in the cool shade. I hear my mother singing in the sitting room. They say my father laughs again, as he did when I was a boy. Those old people are in a Heaven of happiness. The physician says that a few days from now I can resume the business of life. Can any one doubt the existence of a God? Who but a God could have planned such joy? My mother enters and presses her lips upon my brow.

"You haven't the slightest symptoms of fever now, Norval dear," she says.

Angelic woman! She can not keep her arms from around my neck when she comes near me. Now she goes singing through the hallway. There stands my father at the gate. Something has amused him, for he laughs as he did when I was a boy. Yes, my name is Norval.—Arkansaw Traveler.

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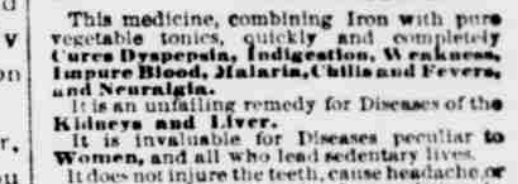
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