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**WILD FRANK'S RETURN**

As the sun, one August day some fifty years ago, had just pass'd the meridian of a country town in the eastern section of Long Island, a single traveler came up to the quaint low-roof'd village tavern, open'd its half-door, and enter'd the common room. Dust cover'd the clothes of the wayfarer, and his brow was moist with sweat. He trod in a lagging, weary way; though his form and features told of an age not more than nineteen or twenty years. Over one shoulder was slung a sailor's jacket, and in his hand he carried a little bundle. Sitting down on a rude bench, he told a female who made her appearance behind the bar, that he would have a glass of brandy and sugar. He took off the liquor at a draught: after which he lit and began to smoke a cigar, with which he supplied himself from his pocket—stretching out one leg, and leaning his elbow down on the bench, in the attitude of a man who takes an indolent lounge.

“Do you know one Richard Hall that lives somewhere here among you?” said he.

“Mr. Hall's is down the lane that turns off by that big locust tree,” answer'd the woman, pointing to the direction through the open door; “it's about half a mile from here to his house.”

The youth, for a minute or two, puff'd the smoke from his mouth very leisurely in silence. His manner had an air of vacant self-sufficiency, rather strange in one of so few years.

“I wish to see Mr. Hall,” he said at length—“Here's a silver sixpence, for any one who will carry a message to him.”

“The folks are all away. It's but a short walk, and your limbs are young,” replied the female, who was not altogether pleased with the easy way of making himself at home, which

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mark'd her shabby-looking customer. That individual, however, seem'd to give small attention to the hint, but lean'd and puff'd his cigar-smoke as leisurely as before.

"Unless," continued the woman, catching a second glance at the sixpence; "unless old Joe is at the stable, as he's very likely to be. I'll go and find out for you." And she push'd open a door at her back, stepp'd through an adjoining room into a yard, whence her voice was the next moment heard calling the person she had mention'd, in accents by no means remarkable for their melody or softness.

Her search was successful. She soon return'd with him who was to act as messenger—a little, wither'd, ragged old man—a hanger-on there, whose unshaven face told plainly enough the story of his intemperate habits—those deeply seated habits, now too late to be uprooted, that would ere long lay him in a drunkard's grave. The youth inform'd him what the required service was, and promised him the reward as soon as he should return.

"Tell Richard Hall that I am going to his father's house this afternoon. If he asks who it is that wishes him here, say the person sent no name," continued the stranger, sitting up from his indolent posture, as the feet of old Joe were about leaving the door-stone, and his blear'd eyes turned to catch the last sentence of the mandate.

"And yet, perhaps you may as well," added he, communing a moment with himself: "you may tell him his brother Frank, Wild Frank, it is, who wishes him to come."

The old man departed on his errand, and he who call'd himself Wild Frank, toss'd his nearly smoked cigar out of the window, and folded his arms in thought.

No better place than this, probably, will occur to give a brief account of some former events in the life of the young stranger, resting and waiting at the village inn. Fifteen miles east of that inn lived a farmer named Hall, a man of good repute, well-off in the world, and head of a large family. He was fond of gain—required all his boys to labor in proportion to their age; and his right hand man, if he might not be called favorite, was his eldest son Richard. This eldest son, an industrious, sober-faced young fellow, was invested by his father with the powers of second in command; and as strict and

swift obedience was a prime tenet in the farmer's domestic government, the children all tacitly submitted to their brother's sway—all but one, and that was Frank. The farmer's wife was a quiet woman, in rather tender health; and though for all her offspring she had a mother's love, Frank's kiss ever seem'd sweetest to her lips. She favor'd him more than the rest—perhaps, as in a hundred similar instances, for his being so often at fault, and so often blamed. In truth, however, he seldom receiv'd more blame than he deserv'd, for he was a capricious, high-temper'd lad, and up to all kinds of mischief. From these traits he was known in the neighborhood by the name of Wild Frank.

Among the farmer's stock there was a fine young blood mare—a beautiful creature, large and graceful, with eyes like dark-hued jewels, and her color that of the deep night. It being the custom of the farmer to let his boys have something about the farm that they could call their own, and take care of as such, Black Nell, as the mare was called, had somehow or other fallen to Frank's share. He was very proud of her, and thought as much of her comfort as his own. The elder brother, however, saw fit to claim for himself, and several times to exercise, a privilege of managing and using Black Nell, notwithstanding what Frank consider'd his prerogative. On one of these occasions a hot dispute arose, and after much angry blood, it was refer'd to the farmer for settlement. He decided in favor of Richard, and added a harsh lecture to his other son. The farmer was really unjust; and Wild Frank's face paled with rage and mortification. That furious temper which he had never been taught to curb, now swell'd like an overflowing torrent. With difficulty restraining the exhibition of his passions, as soon as he got by himself he swore that not another sun should roll by and find him under that roof. Late at night he silently arose, and turning his back on what he thought an inhospitable home, in mood in which the child should never leave the parental roof, bent his steps toward the city.

It may well be imagined that alarm and grief pervaded the whole of the family, on discovering Frank's departure. And as week after week melted away and brought no tidings of him, his poor mother's heart grew wearier and wearier. She

spoke not much, but was evidently sick in spirit. Nearly two years had elaps'd when about a week before the incidents at the commencement of this story, the farmer's family were joyfully surprised by receiving a letter from the long absent son. He had been to sea, and was then in New York, at which port his vessel had just arrived. He wrote in a gay strain; appear'd to have lost the angry feeling which had caused his flight from home; and said he heard in the city that Richard had married, and settled several miles distant, where he wished him all good luck and happiness. Wild Frank wound up his letter by promising, as soon as he could get through the imperative business of his ship, to pay a visit to his parents and native place. On Tuesday of the succeeding week, he said he would be with them.

Within half an hour after the departure of old Joe, the form of that ancient personage was seen slowly wheeling round the locust-tree at the end of the lane, accompanied by a stout young man in primitive homespun apparel. The meeting between Wild Frank and his brother Richard, though hardly of that kind which generally takes place between persons so closely related, could not exactly be call'd distant or cool either. Richard press'd his brother to go with him to the farm house, and refresh and repose himself for some hours at least, but Frank declined.

"They will all expect me home this afternoon," he said, "I wrote to them I would be there to-day."

"But you must be very tired, Frank," rejoin'd the other; "won't you let some of us harness up and carry you? Or if you like—" he stopp'd a moment, and a trifling suffusion spread over his face; "if you like, I'll put the saddle on Black Nell—she's here at my place now, and you can ride home like a lord."

Frank's face color'd a little, too. He paused for a moment in thought—he was really foot-sore, and exhausted with his journey that hot day—so he accepted his brother's offer.

"You know the speed of Nell, as well as I," said Richard; "I'll warrant when I bring her here you'll say she's in good order as ever." So telling him to amuse himself for a few minutes as well as he could, Richard left the tavern.

Could it be that Black Nell knew her early master? She

neigh'd and rubb'd her nose on his shoulder; and as he put his foot in the stirrup and rose on her back, it was evident that they were both highly pleased with their meeting. Bidding his brother farewell, and not forgetting old Joe, the young man set forth on his journey to his father's house. As he left the village behind, and came upon the long monotonous road before him, he thought on the circumstances of his leaving home—and he thought, too, on his course of life, how it was being frittered away and lost. Very gentle influences, doubtless, came over Wild Frank's mind then, and he yearn'd to show his parents that he was sorry for the trouble he had cost them. He blamed himself for his former follies, and even felt remorse that he had not acted more kindly to Richard, and gone to his house. Oh, it had been a sad mistake of the farmer that he did not teach his children to love one another. It was a foolish thing that he prided himself on governing his little flock well, when sweet affection, gentle forbearance, and brotherly faith, were almost unknown among them.

The day was now advanced, though the heat pour'd down with a strength little less oppressive than at noon. Frank had accomplish'd the greater part of his journey; he was within two miles of his home. The road here led over a high, tiresome hill, and he determined to stop on the top of it and rest himself, as well as give the animal he rode a few minutes' breath. How well he knew the place! And that mighty oak, standing just outside the fence on the very summit of the hill, often had he reposed under its shade. It would be pleasant for a few minutes to stretch his limbs there again as of old, he thought to himself; and he dismounted from the saddle and led Black Nell under the tree. Mindful of the comfort of his favorite, he took from his little bundle, which he had strapped behind him on the mare's back, a piece of strong cord, four or five yards in length, which he tied to the bridle, and wound and tied the other end, for security, over his own wrist; then throwing himself at full length upon the ground, Black Nell was at liberty to graze around him, without danger of straying away.

It was a calm scene, and a pleasant. There was no rude sound—hardly even a chirping insect—to break the sleepy

silence of the place. The atmosphere had a dim, hazy cast, and was impregnated with overpowering heat. The young man lay there minute after minute, as time glided away unnoticed; for he was very tired, and his repose was sweet to him. Occasionally he raised himself and cast a listless look at the distant landscape, veil'd as it was by the slight mist. At length his repose was without such interruptions. His eyes closed, and though at first they open'd languidly again at intervals, after a while they shut altogether. Could it be that he slept? It was so indeed. Yielding to the drowsy influences about him, and to his prolong'd weariness of travel, he had fallen into a deep, sound slumber. Thus he lay; and Black Nell, the original cause of his departure from his home—by a singular chance, the companion of his return—quietly cropp'd the grass at his side.

An hour nearly pass'd away, and yet the young man slept on. The light and heat were not glaring now; a change had come over earth and heaven. There were signs of one of those thunderstorms that in our climate spring up and pass over so quickly and so terribly. Masses of vapor loom'd up in the horizon, and a dark shadow settled on the woods and fields. The leaves of the great oak rustled together over the youth's head. Clouds flitted swiftly in the sky, like bodies of armed men coming up to battle at the call of their leader's trumpet. A thick rain-drop fell now and then, while occasionally hoarse mutterings of thunder sounded in the distance; yet the slumberer was not arous'd. It was strange that Wild Frank did not awake. Perhaps his ocean life had taught him to rest undisturbed amid the jarring of elements. Though the storm was now coming on its fury, he slept like a babe in its cradle.

Black Nell had ceased grazing, and stood by her sleeping master with ears erect, and her long mane and tail waving in the wind. It seem'd quite dark, so heavy were the clouds. The blast blew sweepingly, the lightning flash'd, and the rain fell in torrents. Crash after crash of thunder seem'd to shake the solid earth. And Black Nell, she stood now, an image of beautiful terror, with her fore feet thrust out, her neck arch'd, and her eyes glaring balls of fear. At length, after a dazzling and lurid glare, there came a peal—a deafening crash—as if the great axle was rent. God of Spirits! the startled mare sprang

off like a ship in an ocean-storm! Her eyes were blinded with light; she dashed madly down the hill, and plunge after plunge—far, far away—swift as an arrow—dragging the hapless body of the youth behind her!

In the low, old-fashion'd dwelling of the farmer there was a large family group. The men and boys had gather'd under shelter at the approach of the storm; and the subject of their talk was the return of the long absent son. The mother spoke of him, too, and her eyes brighten'd with pleasure as she spoke. She made all the little domestic preparations—cook'd his favorite dishes—and arranged for him his own bed, in its own old place. As the tempest mounted to its fury they discuss'd the probability of his getting soak'd by it; and the provident dame had already selected some dry garments for a change. But the rain was soon over, and nature smiled again in her invigorated beauty. The sun shone out as it was dipping in the west. Drops sparkled on the leaf-tips—coolness and clearness were in the air.

The clattering of a horse's hoofs came to the ears of those who were gather'd there. It was on the other side of the house that the wagon road led; and they open'd the door and rush'd in a tumult of glad anticipations, through the adjoining room to the porch. What a sight it was that met them there! Black Nell stood a few feet from the door, with her neck crouch'd down; she drew her breath long and deep, and vapor rose from every part of her reeking body. And with eyes starting from their sockets, and mouths agape with stupefying terror, they beheld on the ground near her a mangled, hideous mass—the rough semblance of a human form—all batter'd and cut, and bloody. Attach'd to it was the fatal cord, dabbled over with gore. And as the mother gazed—for she could not withdraw her eyes—and the appalling truth came upon her mind, she sank down without shriek or utterance, into a deep, deathly swoon.