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The Lunatic's Skate

I HAVE ONLY, in my life, known one *lunatic*—properly so called. In the days when I carried a satchel on the banks of the Shawsheen, (a river whose half-lovely, half-wild scenery is tied like a silver thread about my heart,) Larry Wynn and myself were the farthest boarders from school, in a solitary farmhouse on the edge of a lake of some miles square, called by the undignified title of Pomp's Pond. An old negro, who was believed by the boys to have come over with Christopher Columbus, was the only other human being within any thing like a neighbourhood of the lake, (it took its name from him,) and the only approaches to its waters, girded in as it was by an almost impenetrable forest, were the path through old Pomp's clearing, and that by our own door. Out of school, Larry and I were inseparable. He was a pale, sad-faced boy, and, in the first days of our intimacy, he had confided a secret to me which, from its uncommon nature, and the excessive caution with which he kept it from every one else, bound me to him with more than the common ties of schoolfellow attachment. We built wigwams together in the woods, had our tomahawks made of the same fashion, united our property in fox-traps, and played Indians with perfect contentment in each other's approbation.

I had found out, soon after my arrival at school, that Larry never slept on a moonlight night. With the first slender horn that dropped its silver and graceful shape behind the hills, his uneasiness commenced, and by the time its full and perfect orb poured a flood of radiance over vale and mountain, he was like one haunted by a pursuing demon. At early twilight he closed the shutters, stuffing every crevice that could admit a ray; and then, lighting as many candles as he could beg or steal from our thrifty landlord, he sat down with his book, in moody silence, or paced the room with an uneven step, and a solemn melancholy in his fine countenance, of which, with all my famil-

ilarity with him, I was almost afraid. Violent exercise seemed the only relief, and when the candles burnt low after midnight, and the stillness around the lone farm-house became too absolute to endure, he would throw up the window, and, leaping desperately out into the moonlight, rush up the hill into the depths of the wild forest, and walk on with supernatural excitement till the day dawned. Faint and pale he would then creep into his bed, and, begging me to make his very common and always credited excuse of illness, sleep soundly till I returned from school. I soon became used to his way, ceased to follow him, as I had once or twice endeavoured to do, into the forest, and never attempted to break in on the fixed and rapt silence which seemed to transform his lips to marble. And for all this Larry loved me.

Our preparatory studies were completed, and, to our mutual despair, we were destined to different universities. Larry's father was a disciple of the great Channing, and mine a Trinitarian of uncommon zeal; and the two institutions of Yale and Harvard were in the hands of most eminent men of either persuasion, and few are the minds that could resist a four years' ordeal in either. A student was as certain to come forth a Unitarian from one as a Calvinist from the other; and in the New-England States these two sects are bitterly hostile. So, to the glittering atmosphere of Channing and Everett went poor Larry, lonely and dispirited; and I was committed to the sincere zealots of Connecticut, some two hundred miles off, to learn Latin and Greek, if it pleased Heaven, but the mysteries of "election and free grace," whether or no.

Time crept, ambled, and galloped by turns, as we were *in* love or *out*, moping in term-time, or revelling in vacation, and gradually, I know not why, our correspondence had dropped, and the four years had come to their successive deaths, and we had never met. I grieved over it; for in those days I believed with a school-boy's fatuity,

"That two, or one, are almost what they seem;"

and I loved Larry Wynn, as I hope I may never love man or woman again—with a pain at my heart. I wrote one or two reproachful letters in my senior years, but his answers were

overstrained, and too full of protestations by half; and seeing that absence had done its usual work on him, I gave it up, and wrote an epitaph on a departed friendship. I do not know, by the way, why I am detaining you with all this, for it has nothing to do with my story; but let it pass as an evidence that it is a true one. The climax of things in real life has not the regular procession of incidents in a tragedy.

Some two or three years after we had taken "the irrevocable yoke" of life upon us, (not matrimony, but money-making,) a winter occurred of uncommonly fine sleighing—*sledging*, you call it in England. At such times the American world is all abroad, either for business or pleasure. The roads are passable at any rate of velocity of which a horse is capable; smooth as *montagnes Russes*, and hard as is good for hoofs; and a hundred miles is diminished to ten in facility of locomotion. The hunter brings down his venison to the cities, the western trader takes his family a hundred leagues to buy calicoes and tracts, and parties of all kinds scour the country, drinking mulled wine and "flip," and shaking the very nests out of the fir-trees with the ringing of their horses' bells. You would think death and sorrow were buried in the snow with the leaves of the last autumn.

I do not know why I undertook, at this time, a journey to the west; certainly not for scenery, for it was a world of waste, desolate, and dazzling whiteness, for a thousand unbroken miles. The trees were weighed down with snow, and the houses were thatched and half-buried in it, and the mountains and valleys were like the vast waves of an illimitable sea, congealed with its yesty foam in the wildest hour of a tempest. The eye lost its powers in gazing on it. The "spirit-bird" that spread his refreshing green wings before the pained eyes of Thalaba would have been an inestimable fellow-traveller. The worth of the eyesight lay in the purchase of a pair of green goggles.

In the course of a week or two, after skimming over the buried scenery of half a dozen states, each as large as Great Britain, (more or less,) I found myself in a small town on the border of one of our western lakes. It was some twenty years since the bears had found it thinly settled enough for their purposes, and now it contained perhaps twenty thousand souls. The oldest inhabitant, born in the town, was a youth in his

minority. With the usual precocity of new settlements, it had already most of the peculiarities of an old metropolis. The burnt stumps still stood about among the houses, but there was a fashionable circle, at the head of which were the lawyer's wife and the member of Congress's daughter; and people ate their peas with silver forks, and drank their tea with scandal, and forgave men's *many* sins and refused to forgive woman's *one*, very much as in towns whose history is written in black letter. I dare say there were not more than one or two offences against the moral and Levitical law, fashionable on this side the water, which had not been committed, with the authentic aggravations, in the town of —; I would mention the name if this were not a true story.

Larry Wynn (now Lawrence Wynn, Esq.) lived here. He had, as they say in the United States, "hung out a shingle" (*Londonicé*, put up a sign) as attorney at law, and to all the twenty thousand innocent inhabitants of the place, he was the oracle and the squire. He was besides colonel of militia, churchwarden, and canal commissioner; appointments which speak volumes for the prospects of "rising young men" in our flourishing republic.

Larry was glad to see me—very. I was more glad to see *him*. I have a soft heart, and forgive a wrong generally, if it touches neither my vanity nor my purse. I forgot his neglect, and called him "Larry." By the same token he did *not* call me "Phil." (There are very few that love me, patient reader; but those who do, thus abbreviate my pleasant name of Philip. I was called after the Indian Sachem of that name, whose blood runs in this tawny hand.) Larry looked upon me as a *man*. I looked on him, with all his dignities and changes, through the sweet vista of memory—as a *boy*. His mouth had acquired the pinched corners of caution and mistrust common to those who know their fellow men; but I never saw it unless when speculating as I am now. He was to me the pale-faced and melancholy friend of my boyhood; and I could have slept, as I used to do, with my arm around his neck, and feared to stir lest I should wake him. Had my last earthly hope lain in the palm of my hand, I could have given it to him, had he needed it, but to make him sleep; and yet he thought of me but as a stranger under his roof, and added, in his warmest moments, a "Mr." to my name! There is

but one circumstance in my life that has wounded me more. Memory, avaunt!

Why should there be no unchangeableness in the world? why no friendship? or why am I, and you, gentle reader, (for by your continuing to pore over these idle musings, you have a heart too,) gifted with this useless and restless organ beating in our bosoms, if its thirst for love is never to be slaked, and its aching self-fulness never to find flow or utterance? I would positively sell my whole stock of affections for three farthings. Will you say "*two?*"

"You are come in good time," said Larry one morning, with a half-smile, "and shall be groomsman to me. I am going to be married."

"Married?"

"Married."

I repeated the word after him, for I was surprised. He had never opened his lips about his unhappy lunacy since my arrival, and I had felt hurt at this apparent unwillingness to renew our ancient confidence, but had felt a repugnance to any forcing of the topic upon him, and could only hope that he had outgrown or overcome it. I argued, immediately on this information of his intended marriage, that it must be so. No man in his senses, I thought, would link an impending madness to the fate of a confiding and lovely woman.

He took me into his sleigh, and we drove to her father's house. She was a flower in the wilderness. Of a delicate form, as all my countrywomen are, and lovely, as *quite* all certainly are not, large-eyed, soft in her manners, and yet less timid than confiding and sister-like, with a shade of melancholy in her smile, caught, perhaps, with the "trick of sadness" from himself, and a patrician slightness of reserve, or pride, which Nature sometimes, in very mockery of high birth, teaches her most secluded child,—the bride elect was, as I said before, a flower in the wilderness. She was one of those women we sigh to look upon as they pass by, as if there went a fragment of the wreck of some blessed dream.

The day arrived for the wedding, and the sleigh-bells jingled merrily into the village. The morning was as soft and genial as June, and the light snow on the surface of the lake melted, and

lay on the breast of the solid ice beneath, giving it the effect of one white silver mirror, stretching to the edge of the horizon. It was exquisitely beautiful, and I was standing at the window in the afternoon, looking off upon the shining expanse, when Larry approached, and laid his hand familiarly on my shoulder.

"What glorious skating we shall have," said I, "if this smooth water freezes to-night!"

I turned the next moment to look at him; for we had not skated together since I went out, at his earnest entreaty, at midnight, to skim the little lake where we had passed our boyhood, and drive away the fever from his brain, under the light of a full moon.

He remembered it, and so did I; and I put my arm behind him, for the colour fled from his face, and I thought he would have sunk to the floor.

"The moon is full to-night," said he, recovering instantly to a cold self-possession.

I took hold of his hand firmly, and, in as kind a tone as I could summon, spoke of our early friendship, and apologizing thus for the freedom, asked if he had quite overcome his melancholy disease. His face worked with emotion, and he tried to withdraw his hand from my clasp, and evidently wished to avoid an answer.

"Tell me, dear Larry," said I.

"Oh God! *No!*" said he, breaking violently from me, and throwing himself with his face downwards upon the sofa. The tears streamed through his fingers upon the silken cushion.

"Not cured? And does *she* know it?"

"No! no! thank God! not yet!"

I remained silent a few minutes, listening to his suppressed moans, (for he seemed heart-broken with the confession,) and pitying while I inwardly condemned him. And then the picture of that lovely and fond woman rose up before me, and the impossibility of concealing his fearful malady from his wife, and the fixed insanity in which it must end, and the whole wreck of her hopes and his own prospects and happiness,—and my heart grew sick.

I sat down by him, and, as it was too late to remonstrate on the injustice he was committing toward her, I asked how he

came to appoint the night of a full moon for his wedding. He gave up his reserve, calmed himself, and talked of it at last as if he were relieved by the communication. Never shall I forget the doomed pallor, the straining eye, and feverish hand of my poor friend during that half hour.

Since he had left college he had striven with the whole energy of his soul against it. He had plunged into business,—he had kept his bed resolutely night after night, till his brain seemed on the verge of frenzy with the effort,—he had taken opium to secure to himself an artificial sleep;—but he had never dared to confide it to any one, and he had no friend to sustain him in his fearful and lonely hours; and it grew upon him rather than diminished. He described to me with the most touching pathos how he had concealed it for years,—how he had stolen out like a thief to give vent to his insane restlessness in the silent streets of the city at midnight, and in the more silent solitudes of the forest,—how he had prayed, and wrestled, and wept over it,—and finally, how he had come to believe that there was no hope for him except in the assistance and constant presence of some one who would devote life to him in love and pity. Poor Larry! I put up a silent prayer in my heart that the desperate experiment might not end in agony and death.

The sun set, and, according to my prediction, the wind changed suddenly to the north, and the whole surface of the lake in a couple of hours became of the lustre of polished steel. It was intensely cold.

The fires blazed in every room of the bride's paternal mansion, and I was there early to fulfil my office of master of ceremonies at the bridal. My heart was weighed down with a sad boding, but I shook off at least the appearance of it, and superintended the concoction of a huge bowl of punch with a merriment which communicated itself in the shape of most joyous hilarity to a troop of juvenile relations. The house resounded with their shouts of laughter.

In the midst of our noise in the small inner room entered Larry. I started back, for he looked more like a demon possessed than a Christian man. He had walked to the house alone in the moonlight, not daring to trust himself in company. I turned out the turbulent troop about me, and tried to dispel his gloom,

for a face like his at that moment would have put to flight the rudest bridal party ever assembled on holy ground. He seized on the bowl of strong spirits which I had mixed for a set of hardy farmers, and before I could tear it from his lips had drunk a quantity which, in an ordinary mood, would have intoxicated him helplessly in an hour. He then sat down with his face buried in his hands, and in a few minutes rose, his eyes sparkling with excitement, and the whole character of his face utterly changed. I thought he had gone wild.

"Now, Phil," said he; "now for my bride!" And with an unbecoming levity he threw open the door, and went half dancing into the room where the friends were already assembled to witness the ceremony.

I followed with fear and anxiety. He took his place by the side of the fair creature on whom he had placed his hopes of life, and, though sobered somewhat by the impressiveness of the scene, the wild sparkle still danced in his eyes, and I could see that every nerve in his frame was excited to the last pitch of tension. If he had fallen a gibbering maniac on the floor, I should not have been astonished.

The ceremony proceeded, and the first tone of his voice in the response startled even the bride. If it had rung from the depths of a cavern, it could not have been more sepulchral. I looked at him with a shudder. His lips were curled with an exulting expression, mixed with an indefinable fear; and all the blood in his face seemed settled about his eyes, which were so bloodshot and fiery, that I have ever since wondered he was not, at the first glance, suspected of insanity. But oh! the heavenly sweetness with which that loveliest of creatures promised to love and cherish him, in sickness and in health! I never go to a bridal but it half breaks my heart; and as the soft voice of that beautiful girl fell with its eloquent meaning on my ear, and I looked at her, with lips calm and eyes moistened, vowing a love which I knew to be stronger than death, to one who, I feared, was to bring only pain and sorrow into her bosom, my eyes warmed with irrepressible tears, and I wept.

The stir in the room as the clergyman closed his prayer seemed to awake him from a trance. He looked around with a troubled face for a moment; and then, fixing his eyes on his

bride, he suddenly clasped his arms about her, and straining her violently to his bosom, broke into an hysterical passion of tears and laughter. Then suddenly resuming his self-command, he apologized for the over-excitement of his feelings, and behaved with forced and gentle propriety till the guests departed.

There was an apprehensive gloom over the spirits of the small bridal party left in the lighted rooms; and, as they gathered round the fire, I approached, and endeavoured to take a gay farewell. Larry was sitting with his arm about his wife, and he wrung my hand in silence as I said, "Good night," and dropped his head upon her shoulder. I made some futile attempt to rally him, but it jarred on the general feeling, and I left the house.

It was a glorious night. The clear piercing air had a vitreous brilliancy, which I have never seen in any other climate, the rays of the moonlight almost visibly splintering with the keenness of the frost. The moon herself was in the zenith, and there seemed nothing between her and the earth but palpable and glittering cold.

I hurried home: it was but eleven o'clock; and, heaping up the wood in the large fire-place, I took a volume of "Ivanhoe," which had just then appeared, and endeavoured to rid myself of my unpleasant thoughts. I read on till midnight; and then, in a pause of the story, I rose to look out upon the night, hoping, for poor Larry's sake, that the moon was buried in clouds. The house was near the edge of the lake: and as I looked down upon the glassy waste, spreading away from the land, I saw the dark figure of a man kneeling directly in the path of the moon's rays. In another moment he rose to his feet, and the tall, slight form of my poor friend was distinctly visible, as, with long and powerful strokes, he sped away upon his skates along the shore.

To take my own Hollanders, put a collar of fur around my mouth, and hurry after him, was the work of but a minute. My straps were soon fastened; and, following in the marks of the sharp irons at the top of my speed, I gained sight of him in about half an hour, and with great effort neared him sufficiently to shout his name with a hope of being heard.

"Larry! Larry!"

The lofty mountain-shore gave back the cry in repeated echoes; but he redoubled his strokes, and sped on faster than

before. At my utmost speed I followed on; and when, at last, I could almost lay my hand on his shoulder, I summoned my strength to my breathless lungs, and shouted again—"Larry! Larry!"

He half looked back, and the full moon at that instant streamed full into his eyes. I have thought since that he could not have seen me for its dazzling brightness; but I saw every line of *his* features with the distinctness of daylight, and I shall never forget them. A line of white foam ran through his half-parted lips; his hair streamed wildly over his forehead, on which the perspiration glittered in large drops; and every lineament of his expressive face was stamped with unutterable and awful horror. He looked back no more; but, increasing his speed with an energy of which I did not think his slender frame capable, he began gradually to outstrip me. Trees, rocks, and hills fled back like magic. My limbs began to grow numb; my fingers had lost all feeling, but a strong north-east wind was behind us, and the ice smoother than a mirror; and I struck out my feet mechanically, and still sped on.

For two hours we had kept along the shore. The branches of the trees were reflected in the polished ice, and the hills seemed hanging in the air, and floating past us with the velocity of storm-clouds. Far down the lake, however, there glimmered the just visible light of a fire, and I was thanking God that we were probably approaching some human succour, when, to my horror, the retreating figure before me suddenly darted off to the left, and made swifter than before toward the centre of the icy waste. Oh, God! what feelings were mine at that moment. Follow him far I dared not; for, the sight of land once lost, as it would be almost instantly with our tremendous speed, we perished, without a possibility of relief.

He was far beyond my voice, and to overtake him was the only hope. I summoned my last nerve for the effort, and, keeping him in my eye, struck across at a sharper angle, with the advantage of the wind full in my back. I had taken note of the mountains, and knew that we were already forty miles from home, a distance it would be impossible to retrace against the wind; and the thought of freezing to death, even if I could overtake him, forced itself appallingly upon me.

Away I flew, despair giving new force to my limbs, and soon gained on the poor lunatic, whose efforts seemed flagging and faint. I neared him. Another struggle! I could have dropped down where I was, and slept, if there were death in the first minute, so stiff and drowsy was every muscle in my frame.

“Larry!” I shouted. “Larry!”

He started at the sound, and I could hear a smothered and breathless shriek, as, with supernatural strength, he straightened up his bending figure, and, leaning forward again, sped away from me like a phantom on the blast.

I could follow no longer. I stood stiff on my skates, still going on rapidly before the wind, and tried to look after him, but the frost had stiffened my eyes, and there was a mist before them, and they felt like glass. Nothing was visible around me but moonlight and ice, and dimly and slowly I began to retrace the slight path of semicircles toward the shore. It was painful work. The wind seemed to divide the very fibres of the skin upon my face. Violent exercise no longer warmed my body, and I felt the cold shoot sharply into my loins, and bind across my breast like a chain of ice; and, with the utmost strength of mind at my command, I could just resist the terrible inclination to lie down and sleep. I forgot poor Larry. Life—dear life!—was now my only thought! So selfish are we in our extremity!

With difficulty I at last reached the shore, and then, unbuttoning my coat, and spreading it wide for a sail, I set my feet together, and went slowly down before the wind, till the fire which I had before noticed began to blaze cheerily in the distance. It seemed an eternity in my slow progress. Tree after tree threw the shadow of its naked branches across the way; hill after hill glided slowly backward; but my knees seemed frozen together, and my joints fixed in ice; and if my life had depended on striking out my feet, I should have died powerless. My jaws were locked, my shoulders drawn half down to my knees, and in a few minutes more, I am well convinced, the blood would have thickened in my veins, and stood still, for ever.

I could see the tongues of the flames—I counted the burning faggots—a form passed between me and the fire—I struck, and fell prostrate on the snow; and I remember no more.

The sun was darting a slant beam through the trees when I awoke. The genial warmth of a large bed of embers played on

my cheek, a thick blanket enveloped me, and beneath my head was a soft cushion of withered leaves. On the opposite side of the fire lay four Indians wrapped in their blankets, and, with her head on her knees, and her hands clasped over her ankles, sat an Indian woman, who had apparently fallen asleep upon her watch. The stir I made aroused her, and, as she piled on fresh faggots, and kindled them to a bright blaze with a handful of leaves, drowsiness came over me again, and I wrapped the blanket about me more closely, and shut my eyes to sleep.

I awoke refreshed. It must have been ten o'clock by the sun. The Indians were about, occupied in various avocations, and the woman was broiling a slice of deer's flesh on the coals. She offered it to me as I rose; and having eaten part of it with a piece of a cake made of meal, I requested her to call in the men, and with offers of reward, easily induced them to go with me in search of my lost friend.

We found him, as I had anticipated, frozen to death, far out on the lake. The Indians tracked him by the marks of his skate-irons, and from their appearance he had sunk quietly down, probably drowsy and exhausted, and had died of course without pain. His last act seemed to have been under the influence of his strange madness, for he lay on his face, turned from the quarter of the setting moon.

We carried him home to his bride. Even the Indians were affected by her uncontrollable agony. I cannot describe that scene, familiar as I am with pictures of horror.

I made inquiries with respect to the position of his bridal chamber. There were no shutters, and the moon streamed broadly into it, and after kissing his shrinking bride with the violence of a madman, he sprang out of the room with a terrific scream, and she saw him no more till he lay dead on his bridal bed.