

Avery's Knot

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Much of this story is true. Ephraim K. Avery and Sarah Maria Cornell were real people, and the principal events of their lives occurred very much as I have described them. Where the facts are not known, I have made educated guesses.

I

The Walking Stranger

On the blustery, cold afternoon of December 20, 1832, on the Island of Rhode Island, several local citizens noticed a tall stranger, striding along past their farms. In that stony, saltwater country, farm people had so much work to do that they seldom did anything just for pleasure. Certainly not walking. When they walked, it was because they had to get somewhere right away, and no horse or horse-and-wagon was available to carry them. For this reason, when they saw anyone on foot they were likely to take note of it, particularly if the person was a stranger.

That day, the sky was scattered with fast-blown clouds that kept rolling over the sun, and whenever they did it was clear that true winter was setting in. The few apples left on bare boughs were black and withered. The orchards had no more to give, and neither did the stone-walled fields, where the corn-stalks stood like brittle bones, wearing rags. In the woods, the fallen leaves that had been so prodigally red were faded to ochre and dull brown. Even when the sun shone, its warmth was parsimoniously given. The stranger walked with his collar up and his hat pulled down. He carried his head a little on one side.

William Anthony and his young family lived within sight of the Bristol ferry-landing. William had turned his cows out of the barn to water themselves at the pond, and was sharpening axes, when he saw the stranger, taking a shortcut across a field of corn-stubble.

"There goes somebody in a hurry," William said to himself. Later, he estimated that the time must have been about half-past two.

The stranger was wearing dark clothes. A black surtout, or it could have been a box coat, and a wide-brimmed, black hat. When he came to the bar-way and climbed over it, William saw his height. A tall man. The bars were five feet high, and the man must have been a foot or more taller. After climbing the bars, he headed round the pond, went over a stone wall, and disappeared into a woodlot.

William was sure of the day, he said later, because he had a child down sick. The doctor had come that morning and had left

a bill, dated Thursday, December 20.

The Carr boys - Billy and his little brother, Charles - had driven to Fall River market with a wagonload of apples. They had started home to the Island about one o'clock, had crossed over from Tiverton on the Stone Bridge, and had then taken the main road to Portsmouth. About a hundred yards on the Island side of the bridge, they met a man, walking fast. He wore a black, broad-brimmed hat, and he had a handkerchief tied over the lower part of his face - to give protection from the wind, the boys presumed. They greeted him, as country people were wont to do, but he did not answer. Young Charles said to his brother, "*He* is rather proud. He didn't even look 'round."

Billy Carr said afterward that, after all, when you don't meet many people on the road, you like the ones you do meet to be civil, at least. Yes, he added: The stranger was a tall man. That he'd swear to.

Old Peleg Cranstoun lived by the Stone Bridge and was the toll keeper. By midafternoon that day, he later recalled, eleven people had crossed - most of them in wagons - and he knew ten of them. The one he didn't know must have crossed not far from three o'clock: a tall man, of dark complexion, and dressed in dark clothes. He had his fourpence ready in his hand when he came up to the tollgate.

"A pretty cold day," he said.

"'Tis," Peleg said. "You're welcome to step inside and warm yourself."

But the stranger shook his head, paid the toll, and walked on over the bridge. Peleg didn't see him again.

After sundown, foot-passengers could avoid the toll by scrambling down on the beach, walking around the tollgate, and then climbing back to the bridge or the road. In the morning, Peleg was in the habit of checking to see how many tracks there were in the sand, so he would know how much he'd been cheated. On the morning of December 21, he found one set of tracks, coming from the bridge and headed toward the Island.

Annis Norton, a young girl of sixteen, lived in a gray-shingled, saltbox house on the mainland side of the bridge. About three o'clock that same afternoon, she was at the kitchen window, watering pots of lemon geraniums, when she saw the walking stranger.

"Who's that, I wonder?" she said to her mother.

Mrs. Norton took her hands out of the bread-dough she was kneading and came to the window.

"Never saw him before," she said. "Wonder what his rush is."

"If he keeps walking at that rate," Annis said, "he'll be in Ohio afore nightfall."

"Some sort of a minister, is what I'd say," Mrs. Norton said.

"I've seen Methodist ministers wearing those big, black hats," said Annis. "More'n likely he's going to preach in Fall River."

"Well, don't let me hear of you listening to Methodists, Annis," said her mother.

"Why not?"

"They have camp-meetings and scream and fall down and act all crazy."

"What do they do that for?"

"I dunno," Mrs. Norton said, returning to her bread-dough. "And they say there's other goings-on, too, at those camp-meetings. You stay away from 'em."

At Robinson's farm, along the road to Fall River, two young farmers named John Durfee and Abner Davis had spent the day blasting rocks. They had their explosives packed in a cart, in bags sewn up with heavy string. About sunset ("Not much difference from sunset," was the way Abner later told it), they set their last charge and were running away from it when they noticed a man they didn't know, sitting on a wall near the cart, some eighty yards away from them.