

Choice Literature.

THE HELP THAT COMES TOO LATE.

'Tis a wearisome world, this world of ours,
With its tangles small and great,
Its weeds that smother the springing flow-
ers,
And its hapless strifes with fate,
But the darkest day of its desolate days
Sees the help that comes too late.

Ah! woe for the word that is never said
Till the ear is deaf to hear,
And woe for the lack to the fainting head
Of the ringing shout of cheer;
Ah! woe for the laggard feet that tread
In the mournful wake of the bier.

What booteth help when the heart is numb,
What booteth a broken spar
Of love thrown out when the lips are dumb
And life's bark drifteth far—
Oh! far and fast from the alien past,
Over the moaning bar!

A pitiful thing the gift to-day
That is dross and nothing worth,
Though if it had come but yesterday
It had brimmed with sweet the earth.
A fading rose in a death-cold hand,
That perished in want and dearth.

Who fain would help in this world of ours,
Where sorrowful steps must fall,
Bring help in time to waning powers,
Ere the bier is spread with the pall;
Nor send reserves when the flags are furled
And the dead beyond our call.

For baffling most in this dreary world,
With its tangles small and great,
Its lonesome nights and weary days,
And its struggles forlorn with fate,
Is that bitterest grief, too deep for tears,
Of the help that comes too late.
—Margaret E. Sangster, in Harper's Bazar.

HOW IT LOOKED AT HOME: A STORY OF '85.

Grace was sadly ignorant; she knew nothing of that noble art of the politician by which the interests and sufferings of others are made the means of self-aggrandizement, and to her the accusations and recriminations which form the missiles of the worldly war of faction were worse than idle sounds. Many times was her indignation roused by the squabbles of opposing cliques and the endeavor of angry parties to fasten on each other blame which neither was willing to bear, during those succeeding weeks of anxious waiting when so few could guess what the immediate future was to bring—when intelligence false, if not falsified, and rumours contradicted as soon as circulated made life a fever of expectation and suspense. In the light of later knowledge we can wonder, and almost smile, at the darkness that then enveloped places and events; but then we learned that it is not what we know but what we fear that is hardest to be borne.

Then, on the morning of the 10th of May, a wild tempestuous Sunday, suspense came to an end. It might not be well to inquire how many of those who worshipped that day in Rexborough, with the knowledge of what was at that moment passing at Batoche's Crossing filling their thoughts, profited greatly by their devotional exercises; we remember but the rapid emptying of the churches, the crowding of the people to the newspaper offices, the eager watching through the windy afternoon for the tardy news, the demand for the "extras" which when news did arrive were seized upon faster than the presses could give them out, the thrill that struck us when we knew that the end was come; but not yet the end of the end. We remember the days that followed, with their watching, their doubt and dread, their scanty, untrustworthy tidings, the wavering balance of victory or defeat, the angry mourning for those gone, the anguish of anxiety for those whose turn it might be next to go—all this Grace remembers and will never forget.

And all this Annis knew, and the knowledge wrought her to fever, which, fading, left a weakness from which there was no rally. Letters of course, there were none; the message of life or death must be looked for in the public prints, whose terse phrases added bitterness to their bitter tidings; but to Grace and Annis came no tidings, either of pain or consolation. Never did days appear so long as that 11th and 12th of May; never did Grace find it so difficult to utter the words of hope and cheer her heart denied; and never was relief greater

or thanksgiving deeper than when the wires flashed the message that, whatever might be the individual loss, victory had declared itself on the side of authority, and that further strife was stayed.

That individual loss! oh, how it tarnished the satisfaction given by the triumph of law! What eagerness of search of the dreadful lists! What heart-break were they right, what terror lest they should be wrong!

For two days Grace searched those lists with shrinking eyes, but met no sorrow, and was fain to hope that they were spared. But on the Wednesday afternoon, a warm, still shining day, that seemed made for life and joy, she came upon her hostess with a newspaper spread before her and tears dropping on the page. She gathered up her courage and scanned the lines, and this was what she read, in letters that seemed to turn to fire. "Wounded; Severely: Private Norman Wright." And Grace laid her head down upon her arms, and wept as in all her life she had never wept before.

After that her hands and heart were full. She could scarcely be glad of her own immunity in face of the sick girl's agony and swift decay, and Paul's safety seemed a blessing to which she had no right while others mourned. She hardly heeded the public interest of the events which followed, in the knowledge that no peace now could bring life back to young limbs or happiness to young hearts again; that page was folded down.

Then the victorious troops went on their further march to the north, and began the long, weary search for the retreating Indians; invalided men began to return with their heart-stirring tales, and rejoicing friends to welcome them; but to the two women in the quiet room in Rexborough life consisted only in watching and waiting—for tidings from the woods and swamps of Saskatchewan and bulletins from the hospital at Saskatoon.

It was the 6th of June. Long weeks of anxious suspense and uncertainty had succeeded the fever of expectation and the excited reception of startling news. Those whose friends had disappeared into an unknown northern wilderness, whence tidings could scarcely come, felt that they had changed little for the better from the knowledge of risk and privation to conjecture of greater evils still; too often the words "Wires down" took the place of the news looked for more eagerly each day, and it was difficult, in the face of the doubtful future to find as much satisfaction as before in the work already accomplished, the honour already won.

Grace was growing very weary. The strain of the constant care of the invalid, the ceaseless anxiety as to the effect upon her of the daily news from the north, and the worse result of no news at all, the thought of poor Norman which could scarcely be called suspense when hope there was none, the endless fretting of the old man over what he had deemed he had brought about and what was yet to come, all this had so wrought upon her that she no longer dared to let her mind dwell upon her own troubles, or strive to penetrate the darkness that now hung over the wanderings of the soldiers—for with her Paul was not all. She tried to concentrate her thoughts upon the present, to lighten as she best could the burdens of others, and not yet face the dread that she might have to share it with them later on.

On this evening she was especially overwrought. The announcement "Wires down" had thrown Annis into an excitement only allayed as darkness fell. She had sunk into a troubled sleep, then Grace felt the jarring of her own nerves. The silence oppressed her, and when the clock tolled eight and she realized how long the night would yet be she dreaded lest her own strength might fall when needed. She left the old man on watch, and wrapping a shawl around her went out alone under the trees of the path that bordered the river.

The June night was moonless and cool. The air was damp with a promise of rain, and heavy with the scent of lilac blossoms that tossed aloft their purple plumes. Grace leaned over the water, looked at the

lights reflected in the dark stream and at the grey walls of the fort on the other bank whence came a faint bugle call, and listened to a man's deep voice singing near by. Then for a short season she allowed her thoughts to stray.

"A pretty town of about forty houses, arranged in a square." She recalled thus the only description she had then seen of Saskatoon, that place where so many thoughts were then centred, for which so many prayers went up, and tried to picture to herself how it must look. There rose before her a vision of the wide plain, the rapid rolling river, the starlit northern sky. She felt the fall of the dew, the sigh of the breeze. Fancy played her part only too well; as the dusk deepened Grace forgot her actual surroundings, and her mind, straying from the sick-bed she had left and mingling remembrance with imagination, was filled with confused images of dimly lighted rooms, of silence broken only by whispers and soft tread, of pallid, pain-drawn faces, languid limbs, faint, fluttering breathings, powerless hands, and weary eyes. She could hear the checked groan and muttered exclamation as the wrench of agony wrung the strong man's frame, she imagined the gentle voices that spoke hope and courage and the fierce hopelessness that rejected comfort. All the suffering and the sorrow, all the vain longing for the sound of a home-tone or the touch of a loved hand by those who would never again know or feel them, all the present misery and the future dread seemed to take bodily shape and weight and to crush her heart. Her very ignorance of the reality intensified the imaginary picture, and she put her hands before her eyes to shut it out.

Only a woman's foolish fancies, altogether wide of the truth? Maybe: but the fancies of those days stung deep and sore. They have left some scars that will never be effaced—some wounds that will never be healed.

Grace recovered herself with a start of self-reproach. In the silence the clock tolled nine, and the bugle rang out its call from the hill. With a sudden impulse she turned and looked upward to the North-western heavens; Corona hung trembling in the blue vault, and with her eyes Grace's thoughts rose, and the words came to her mind, "Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we—" she shivered a little, as though a breath from another world had chilled her, and returned to her watch.

Her uncle was waiting for her at the door.

"She's awake, Grace, and better, I do believe; her eyes are so bright and her voice so strong. She must have been dreaming, for she laughed in her sleep, and woke calling out 'Wait! I am ready!'" Grace made no answer, but went to Annis with a fresh and sudden fear. She did not like the news.

"I've had a lovely dream," Annis said, as Grace stooped over her. A kiss was the only reply—no need to ask the subject of the dream.

"Isn't it a good sign, Gracie? May I take it to mean that I shall live to see him come back?"

"I—hope so—darling—"

"I—don't want more than that—now. I did once—then—I was going to leave a message for him with you, but now—if I can just see him—and tell him I never mistrusted him, and hear him speak—and leave him safe with you—"

"Hush, dear, you must not talk," said Grace, as the groan the old man could not stifle came to her ears. She did not dare to tell him what she feared; but her heart was very heavy as she watched the sleeping girl through the long night. She longed for tidings, but this unearthly communion disquieted her; and the next day was Sunday when no news could come.

The weary Sunday dragged itself out, spent by Annis in a lethargic patience; perhaps the memory of her dream stood as a shield between her and the worst—that dream which to Grace, with the recollection of her own vision at the same hour was only a haunting presage of ill. The long warm still hours were laden with suspense, and fear and anxiety were as the breath Grace drew.

The morning brought neither letter nor telegram; there was nothing to do but

wait for the public news of the afternoon. When her uncle went to obtain it, Grace concealed his departure from Annis, and waited during a time that seemed both leaden-footed and to fly with wings. Annis appeared asleep when the returning footstep sounded, and Grace went down feeling that the worst that could be told would be a release compared with the tension of a moment such as this.

The old man's hand trembled as he held a paper towards her. "No letter," he said, hoarsely, "but there may be something here—"

Grace took it and scanned the lines over which so many hearts had sunk, so many tears had fallen. If for one moment her eyes went to that spot where news of Paul might be looked for, let it be forgiven her; she resolutely averted her attention to that quarter where she must learn what was now alas! an oft-told tale. The search was short; her uncle, watching her, saw a little start; then she held the paper out to him without a word. He followed where she pointed, and read the form familiar enough in its terseness, but charged for each who sought it with new and keen-edged meaning. "Clarke's Crossing, June 7th. Private Norman Wright, wounded at Batoche, died last night in the hospital at Saskatoon."

That was all. Of the young vigorous life gone out—of hopes quenched and promise blighted—of the long vain struggle with pain and death—that was all the world would ever know. Nor the world only. Of the self-sacrifice that had concealed the suffering of the fever-flush of hope and the gloom of the dark valley—of the yearnings never to be satisfied—of the last thoughts and prayers of the heart whose faint final throb had fluttered into silence alone in the far-off desert—there could come no whisper to the hearts that craved it; the voice had passed "where beyond these voices there is peace."

"One more gone for honour's sake

Where so many go,"

And those few words, over which few eyes would glance with more than indifference, or at least a half-careless pity, his only record and reward—too often the soldier's sentence, epitaph, and eulogy, all in one.

"Who shall tell her?" whispered Grace with white lips, and without a tear. Then she covered up her face as the old man held up a shaking finger and left the room.

It was over—over. If words were needed they had been spoken—if tears had fallen they were dried. The majesty of death might reign here, but the monarch had laid aside his frown. The glory of the sunset streamed through the open window, shed a halo round the head of the dying girl, and fell on the joined hands laid lovingly on the grey head bowed upon her knees; outside the leaves rustled softly, and a bird carolled its even song; the scent of flowers hung on the air like incense; the stillness was as deep as the hush of prayer; and the smile on the lips of Annis "filled the silence like a speech."

Grace hesitated on the threshold; the place seemed to her holy ground. But Annis saw her, and at a look she came and knelt beside her.

"I need leave no message with you now," said Annis, softly.

Grace kissed the slender hands—they were quite steady—but she could not speak.

"I am very selfish, Gracie. I am so glad for myself that I cannot be sorry for him—or you."

Grace glanced at the old man; but he did not seem to hear, and did not move.

"It shocked me—for a minute—to think he could be dead—he was so strong—but now—it would be hard to live on—and think so—and I am so glad to know that he will never—have to—miss me." She drew a little fluttering sigh. Grace leant her head on the heart whose faint beat she could hear in the stillness, and her tears fell unchecked and uncontrolled.

"Don't cry Gracie. Do you think I am worthy of him now? 'Greater love hath no man—' you know—"

"Who can ever be worthy—" began Grace.

"And yet—will you say that verse for me—about being faithful over a few things? I can't quite—remember—"

With a mighty effort Grace steadied her voice. "Well done, good and faithful—"

But the verse was never finished to mortal ears. There was a trembling of the hand Grace held, then the two were clasped together and flung upward, and there rang out a joyful agonized cry—"Wait for me Norman! I am ready!" Grace started up with a scream—to see the strained eyes close softly, the pale lips quiver into silence, and the head fall back.

"Oh my God! she has fainted!" cried the old man, even now refusing to accept the truth.

But Grace knew better. She knew that in that last—or first—glimpse of recognition the eyes had seen no mortal vision; that in that parting cry of passionate appeal the lips had uttered their last words on earth.