

Choice Literature.

SALEM: A TALE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

BY D. R. CASTLETON.

CHAPTER XIV.—WAKEFULNESS.

"'Tis well for us there is no gift
Of prophecy on earth,
Or how would every pleasure be
A rose crushed at its birth."

Alice retired to her bed; but weary as she was, she could not sleep. Hitherto, whatever her griefs or anxieties had been, night had brought repose—sleep, blessed sleep, that panacea of all human woes, which the young and happy have never learned to estimate, had never failed her before; but now her powers of mind and body had all been overtasked, and her whole delicate nervous system was shaken by the intense strain it had undergone, and she could not sleep. Restless and feverish, she turned from side to side in strange, un wonted wakefulness. Her head ached, her cheeks burned, her temples throbbed, her aching eyes seemed strained unnaturally wide open, and her hot hands and restless arms were tossed wildly above her head.

She had no power to stop the action of mind and memory. Thought seemed to her like the great wheel of some ponderous machine, which once set in motion could neither be guided nor stopped, but would go on and on forever, with its terrible but useless activity.

Probably, for the first time in her healthy, happy young life, she realized what wakefulness was, and she lay, with quick beating heart and widely-opened eyes, staring into the blank darkness, through long, uncounted hours, that seemed to her inexorable to be interminable.

Of course in this state of enforced bodily stillness, and unnatural mental excitement and activity, the sad scenes of the previous day, the terrible sorrow she had witnessed and shared in could not be put aside—it was all lived over again in her excited imagination.

Again in memory she went through all the sad details of that harrowing story: again she saw and pitied the silent, hopeless grief of the bereaved and sorrow-stricken old man, whose voiceless woe was more eloquent than the most expressive words; again she seemed to pass that nameless and unmarked grave, where she dared not pause to drop a tear, and over which the tenderest love ventured not to place a stone or a flower. And when, by a powerful effort of self-will, she at last succeeded in turning her mind away from this dreadful subject—there rose up before her the recollection of her unbidden interview with the two women who had so rudely accosted her in the street on her way home, and she naturally began to wonder who they were, and what they could have meant.

She had never spoken to either of them before, and knew nothing of them beyond what she had told her grandmother. What, then, could they know of her or her affairs?

But as Alice pondered this question curiously, a new thought took possession of her mind. The woman had spoken of her father—how oddly the words sounded to her ears—her father? She had never heard of him before; and, strange as it now seemed to her, when her thoughts were thus turned to the subject, it had never before occurred to her that she ever had a father.

Her grandmother had so constantly spoken of her as her daughter's child, as her own Alice's "wee Allie," that it had never entered her mind that she belonged to any other parent.

Her grandmother, her mother and herself—these formed for her a regular trio; and she had grown up so impressed with the idea that they three were and had been all in all to each other, that any other relationship had seemed superfluous; but now, when her thoughts had been called to the subject, she wondered at her own stupidity, and puzzled herself in wild conjectures. Why had her grandmother never mentioned her father to her? No doubt he must have died long ago—in her infancy, perhaps, as her poor mother did. And yet, if he had—her grandmother had always talked to her of her mother, and had taught her to love and cherish her memory. Why, then, had she not taught her to remember and love her father, too?

Surely, she thought, her grandmother must have done so, of course she had, and she, undutiful child, must have forgotten it. It would all come back to her by and by—she should be able to remember what grannie had told her about her father; and she taxed her memory to the utmost to try to recall any such information—any allusion, even, to such a person having ever existed. It was all in vain; but as she thus explored the uttermost limits of her childish recollections, there came up a dim, shadowy remembrance of that vague suspicion which had been awakened long ago, when she was but a little child, and had dressed her hair with the purple flowers, and grandmother had seemed so displeased with her—she did not know why. She did not understand it then, and she did not understand it any better now. It was all so hazy and dim, she could make nothing of it.

Turning away in despair from that vain research, the restless thoughts took a new direction, and she began to wonder who and what this unknown father could have been. Already his very name had taken a strong hold upon her innocent affections. Surely she ought to love him, to make up to him for her life-long forgetfulness. Who could he have been? What was he like? What was his name? But here a new question started up—Why did not she bear his name instead of that of her mother and grandmother?

In vain she questioned and conjectured. There was but one way out of this strange mystery—her grandmother must know all about it. To-morrow she would ask her. Yes; to-morrow she would get her grandmother to tell her all about it; but though she repeated those words to her-

self a dozen times, they did not satisfy her impatient longing, and more widely awake than ever, she looked and longed for the coming day.

And Mrs. Campbell, too, had had her sleepless night (but it was not so new to her). She, too, had been tossing restlessly, striving vainly with the memories of the past, and the anxieties of the future.

Again she revived the sad events of other days; again, with a renewed bitterness, they rose up before her; again she strove with a mighty sorrow, a cruel wrong, an unmerited disgrace, a fierce temptation, a ready revenge, a yielding circumstance; again she weighed chances long passed, and pondered probabilities all long gone by, and balanced with trembling hands and wavering brain the eternal right and wrong.

Again she seemed to look with bitter anguish on the face of the dead; again, by her persistent will, she tore open the deep but unforgotten wounds of her heart, and laid her own fierce hand on the unhealed scars that bled with a touch.

Alas! there was no comfort there. What had all that suffering brought her, that a chance word might not have swept away?

She never for a moment doubted that Alice would question her—she knew the girl too well to doubt it. That quick, imperative spirit was too like her own for her to think for a moment that she would relinquish her purpose. How could she baffle or resist her? and what and how should she answer her eager inquiries? What to keep back, and what to reveal, was a momentous and unanswerable question. Long and painfully she pondered it, but no new light broke in upon the troubled darkness of her spirit; for the trying ordeal must be met, and to-morrow would surely bring it.

At last she made up her mind that she would steadfastly refuse all explanation whatever. Alice could not force it from her, and she should not. She might, indeed, question—no doubt she would; but what then? She had held her own secret for more than eighteen years—should a mere child have power to wring it from her now?

With this fallacious hope, of the insecurity of which she was too well aware, she tried to fortify herself for the coming interview; but it was with a new and strange feeling of constraint on both sides that the grandmother and her child met each other the next morning.

CHAPTER XV.—ESTRANGEMENT.

"A something light as air—a look—
A word unkind or wrongly taken;
Oh! love, that tempests never shock,
A word—a breath—like this has shaken."

In the silent and lonely hours of the sleepless night it had seemed to Alice a very simple and easy thing to ask the question she meditated, and obtain from her grandmother the information she desired, and she longed for the coming day to dawn that she might begin her investigation; but in the clear light of day it seemed neither so easy nor so practicable, and she almost trembled at the temerity of her own purpose.

She glanced at her grandmother's stern, set face (all the more stern from her midnight resolve), and her habitual awe and reverence for the old woman came back to her with redoubled force. She saw, too, that her grandmother was watching her with uneasy glances, and her heart sunk, appalled at the task she had set herself; yet she never for one moment thought of relinquishing her purpose.

And the grandmother, on her part, noticed Alice's furtive, uneasy glances at her, and knew the dreaded hour was at hand, and braced herself to meet it.

"I laid awake nearly all night, grandmother," said Alice, at length, beginning afar off; "I could not sleep for thinking—my visit was such a sad one."

"I dinna doot it," replied Mistress Campbell, gravely. "You had a lang, weary walk, an' a varry mournfu' visit; I wad na' wonder ye could na' sleep."

"No, indeed. I seemed to live it all over again—I could not forget it; and I got my eyes so wide open, it seemed as if I should never sleep again. And then, grandmother"—and here, in spite of all her efforts to keep it steady, the poor child's voice trembled a little, and she was sure her grandmother noticed it—"and then I thought of what those women said to me in the street."

"Haith! Alice," said the old woman, snappishly, as she rose from the table, as if to put an immediate end to the conversation, "an' what do ye fash yersel' aboot them for? Ye ken fu' weel that they are vile leers an' defamers; dinna talk o' them to me—forget them—let them gang."

"Yes, grandmother, I know—I would gladly forget them; I do not wish ever to see or hear of them again. I only want you to tell me what they meant."

"An' hoo tell I ken their meanin' mair than yersel'? I did na' hear them."

"No; but I told you what they said."

"An' what if ye did? I ha' naething to say to them; an' I dinna care to ken their leeing words."

"But, grandmother, tell me what it meant."

"How do I ken? I ha' naething to say to them or of them: an' I suld think, Allie, ye wud na' care to keep company wi' them that wrought the death o' Goody Nurse."

Trembling with vainly-suppressed passion, Goody Campbell uttered these cutting words. She meant that they should cut deeply, and they did; but she saw in a moment that she had made a mistake—she had gone too far. Alice's pale face flushed to the very temples, and all the passionate impulse of the temper she had inherited from her grandmother flashed back upon her from those startled eyes.

"Grandmother, it is not of Goody Nurse or her accusers that I am speaking," she said, controlling her rising temper with difficulty, "but of my father."

Goody Campbell made no answer, beyond an emphatic and contemptuous "Hump!"

"I ask you," said Alice, with her blue eyes wide open,

and glittering like cut steel, "I ask you only to tell me about my father."

"An' I ha'e naething to tell ye. Tak' yer answer, an' gang."

"I will not take that answer. You have told me about my mother a hundred times; then why not tell me something about my father?"

"I dinna ken ony thing aboot him—I ha'e naething to tell ye. I ha'e na' seen him, or heard fra' him, sin' ye kim into the warld. What ha'e I to tell?"

"Neither have you seen nor heard from my mother since I was born; and yet you can talk to me for hours about her."

"Alice," said the grandmother, making a desperate effort to re-establish her hold upon the girl's affections, "hoo kin ye try me sae? Yer mither wa' my ain bairn—my on'y child; sure I ha'e much to tell o' her; and ye are her on'y bairn. Hoo kin ye doot me? Hoo kin ye doot if I ha'e ony thing pleasant to tell ye I wad na' wait for ye to question me?"

But the effort failed. Alice stood proud and unyielding.

"Grandmother, I do not ask for pleasure—I ask for information. I have a right to know something of my own history—of my own parents. I have been kept blinded long enough. I am no longer a child, to be put aside with a jest or a scolding. I ask you again—Will you tell me about my father, or not?"

Alice paused; but there was no answer.

"Grandmother, I am in earnest; will you answer me—yes or no! I must know the truth."

"Ye maun know, did ye say Allie? Haith! lass, 'must' is a bold doggie enow; but 'you can't' is the doggie that kin pu' him doon, an' hold him there, I wot."

"Perhaps so," said Alice, carelessly. "But 'I can and will' can conquer even him, I think; and I tell you now plainly that I both can and will."

"Tut, tut, lass. Dinna bark when ye kinna bite—hoo kin ye, an' hoo will ye?"

"I will go to the women I met in the street; it is clear to me that they know what you refuse to tell me. 'An open enemy is better than a false friend'—I will go to them."

"Alice, girl, are ye mad? Would ye gang to those awfu', leeing creatures that ha'e the power o' the evil-eye? Ye wad na'—ye wad na'."

"I will," said Alice, calmly; "I fear them not. I will brave the evil-eye, and the evil tongue, too—but I will find out the truth you are hiding from me. I will give you the day to make up your mind in—I will wait until the evening; if you chose to tell me then, I will have the story from you—if not, then before this night closes I will try to learn it from them."

"Nay; but Alice, hear me."

"No," said Alice, "there is no use in any more angry words. We have both spoken too many already. I will wait until night; then you may speak or not, as you may think best; and sweeping by her grandmother with an air of proud defiance she had never manifested before, Alice left the room."

During the rest of the day no word was exchanged between this so lately loving pair. In silence they met and passed each other in the performance of their respective daily duties, and in silence each covertly and anxiously scanned the face of the other—but in vain. They were well-matched antagonists, for they were far too much alike in temper and spirit for either of them to be able to detect one sign of wavering in the other.

But when their evening meal was over, Alice rose in silence, and put on her shawl.

"Alice!" cried her grandmother, starting as from a stupor, "where are ye gangin' the night?"

"I am going to the village, as I told you I should."

"Whist! Alice, girl," said Mrs. Campbell, seizing the shawl with no gentle hand, and drawing its hastily from her shoulders; "ye are na' gangin' to those awfu', leeing creatures."

"I am," said Alice, resolutely.

"Girl, ye are mad—mad! I think the power of the evil-eye is upon ye a'ready."

"It is your own work, grandmother. Remember always, if any harm come of it, it was you that sent me there; it was not my own choice to seek them—you drove me to it."

"What is it ye wad know, lass?" said the woman, brought to terms at last.

"I want to know the story of my birth—I want to know about my father; I have been kept blindfolded long enough. I want the whole story—and I want the truth."

"Alice," said the old woman sadly, "ye are unjust. For yer ain sake—to spare ye—I ha'e concealed the truth, that I ken too weel will gie ye sair pain; but niver in a my life did I tell ye a lee."

"Very well," said Alice, coldly; "let us have an end of concealment now. Will you tell me the whole story now?—or shall I seek it of others?"

"I will, Alice; but if it gies ye pain, mind ye ha'e yersel' to thank."

"Very well," said Alice, folding up her shawl, and resuming her seat—"I will take that risk."

(To be continued.)

ESQUIMAUX WOMEN.

The appearance of these Esquimaux is suggestive of patience and perseverance. They are short and squat of figure, the men averaging five feet three inches, and the women five feet in height. Their breadth is apt to vary, according to whether the Fates have sent them plenty of seal or not. Their eyes and hair are of the very blackest, the latter being as straight and not less coarse than horse-hair. A favourite amusement among the women is for two of them to select a hair out of their heads, and looping one through the other, to pull on the ends held in their hands until one of the hairs gives way, to the vast delight of the fat little lady whose capillary strength wins in this odd tug-of-war.—*J. MacDonald Oxley, in the American Magazine for February.*