

Choice Literature.

SALEM: A TALE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

BY D. R. CASTLETON.

CHAPTER XX.—Continued.

But what do we know of the agony of those who see the impending blow coming, not from the beneficent and all-wise Father, whose right to the creature he has made we do not dispute, but from man, the petty instrument of a fallible judgment, stepping in between the Creator and the created?—who see the beloved one moving before them, in fulness of health, in unimpaired vigour of body and mind, and in undoubted love and faith, and yet know that before another sun shall set that precious life shall be crushed out by brute violence?

"Heaven in its mercy hides the book of fate"—but man, unpitying man, sets the inevitable hour full before his victim's eye, and the terrible moments melt away, each one bearing off a visible portion of the life still palpitating in the heart.

Ah! we say such agony is too great to be borne. But it has been borne by hearts as tender and as loving as our own. And how can human nature endure it? We know not—we only know that it has been borne. "Lo! all things can be borne." And it was this bitterest portion that poor Alice was called upon to suffer.

The last terrible moment had come. The sun had climbed to the mid-heaven, as if to look down upon the sacrifice, when the door of the prison was opened, and the unhappy prisoner came forth—not led forth, for the brave and dauntless old woman came out unsupported, and walked with a firm and unflinching step.

There was a marked and striking difference between Goody Nurse and Mistress Elsie Campbell. Both went to their death unflinchingly; but one had the meek resignation of a humble Christian, the other the fierce heroism of a Stoic; the first was saintly, the last was majestic.

Conscious of her own integrity, and of the falsity of the malicious charges against her, and full, as we have seen, of unmitigated contempt for the tribunal before which she had been so unjustly condemned, the spirit of the old Scottish Covenanter was roused within her. Her face, though perfectly colourless, was set as a flint: and, like the Indian warrior at the stake, she was fixed in her purpose that no trembling nerve, no faltering step, should gratify the malice of her enemies by a token of her suffering.

So she came out, disdaining support, and would have mounted the fatal cart unaided, had not her manacled limbs forbidden it.

When she was placed in the vehicle, another vain attempt was made by Alice's friends to withdraw her from the awful scene; but the faithful child would not be removed. With wild eyes and piteous hands she waved them back. Twice she essayed to speak, but the unuttered words died on her feverish lips. Again—and they who stood nearest to her caught only the words, "Having loved His own, He loved them to the end;" and awed and silent, they desisted, and made way for her.

Clinging tightly with both her clenched hands to the back of the cart, to support her tottering and uncertain steps, with her uncovered head bent down upon her hands, and her bright, dishvelled hair falling as a veil about her, Alice followed as the melancholy procession moved onward—up the length of Prison Lane (now St. Peter Street) into Essex Street.

As the gloomy train wound along its way through the crowd, and just as it turned the corner into Essex Street, an Indian, closely wrapped in his blanket, dropped, as if by the merest chance, a bit of pine-bough into the slow-moving cart.

Apparently by accident the little missile fell; but it had been thrown by a dexterous hand, and with a calculated and certain aim. Lightly it brushed Alice's fair, bended head, touched her clenched hands, and fell into the cart before her. But Alice, moving on in a trance of giddy horror, with her heart "so full that feeling almost seemed unfelt," did not notice it. If she had, she might have recognized in it a token of the hope it was meant to convey to her.

Pashemet had received the little wampum chain—he was true to his pledge. Even then he was in town with a party of his bravest warriors, although to make himself known even to Alice would possibly have defeated his object.

Gradually and unobserved, half a dozen Indians, closely wrapped in their blankets, had mingled in the crowd—their stolid, inscrutable faces expressing neither interest nor sympathy in the sad scene passing before them. But under those blankets they were fully armed; under those dark, inexpressive faces there was keenest observation and intent purpose; and in a little wooded hollow, near the fatal "Gallows Hill," a dozen or more fleet little shaggy Indian ponies were quietly picketed, waiting for their fierce, tameless riders.

The plan was perfected in its most minute details. The town officials, unsuspecting of opposition, were unarmed. The surprise was to take place at the moment of transit from the cart to the ladder. All was in readiness, and the rescue would undoubtedly have been successfully made had not circumstances wholly unlooked for chanced to prevent it.

The street was crowded with spectators, as upon the former executions; but it was clearly evident there was a change of sentiment in the lookers-on. Possibly the thirst for blood had now been satiated, and had died out—the tide of popular feeling was evidently turning. The faith in the accusers, once so unquestioning, had been lessened; the girls had become too confident and too reckless. Or it might be that possibly a new-born pity was awakened in behalf of the victims; and who would wonder?

In a small community, such as Salem then was, the private history, the affairs and personalities of each of its inhabitants are considered as the joint property of all the rest; consequently Alice's desolate orphan girlhood—her entire dependence upon the condemned prisoner, who was her only known relative in the wide world; but, beyond this, the rare beauty of the poor girl, her sweet innocence, and her fearless devotion to her grandmother, had called forth the interest and admiration of many who had never personally known her; and now, instead of the coarse jeers, curses and bitter invectives, with which the howling mob had followed the first sufferers, there was, as they passed along, an awed and respectful silence—broken only now and then by sobs and sighs, and half-uttered exclamations of "God help them."

As the sad procession wound its slow way beneath the scorching noonday sun, toiling up the little crooked, narrow street, an interruption occurred. In one of the very narrowest portions of the street a gay cavalcade was seen approaching—their gay military harness ringing out and glittering in the sunbeams.

It was the new governor, Sir William Phips, who had only arrived in the country on the previous May; and who was now riding into town, accompanied by a party of officers, most of them composing his suite, and one or two personal friends.

Laughing and jesting in true military style, they drew near; but the street was too narrow to allow of two such pageants at one time, and for once grim Death stood back, jostled out of the way by busy, joyful Life.

The miserable, creaking, jolting death-cart drew up on one side of the narrow street, and halted, to allow the governor and his suite to pass by.

At the sudden stoppage of the cart, poor Alice started from her ghastly drowse—possibly she thought the terrible goal was reached. As she lifted her head and looked wildly around with her sad, frightened, bewildered eyes, the words which were passing from lip to lip around her fell upon her ear: "It is his Excellency, Sir William Phips, the new governor."

In one instant, straight and clear as a flash of light from heaven, broke in upon her clouded mind an intuitive ray of hope; in one moment she had quitted the cart to which she had convulsively clung, and with one wild bound, like the death-leap of some maddened creature, she sprang directly in Sir William's path, and flinging up her wild arms to arrest him, she raised her sad, beseeching eyes to his, and faltered out her impassioned appeal: "Mercy! mercy! your Excellency; pardon—pardon—for the sweet love of heaven—she is innocent! Oh! as you hope for mercy in your own sorest need hereafter, have mercy upon us—mercy! mercy!"

As the frantic creature paused for breath, she sank exhausted upon the ground just in front of the governor's horse; and startled by the sudden apparition of the fair, spirit like thing, Sir William sat in silent bewilderment, reining in his plunging, snorting horse with a powerful hand, till the spirited animal sank upon his haunches beneath the strong control.

But Sir William's were not the only eyes to which that fair, frantic face appealed; one of the officers in the company, who had come out from England with the governor, galloped to the scene, and forcing his horse up to the side of the death-cart, peered with quick, inquiring eyes into the face of the prisoner, who had sat with closed eyes and tightly compressed lips, not turning her head or moving hand or foot since she entered that car of death; then suddenly, as if his gaze had assured him of her identity, he bent forward and shouted close to her ear, "Elsie Campbell!—look at me!"

With a mighty effort, the fast-sealed eyes unclosed; and the thoughts which had, it would seem, already preceded her to the unknown and eternal world she was so soon to enter, turned back once more to earth; she did not speak, but her involuntary start, and the sudden rush of colour that flushed her pallid face, betrayed her recognition of him.

Grasping her firmly by the arm, he asked in breathless entreaty: "Tell me—who is that girl! I adjure you—by the memory of Alice—answer me."

For one moment Elsie Campbell wavered—here was the betrayer of her only child—and for one moment revenge seemed sweet to her still; but then she thought of Alice, her darling, left alone in the wide, cruel world—no friend, no protector; this man was her father—and love conquered pride; the rigid lips painfully enclosed, and with an evident effort she murmured hoarsely: "Your child, my lord! my Alice's daughter."

Another moment, and the officer had sprung from his saddle and stood by Sir William's side, his eager hand upon the governor's arm.

"Sir William—hear me; you know my life's sad history, and my unsuccessful search; I believe that girl to be my long sought child; that woman is the mother of my sainted wife—she is the sole possessor of the coveted secret; I will answer for her innocence of the absurd charge. I ask you, by our life-long friendship, to use in her behalf the executive clemency which you hold."

The hands of the brother officers met in a wringing clasp; and then, while the father pressed forward and raised the unconscious form of Alice from the ground, there was a sudden stir and conference among the officers of the governor's council, a few words to his secretary, a few hasty formulas—and then the magic words, "A reprieve—a reprieve! pardon—pardon! the governor's pardon!" were caught up by the nearest by-standers, and spread rapidly through the sympathizing crowd. The governor and his suite galloped onward; the clumsy, creaking death cart was turned about, and followed them down to the "Ship Tavern," where Alice's father had already preceded them with his precious and unconscious burden; and here, when her swollen and long-manacled limbs were once more set at liberty, the trembling and half-bewildered grandmother assisted in recovering the still fainting and exhausted girl.

"Oh tell me!" said the father, who was supporting his child in his arms—looking up into Goody Campbell's face

as she too bent over her darling—"Oh, tell me those blessed words again—tell me that this is indeed the child of my beloved Alice—my precious wife."

"An' wa' she your wife—in varry deed?" asked the still doubting listener, with her keen, penetrating eyes fixed full upon his face.

"Was she my wife? Yes—ten thousand times yes! who dares to question it? Yes! my sainted Alice was my dear and honoured wife; did you—did any one ever doubt it?"

"Yes," said Elsie Campbell, meekly, "I did doot it—I wa' told it wa' a sham marriage, an' I believed it; I thought you had done me an' my dead a mighty wrong, an' I could na' forgi'e it. But I see now that I hae done ye a mighty wrong, an' I dare na' ask ye to forgi'e me."

"I can forgive any thing to-day," said the father, tremblingly, "if only this precious one, so long and so vainly sought, is spared to me; but we have each of us much to explain."

And Alice was spared to them—but not till a long and dangerous illness had resulted from the unnatural strain of mind and body which the poor girl had undergone did they dare to hope; and while hovering in united care and anxiety over their mutual treasure, the two watchers learned each other's mutual worth—and if they could never forget the heart sorrow they had each suffered and occasioned, at least they learned to forgive and respect.

CHAPTER XXI.—CONVALESCENCE.

"It may be there was waiting for the coming of my feet, Some gift of such rare blessedness, some joy so strangely sweet,

That my lips can only tremble with the thanks that I repeat."

But Alice was young and strong, and of an unbroken constitution; and youth, when aided by love and hope and happiness, recuperates rapidly. And the time soon came when Alice, sitting supported by her father's arms, with her trembling hand fondly clasped in that of her beloved grandmother, who seemed to her as one restored from the dead, could listen attentively to her father while he recounted to them the events of those past years, which she had so longed to know and so vainly conjectured.

He described her mother to her as she was when they first met—her beauty, her purity, her loveliness; of his deep admiration of her; of the love she inspired in him from the first, and which he flattered himself she soon learned to reciprocate; and of his full and fixed determination to win her for his wife.

Then he told her of the obstacles which his father's more mercenary views for the greater aggrandizement of him, as his only son, had thrown in his way; and that the marriage which his father had to set his heart upon would have made his life wretched.

He explained to her that his father's disease, which was a softening of the brain, had been pronounced incurable, and that while he might live for years, any opposition would be sure to aggravate it; and that his medical attendants had plainly stated to him that to cross his wishes upon any point upon which they were strongly fixed would increase the difficulty under which he laboured—would certainly be dangerous, and might prove fatal.

What, then, could he do? There was no hope of favourable change in the future, and the postponement of his marriage might be prolonged for years. Under these circumstances he had persuaded Alice to consent to a private marriage; but this, though necessarily kept from the knowledge of his father, had been duly solemnized by his own clergymen, in the presence of his two uncles (who fully approved of it), and two or three other material witnesses.

He told her of his distress when his father concluded to go abroad for change of climate, and strenuously demanded he should accompany him, which he could not evade without declaring the fact of his marriage, which he dared not venture to do.

He told her of his deep griefs and despair when in a foreign land he received the terrible tidings of his young wife's sudden death; of his heart-felt craving to know more; of the many letters which he had addressed to Mrs. Campbell, imploring her to give him the most minute details of all that related to his wife's sickness and death, but which had been all unanswered.

That when, by reason of his father's death, he had at last been free to return, he had hastened at once to Scotland to see her, but only to find all his letters still lying uncalled for at the post office, and to learn that Mrs. Campbell, after the death of her daughter, had sold out all her possessions and departed, and no one could tell him where she had removed to. And he had only the melancholy satisfaction of having the beloved remains of his wife removed from her humblest resting-place to the burial place of his family, and a suitable monument erected to her memory as his wife.

That after the performance of this sacred duty he had prosecuted his search for Mrs. Campbell in every direction, hoping only to learn from her something of his wife's last hours; but in vain, until in a remote region of the Highlands he had come upon traces of her recent occupation of the little Hillside Farm.

Here he learned for the first time, to his infinite surprise, that she had with her a little girl of the same name as his wife, whom she called her granddaughter. As he well knew that she had not only no other child than his wife, but no other near relative, there arose in his mind the vague hope that Alice might have left a living child; and the description of the little girl's age and appearance confirmed this new hope. Yet, if so, why had the fact never been communicated to him? And his sole object and interest now in life was to find her. But Elsie Campbell had taken her measures too carefully, and concealed her trail too successfully for this.

For years he had prosecuted this eager but ever unsuccessful search, which had for him the only hope which life still held for him.

(To be continued.)