

Choice Literature.

SALEM: A TALE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

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CHAPTER XI.—THE MERCHANT'S WIFE.

"I call her angel—but he called her wife."

It was in Salem, at noon, on Saturday, and the court, which held its sessions in the great First Church on Essex Street, had just risen and adjourned to the coming week, when Justice Jonathan Corwin, leaving the heated and oppressive air of the court room (oppressive at once to mind and body), passed with slow, dignified step, thoughtfully depressed head, and arms crossed behind him, down Essex Street, to a large house then standing upon the site of the present market-place in Derby Square, and occupied by the Honourable Colonel William Browne.

Entering unannounced, with the familiar air of a frequent and ever-welcome guest, he passed through the hall which divided the house, and opening the glass doors which closed it at its lower extremity, came out upon a vine-shaded porch or veranda, which ran across a portion of the southern or back part of the house. Below the wide, easy steps spread the flower garden, now bright in all the radiance of its summer hues; and at the extremity of the little flowery domain, the quiet, blue waters of "Browne's Cove" were rippling and flashing in the sunny light.

Upon a straight, high-backed chair on this cool and shady seclusion sat his sister, Mrs. Browne, the mistress of the establishment, still a fair and graceful matron, although now past the earlier bloom and freshness of her youthful beauty.

She was richly and becomingly dressed, after the rather gorgeous fashion of the day. A loosely fitting negligee of rich satin, of that peculiar shade of lilac-pink which we so often see in Copley's matchless portraits, was worn over a pale sea-green petticoat of quilted silk, and fell in sheeny folds to the ground. The dress was cut low and open in front, leaving her neck partially bare, and so were her white arms to the elbow; but both neck and arms were shaded and relieved by wide ruffles of the costliest lace. Her soft and still abundant dark hair was drawn off from her brow, and combed over a crape cushion—much as modern taste dictates to its votaries of the present day—and being gathered in a clasp or band at the back of the head, the ends were suffered to flow in loose, waving curls over her neck and shoulders. A string of large pearls, clasped closely around her slender throat, and a brilliant pin at the knot of ribbons at the top of her bodice (or stomacher, as it was termed), connected by a glittering chain to a massive gold watch and equipage at her side, were the common ornaments which marked her rank in life, at a period when female domestics were not accustomed to outshine their mistresses in extravagance of dress and demeanour.

We have said that she was no longer in extreme youth, but the fair face was still smooth and delicately tinted; and time, which had added thoughtfulness to the open brow, and penetration to the deep, darkly lustrous eyes, smiling beneath their finely-arched brows, had left unimpaired the almost childlike tenderness of the sweet lips.

"Good-morning, Sister Browne," said the brother, stepping out upon the veranda, and bending over her with the stately courtesy of the times, he pressed a light kiss upon her fair, round cheek.

"Good-morning, Jonathan," responded the matron, offering her hand in hospitable greeting.

"Husband not come home yet, Hannah?" inquired the visitor.

"Not yet," she replied. "The Colonel is later than usual very often nowadays. They are about fitting out two of their vessels, and my husband is often detained at the store quite beyond the usual hour. The times are so out of joint at present that it is almost impossible to procure the necessary labour. Everybody seems to be taken out of themselves, and all work is neglected, while these terrible trials are occupying all minds."

Judge Corwin made no answer, but lounged carelessly to a little table at the back of the veranda, which held a massive silver punch-bowl, richly chased round the brim with a pattern of roses and lilies of natural size. This bowl stood upon a salver of the same costly material and workmanship—a wreath of corresponding roses and lilies being enmeshed round the outer border. He lifted the heavy silver ladle, with the family arms richly engraved upon the handle, and dipping up a very moderate portion of the lemon punch, which was then the common and uncriticised non-day beverage of gentlemen, he put it into one of the tall glasses, whose slender stems were curiously enriched with a white spiral substance artfully blown into the glass, which stood in readiness to receive it; took a sip, and then returning, glass in hand, drew a chair, and seated himself near his sister, who had now quietly resumed her embroidery.

"You certainly do brew better punch than anybody else, Sister Hannah," he said approvingly. "I do not get it nearly so good at my own house as you make it."

"That may be because I make it by the old home recipe," said Mrs. Browne, smiling. "I make it just as I used to make it at father's—only the Colonel and his father both like it better made of green tea; that is the only change I have made. But won't you stay and dine with us, brother?"

"I don't know—perhaps so. What have you for dinner? Don't put me off with pudding and beans again."

"No, no!" said the hostess, laughing. "I remember that; but it is not baked-bean day to-day—it is Saturday."

"Oh, true. Then, of course, I am to conclude it is to be salt fish, beefsteak and apple pie."

"Of course it is—and will you stay?"

"Yes, thank you, I think so; for my wife is in Boston at her mother's. Here, you little ones," he said, as two of his sister's children came up from the garden, and stood at the

bottom of the steps looking at him, "run and see if you can find Jim or Sambo, or somebody or other to pull off my boots, and bring me slippers."

When this accommodation had been furnished him, he held out his hand affably to the two little ones, who had returned, and who now stood, hand in hand, at the foot of the steps, silently regarding him, the strict etiquette of the times forbidding a nearer and more familiar approach to their uncle, until such time as he might see fit to address them.

"Here sirrah!" he said at last, addressing the boy, who was the eldest of the two children, "and you, too, little maid Mary, come up here, and tell me what you have learned since I saw you last. What do you know now?—tell me."

"Nothing much, I think, uncle," said the boy, lifting his clear eyes to the inquirer's face with a look of roguish meaning, as the two stood at their uncle's knee; "I guess I know but little, and Sister Mary here don't know anything." The timid little Mary turned her eyes upon him deprecatingly, but said nothing.

"Well, my little man," said the Judge, laughing as he pinched the boy's round cheek, "that is modest, Johnny, any way. And now, if you please, tell me the little you do know. Hey, sirrah?"

"I know," said the boy stoutly, "that you are one of the judges that are trying the wicked witches, uncle."

"Ahem!" said the magistrate, settling his laced necktie, and somewhat disconcerted by the unexpected answer. "Oh! you know that, then, do you? And now your turn, my little maid—tell me, if you can, what you don't know."

Raising her clear, soft eyes to his face, the child without a moment's hesitation replied, "I don't know what you will do with all the poor witches, uncle."

"Good!" said the questioner, turning to his sister. "I could not have answered the questions better myself. Your children are quick-witted, and appear to be well posted up in the topics of the day, Sister Hannah."

"Only too much so," said the mother with a sad sigh; "it is no subject of congratulation to me, I assure you, Jonathan.—You may go now, my children. I wish to talk with your uncle. You and Mary may play in the garden till dinner time, Johnny; but do not go down to the water." As the little ones wandered away among the flowers, Mrs. Brown rose, and carefully shut the glass doors behind her, and looked anxiously up at the closed windows. Then resuming her seat by her brother's side, she spoke in low tones, but in a voice of deep feeling:

"You say my children are well posted up in the news of the day, Jonathan, and I regret to confess it is so. It is a solemn and a fearful thing to have children as young as these listening to all the details of the horrors that are going on around us. It is a fearful thing to have their young ears contaminated, and their innocent hearts hardened by such things as are the common topics of conversation; and, situated as I am, I am powerless to prevent it. They hear it on every hand. I went into the garden only this very week, and there I found John Indian and Tituba in close and earnest confabulation with my own servant; and close by them stood my innocent children, eagerly listening with open mouths and ears to the pestilent communications—swallowing all they heard, and doubtless with their imaginations all at work, conjuring even worse than they heard from hints and gestures, and wild suggestive grimaces; and yet what can I do to prevent it?"

"Order them off of your premises at once and forever—or get your husband to do it—and forbid their coming again," said the magistrate, unhesitatingly. "Or, if you wish, I will do it for you."

"Oh! no, no!—not for the world. Alas! I dare not—it is a time of too much peril. The very air is heady with danger, and sickening with horror. I feel that I am in the midst of spies and eavesdroppers," she said, glancing fearfully up at the closed windows, and dropping her voice to a still more cautious whisper. "One knows not where to look for treachery now. My power over my own servants is gone, and I am at their mercy. A chance-dropped word, innocent as it may be, may be caught up and twisted from its meaning, and carried away to those who will know how to make a fearful use of it. It has come to this, brother, that I, a quiet, home-keeping matron—a believing, and, I hope, a consistent Christian—connected by birth and marriage with the most influential families in the land—I, the daughter of Judge George Corwin, and wife of the Honourable William Browne, dare not, in my own house, to speak my own mind or order my own servants, lest I should draw down a fearful vengeance on myself, or my dear ones. I cannot bear it any longer. I seem to be stifling in this dreadful atmosphere; and it was this in part that I wanted to tell you, Jonathan—I have made up my mind to leave the country."

"Hannah, what do you mean? Where will you go?"

"Home to England. My husband has duties that will call him to the Court of St. James—you know he has been out before—and he has promised to take me and my children with him. If, by the mercy of God, this horrible cloud is ever dispersed, I will return—if not, I will remain there. Our fathers left England to enjoy freedom of conscience, and the liberty of thought and speech, and we have been taught to honour them for it. I will go back in pursuit of the same inestimable blessings."

"And does your husband approve of this step?" asked her brother in surprise.

"He consents to it."

"But, my dear sister, this decision of yours appears to me premature—at least, I think you are nervous, and causelessly alarmed. What possible danger can reach you, secure as you are in your social and moral position?"

"No more secure than others have believed themselves to be, Jonathan. Oh, my brother! think of Mrs. Nurse—the purest, truest, humblest Christian; of high standing in the Church, and blameless in character. I knew her well. She was with me in many of my trials—she was at the birth of all my children; and in the dark days when it pleased God to take my precious ones from me, she was with me, sustaining my weaker faith and trembling spirits under sick-

ness, suffering and loss, by her more fervent piety and gentle ministrations. Oh! I knew her well; no child ever turned to its mother in surer confidence of finding the support and sympathy it needed than I did to her, and she never failed me; and where is she now? Snatched from the home of which she was the loved and loving centre; reviled and deserted by the neighbours she had served and blessed; excommunicated by the Church of Christ, of which she had long been an honoured member; her innocent life lied away by malicious tongues; she was imprisoned for months; she met a felon's death; and her poor remains are not even allowed to rest in hallowed ground. Oh, brother! forgive me if I speak too strongly, but my heart is full of bitterness; and how do I know if, before another week closes, I may not myself occupy the cell from which she has gone, and my little children be cast out to the mercy of the cold world, as so many other poor children have been?"

For a few moments Jonathan Corwin sat meditating in gloomy silence, his head resting on his hand, while Mrs. Browne wept silently. At last, raising his head, he asked in trembling tones:

"Hannah, do you blame me; do you hold me responsible for all this? if you do, you must look upon me as a murderer."

"No, Jonathan," answered his sister, laying her hand kindly upon his, "I do not mean to blame you; I know that your office has its painful duties; I do not believe you ever willfully wronged any one; but I do think that you are blinded and deceived; you are my own brother in the flesh, and still more the dear brother of my affections, and I know your heart is a good and a true one; it grieves me to differ from you—but I must bear my honest testimony to you that I think you are misled in this matter. I know something of these girls—these 'accusers,' as they are called: I have known Abigail Williams ever since she first came here, and I know her to be an artful, designing, false-hearted girl; I know, too, that Elizabeth Hubbard, the niece of Dr. Griggs his wife, and I know no good of her whatever; and Ann Putnam, too, she has always been known to be a mischievous, malicious girl; I know, too, a little about Mary Warren and Sarah Churchill—Sarah, indeed, lived with me a little while, and I dismissed her for lying. I believe they are both moved by revenge for fancied wrongs against their employers. I know, also, that for months past, indeed all through the winter, these girls have been practising all manner of charms and enchantments, all sorts of sorceries and black arts, under the teaching of those pagan slaves of Mr. Parris—until their brains are overset, and their sense of right and wrong is wholly perverted."

"I do not dare to say how far their sufferings and fits are real or assumed. How far they are acting a part I cannot tell, of course; but I do believe that if they are not insane, they are themselves bedevilled."

"I cannot understand why their testimony is so freely taken, while that of others is rejected; these insolent, artful girls, whose flippant and reviling tongues are dealing death so recklessly—who are boldly clamouring against lives worth far more than their own—why are they entitled to such credence? Tell me, my brother, do our laws condemn one without allowing him a chance to defend himself? and yet, it is well known, these unhappy prisoners are not allowed counsel; they are not allowed to speak for themselves, unless it is to confess, and all witnesses in their favour are set aside—is this right, is this impartial justice, is this English law?" and she paused.

"Tell me," she said, trying to speak more calmly, "do you get on any? do you see any light breaking in upon this horrible darkness?"

"No," replied the magistrate, sadly; "I must confess I do not."

"Have there been any more arrests or commitments?"

"Several."

"Any new condemnations?"

"Alas! my sister—do not ask me."

"I must ask, Jonathan, and you must hear me. Oh, my brother! remember that the sword of justice is a fearful thing—it is a two-edged weapon, too, Jonathan; beware, lest it turn in your grasp, and wound the hand that wields it."

"I do not understand you, Hannah; how do you mean?"

"I mean that this terrible power, thus encouraged and helped on by the ministry, the law and by medical science, is growing daily more and more exacting; by you fail to see that the victims it demands are daily more numerous, and of a higher class in life?—tell me, brother, what will you do if they should accuse your wife, or me?"

"Nay, my sister, you jest—that cannot be—it is impossible."

"Not so; we may be cried out upon any day, any hour; what would you do? Would you believe their accusations against us?"

"Hannah—how can you ask it? No! ten thousand times no!"

"But why not, if the evidence were conclusive? you believed it in other cases, why not in ours?"

"Why not? because it would be too monstrous; because I know you both incapable of such things."

"Perhaps so; but how would that avail us? you could not convey your convictions of our innocence to other minds. So did I believe in the entire innocence of my poor old friend, Goody Nurse—and so did hundreds of others—but what did that avail her? At my urgent request my husband drew up a paper in testimony of her worth, and her blameless life, and many of our best people signed it gladly; but the petition of her friends was rejected, and the words of those miserable children, and of one or two other persons who were known to have a grudge against her or her family, took away her life. Oh! I shudder when I contemplate the widespread misery, the sea of blood that lies before us;—when shall it end?"

"But what can be done, Hannah? I, for one, am open to conviction; suggest a better course."

"I would give the accused a fairer trial; I would have