

Choice Literature.

SALEM: A TALE OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY.

BY D. R. CASTLETON.

CHAPTER XVII.—IN DANGER.

"Send down Thy bright-winged angel, Lord!
Amid the night so wild;
And bid him come and breathe upon
And heal our gentle child."

Again darkness shed its shadowy wings over the little dwelling of Mistress Campbell, and its inmates separated; but again poor Alice passed a restless, feverish night, tossing and turning in painful sleeplessness, wearied and exhausted in mind and body, but still seemingly condemned to sad watchfulness.

It might have been something peculiar in the heavy atmosphere which oppressed her, for the sultry night air was surcharged with electricity; or it might have been merely the natural result of the overtasking of nerve and brain which the sensitive girl had undergone during the last two days; but sleep seemed denied her.

Oh! how welcome to her would have been only one short hour of that calm, dreamless slumber, light as the sleep of infancy, which she had never learned to appreciate till the lesson came to her through its loss. Oh! for only one short hour of blessed sleep, to calm her wild, feverish unrest—to take the sting of pain out of the hot and dazzled eyes, whose aching lids seemed as if they would never again close over the strained vision.

In vain. She lay, restlessly tossing and moaning—only made conscious of a momentary drowse, when a sudden nervous start betrayed to her that she had been treading the border-lands of sleep. Yet it was not so much the memories of the past, or the doubts, hopes and anxieties of the future, which dwelt now upon her mind, and kept her waking, as it had been the night before. Her mind was, perhaps, quite as much and unnaturally overtasked; but it was far less clear, and its condition was also wholly different.

On the preceding night, although painfully excited and disturbed, the action of her mind had still been coherent and natural—the objects which had then passed in review before her were real, though distressing, and she had mind and memory enough to think them out, and follow them up to their legitimate conclusion; but now it was the delirium of coming fever—her mind drifted beyond her control, and her brain was filled with the rapidly-shifting, weird and often grotesque visions of an incoherent and disordered imagination.

A strange physical drowsiness, that was not sleep, contented with a fierce mental activity that was not wakefulness; and she lay, vaguely watching the procession of fantastic figures which moved around her, wondering if they could be real, yet wholly unable to convince herself that they were false; now feebly laughing at their mocking show—then cowering from them in weak terror.

Slowly—slowly, the heavy hours of the night crept by; and was it wonderful if, when the tardy morning broke at last, she was wholly unable to rise—unable to lift her weary, aching head from its heated pillow—and that her grandmother found her with burning cheeks, rapid pulse, throbbing temples, and all the terrible premonitory symptoms of fever?

But Elsie Campbell, who was an experienced and tender nurse, though fully aware of the danger which threatened her darling, met it with calm, determined and active remedies. With her loving heart wrung to its very core, she wasted no time in idle questions or useless protestations; her loving, active hands shut out the light from the sad, staring eyes—tenderly bound the moistened linen round the tortured brow—bathed the burning cheeks, and held the cooling drink to the parched and thirsting lips. She fanned the languid sufferer, lifted the feeble form to an easier position, or held the aching head upon her kind, maternal bosom.

It seemed as if all memory of their recent feud had passed from the mind of each—all was forgiven and forgotten. Alice, moaning and tossing, with the unconscious selfishness which sickness so often awakens in the inexperienced in suffering, calling freely for all her grandmother's tender care and loving sympathy, forgot she had so lately doubted them; and poor Elsie, hanging over her in soothing ministrations, with a perpetual prayer in her heart, remembered only her darling's present danger, and forgot she had ever been less than dutiful.

Mistress Campbell was well skilled in all the homely curative lore upon which, in the olden days, experience relied. She knew the health-giving properties hidden in herbs and roots and barks—the simple remedies drawn from Nature's own laboratory—and which, if possibly less potent for good, were far more harmless than the drugs of our modern pharmacists; and, so, through the long, uncounted hours of the bright, hot summer's day—through the slow-moving watches of the sultry summer night—the patient watcher kept her weary place by the sick-bed, with tireless love, and tender, soothing words; and by her skill and love seemed to hold even the "king of terrors" at bay, and actually to ward off the impending danger. It was a fearful contest, for life or death, and often poor Mistress Campbell's heart sank within her; but as the second day drew toward its close her experienced eye detected a hopeful though very gradual change.

The burning fever was lessened; the torturing pain in the temples was subdued; the restlessly tossing limbs relaxed their painful tension, and sunk into easier attitudes of rest; the rapid pulse grew slower and more regular; the quick, gasping respiration became deeper and less rapid; a gentle moisture broke out upon the parched skin, and Alice

dozed off into a light and broken slumber beneath the glad eyes of the watcher, who held her breath to listen with thankful heart, as the health-bringing sleep grew more and more profound, until, as the cooler shades of night came on, the young sufferer lay in calm and peaceful rest, beneath the glad eyes that ventured now to weep in very thankfulness.

Deeper and deeper grew that blessed, saving slumber as the night wore on, only broken when Alice was aroused to take the offered medicine or nourishment, which she received with grateful consciousness, and then sank back to quiet sleep again; and still the grandmother watched and waited, with a perpetual song of thanksgiving at her heart.

It was late in the morning of the third day when Alice awoke from her restorative sleep calm and refreshed, and with a clear brain; but weak—oh! weak—to almost infantine weakness. Instinctively she turned her head to address her faithful watcher; but she missed the dear old familiar face, which she remembered had bent like that of a guardian angel above her. But with returning clearness of mind had come back Alice's habitual thoughtfulness for the comfort of others; and remembering her grandmother's patient and protracted watching, she naturally concluded she had left her to seek the refreshment of needed sleep, and she kept very quiet, resolved not to disturb her, but to wait patiently until she came to her.

But she waited long and vainly no one came; and at last, feeling the need of nourishment, and hearing Winny moving with restless steps in the room below, she called to her, faintly, at first, for fear of disturbing her grandmother; but as her call seemed unheard or unheeded, she raised herself painfully from her pillow and called again.

And Winny came—but what had happened? What was the awful horror that spoke in those great, wildly-rolling eyes which had blanched to a gray ashiness that dusky face?

"Oh! Winny, Winny, what is it? Oh! tell me—tell me at once, murmured the girl's pale, quivering lips—'tell me what it is. I can bear anything better than silence. Tell me—oh! tell me—or I shall—'"

And poor Winny, thus affrighted, did tell. She had been cautioned not to tell—to wait, and let others break the sad tidings carefully to Alice; but grief and horror rendered all precaution impossible to her, as, throwing herself down in abject terror, she burst out with the terrible truth in all the passionate volubility of her race.

Goody Campbell had been cried out upon by the accusing girls—the constables had come with a warrant that morning and taken her away to gaol, to be tried as a witch, like poor Goody Nurse!

And Alice heard and comprehended it all—and then, shrieking in wild delirium, she sunk back upon her bed in utter unconsciousness and knew no more.

CHAPTER XVIII.—MISTRESS CAMPBELL'S TRIAL

"Perchance Elijah thought his fate was sealed—
That God had sent premonitory warning;
And that the croaking ravens but revealed
His death to-morrow morning."

When poor Mistress Campbell, dizzy with want of sleep, and worn and weary with her anxious and long-protracted watch, was summoned from her grandchild's sick-bed, in the chill gray of the early morning, to encounter the stern messengers of the law, her first instinctive thought was fear that Alice might be disturbed.

Of her own impending danger she took not the slightest heed—indeed, she scarcely realized it; for, conscious of her own entire innocence of the crime imputed to her, and ignorant that she had any enemies or ill-wishers, she never doubted that the whole thing was a mistake, and that it needed only to be explained to be rectified at once; and she confidently made this assertion. But in answer to this the officers produced the warrant for her arrest, in which her name was plainly inserted.

Still, though surprised and indignant at the ignominy and shame which such a charge, even if unfounded, must leave upon her hitherto spotless good name in the little community, she felt no personal fear for the result. Her only thought was for Alice—Alice, sick and in danger. How could she leave her when perhaps that precious life—so much dearer than her own—yet hung upon her continued care?—and with tears and entreaties that she would have scorned to use in her own behalf, she pleaded earnestly for a short delay.

She told the officials of the dangerous nature of her grandchild's illness, and tried to touch their feelings. She promised, with solemn protestations, that she would not leave the house, but would consider herself their prisoner—and wait, and be found there, ready to answer any future legal summons, if they would only leave her for a few days to watch over her sick child. But she pleaded in vain; her words fell upon unheeding ears. Possibly the men had, by virtue of their office, become inured to such scenes, and their hearts were hardened to them; or it might be that the very imputation of being a witch had cut her off from all human sympathy; but the officials were deaf to her tearful pleading, inexorable in the performance of their cruel duties, and would admit of no delay.

Still, even then, amid all the agitation of that hurried and terrible home-leaving, with true motherly love, the afflicted woman thought only of Alice, and contrived to send a message to her loving friends at Nurse's Farm to inform them of her own arrest and Alice's illness, and asking them to come and comfort and care for her darling in her own enforced absence from her home.

And these sisters in affliction answered the appeal at once, and hastened to Alice's bedside though not, as we have seen, in time to prevent the terrible disclosure which poor terrified Winny had made.

But it would have made, possibly, but little difference in fact how the terrible story was told. No cautious words, however carefully chosen—no tender, pitying tones, however sympathetic—could have robbed that awful communi-

cation of its fearful meaning. But they found poor Alice wildly raving in a relapse of the fever which her grandmother's devotion and skill had so nearly averted, and they took charge of the desolate household, and watched over the suffering girl with sisterly love.

But while Alice, blessed by her very unconsciousness, lay battling with the fierce fever which had fastened upon her, and tended by the loving care of the few true and faithful friends whom misfortune and danger only drew more closely to her side, her grandmother's free and active spirit chafed in her close confinement within the narrow limits of the jail.

The clever, bustling, active housekeeper, who had kept herself busy with all the details of her little household, and to whom fresh air and active out-of-door exercise seemed to be a very necessity of her being, was helpless and cramped in chains and bondage; she, to whom "cleanliness was next to godliness," was sickened and disgusted by the dirt and discomfort all around her; and far more than all these lesser evils was the heart's deep craving for the companionship of her child, from whom until now she had never been separated for a single night since Alice's infancy; and now this one treasure of her otherwise desolate heart was ill—possibly dying—and she was kept from her.

This thought exasperated her beyond measure. Her knowledge of her own entire innocence made the unfounded charge seem an absurdity in her eyes. She could not realize that others, from a different standpoint, took different views; and she felt a thorough contempt for what seemed to her the willful blindness of her accusers and prosecutors, and this sentiment she did not hesitate openly to declare.

It was strange that her reliance upon her own innocence should have rendered her thus fearless, with the tragic fate of poor Goody Nurse before her, for she believed in her friend's integrity as fully as in her own. But then it must be remembered that Rebecca Nurse had made many personal enemies by the part she had taken in the former Church controversy, and to their malicious revenge many persons attributed her condemnation; while she herself was wholly uncompromised in these matters, and was not aware of an enemy.

At length, when worn with her confinement and irritated with delay, she was arraigned for trial, and the same formulas were gone through with that had marked the trials of her unfortunate predecessors; but Elsie Campbell, with her heart full of anxiety for her child, and bitter contempt and hatred of her judges, was a sharp match for the sharpest of her opponents.

Reckless of all possible consequences—fearless by nature—sure that a trial must make her innocence clear to all—and stung to madness by the uncalculated malice of her accusers and the injustice of her confinement, her sharp Scottish shrewdness and quick mother wit flashed back upon them in angry, scornful words.

When she was placed at the bar Justice Hathorne (who seems to have combined in his own single person the several duties of judge and prosecuting officer, in a manner that is incomprehensible to our modern ideas of legal etiquette) thus addressed her:

"Elsie Campbell, look at me. You are now in the hands of authority, answer, then, with truth."

"I kinna answer ye wi' ony ither. The truth is my mither tongue—I aye speak it."

"Tell me, then, why do you torment these children?"

"I dinna torment them. I niver hurted a bairn in my life—I'd scorn to do it."

"But they say that you do."

"I kinna help wha' they say. I am jist an honest, God-fearin' woman; I dinna ken aught o' yer witchcraft."

"But what, then, makes them say it of you?"

"Hoo suld I ken? I kinna lash mysel' to tell hoo illa fuie's tongue may wag."

"But do you not know that if you are guilty you cannot hide it?"

"Haith! an' I ken that weel know; an' sae do the Lord abune us."

"Yea, He doth; and He hath power to discover the guilty and bring them to open shame."

"In varry deed he hath. He can gie wisdom to the simple—may He open the een o' magistrates and ministers."

"Do you think to find mercy by denying and aggravating your sin?"

"Alas! that is a true word—na, I dinna think it."

"You should look for it, then, in God's way."

"An' sae I do; an' in nae ither."

"Here are three or four witnesses who testify against you."

"Weel-a-weel, an' what kin I do? Many may rise up again' me—I kinna help it. If a' be again' me, what can I do?"

"I kinna just now that we magistrates needed to have our eyes opened."

"Did I say that? Na—na, I but said I prayed it might be."

"Do you mean to say that we are blind, then?"

"I suld think ye maun be, if ye can see a witch at a' in me."

"I hear you have said that you would open our eyes for us."

"Na—na, I ne'er said the word: I wad na' be the presumptuous."

"What do you mean by that?"

"That I think it is far abune me. I wad take the power o' Him who opened blind Bartimeus' eyes."

This allusion to the supposed professional blindness of the court which the prisoner at the bar was accused of having made seems to have rankled in the breast of Justice Hathorne with peculiar bitterness; and her spirited answer, although it might silence, was certainly not calculated to conciliate him—indeed, the whole conduct and bearing of the prisoner, both in confinement and upon trial, was so irritating in the extreme, and such as to increase the prejudice already existing against her.

(To be continued.)