

LITERATURE, &c.

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THE TWO FIRESIDES.

A TALE FOR THE CHRISTMAS HOLIDAYS.

By Georgina C. Munro.

PART I.—THE CHRISTMAS HEARTH.

The wanderer beside Lake Huron would find it difficult to number the lovely spots he encounters along its shores, wearing charms which well might tempt him to wish it were his fate to linger there forever. Very fair are they in their summer beauty, with flowers of a hundred brilliant dyes enamelling the verdant turf, and gleaming amid the varied greens of the primeval forests, while the sunny waters break in murmuring music on long miles of glittering sand. And not less fair are they when winter wraps the wild woods in her veil of dazzling white, and the wide fields of glassy ice, and broad tracts of untrodden snow, alike are flashing in the sunlight.

Perhaps one of the loveliest of these spots is a secluded bay, low down on its western shore, where the lake begins to contract its vast surface preparatory to pouring its huge volume of water into the comparatively narrow limits of lake Erie. When first we saw that bay it wore its winter garb of silver, and the same was its aspect at the time our story opens, many years previous to our visit, while still old Richard Hewston and his family were the only white people who had passed more than a day or two within sight of the tall dark cliff which stood like a mighty obelisk on one of the enclosing points.

Hewston was one of those seemingly incongruous characters which are so frequently to be met with. So far as concerned the world at large, he might have been thought that thing which never yet had existence—a being without a heart; yet towards his own family he was all warmth, and kindness, and affection. But these loved ones were few in number, and all comprised in the little circle which gathered round his hearth, as the early nightfall of Christmas eve spread darkness over the Huron. A fierce storm raged without: the wind moaned and howled, as though it bore the voices of evil spirits lamenting His advent who crushed their sway on earth; and in the forest branches were broken and trees bent, as if by the passage of some giant monster. But though the log cabin shook as the wild blasts dashed against its frailty, the cold breath of the tempest pierced not through the thick plaster which filled the inequalities between the massive logs which formed its walls; while the huge fire which blazed high on the wide hearth, and cast over the room a bright red glow, beneath which the candle-light paled, banished from its genial presence all feeling of wintry chill.

Before the fire sat Hewston, still a hale man of sixty; on one side was his son—now his only one—and on the other his son's wife, whom he loved as though she had been in truth his daughter, and on his knee sat his eldest grandson, the joy and hope of his advancing years. A twin sister of this little one was engaged in sportive contest with her father for some favorite toy; and by the mother's side an infant boy lay sleeping in its cradle. It was a sweet picture of domestic happiness; love beamed from every countenance, and no dark or evil passion seemed capable of dwelling where all was so calm and bright.

Yet, after a time, as they sat talking, a shadow from the past fell on them, and a mournfulness stole over their spirits and their words. The grandfather's gaze lingered on the face of the child he was caressing until a tear dimmed the eyes which strove to read in its infantine features a bright promise of the future.

'How like he is to my dear, lost Edward!' said the old man sorrowfully; 'there is the same dark eye, the same proud look, and the same bright smile with which he bade me last farewell. But you must be Edward to me, my little Henry—you must be noble and good and dutiful like him, and be to me all he would have been if he had lived. Alas!' added Hewston, 'how little thought I a year ago that so few would cheer my hearth at Christmas Eve! Surely,' he muttered between his teeth, 'surely a father's curse will cling to the hands which smote him!'

The daughter-in-law shuddered at the terrible memory he called forth, and a frown contracted the son's open forehead, and his lips were steadily compressed for some minutes, then he said—

'Do not speak of it, father, on this night. I would not have my heart filled with unchristian feelings.'

'If one can help it, William,' replied the old man. 'But when I think of my sons, so good, so clever, and so fearless, who never cost me a pang until the hour when their fate was told to me—'

'It turns one's heart as savage as their's who did the deed,' interrupted young Hewston.

'Vengeance is mine, and I will repay, saith the Lord,' said his wife, in a low, sweet voice.

'Nay, Margaret, I think not of vengeance; my hand has never shed man's blood, and seeks not to attempt it. But it is more than I can do to prevent my own blood boiling in my veins, when I think that, no longer ago than when the leaves were thick upon the trees around us, my young brothers died a

death of torture, inflicted on them by those they had never wronged—with whom they had no quarrel.'

And setting down the child, who, startled at his agitated demeanor, sank trembling to her mother's side, William Hewston paced the room with rapid steps.

Such silence as the storm permitted, continued unbroken for some time, while the heart of each was too much engrossed with its own emotions to seek relief in words. Then the latch of the door was raised by some person without, and the door attempted to be opened. But the bolts had been drawn, not as a precaution against intrusion, for months would sometimes pass without that solitude being invaded by any stranger's step, but to oppose sufficient resistance to the wild guests which threatened every instant to dash it to the earth.

'There is some one wants admission,' said William Hewston, pausing in his hurried walk; and after a moment he strode towards the door, but ere he could reach it, a clenched hand, it seemed, knocked loudly and impatiently.

'They are in a great hurry,' observed old Hewston, rising with a no well-pleased countenance.

'Some poor unfortunate traveller exposed to this dreadful tempest,' observed his daughter-in-law.

By this time the door was open, and a tall, handsome Indian stood on the threshold.

'What do you want?' demanded old Hewston.

His meaning was understood, if not his words, and the stranger answered in that patois of Indian and Canadian French more or less familiar to all sojourners in those regions: 'I come to ask my pale-face brother for food and shelter.'

'Not beneath this roof,' exclaimed Hewston. 'No Indian shall ever eat my bread, or sit by my fire.'

A dark and angry shade overspread the Indian's face, which at first was gloomy. But he checked all evidence of indignation, and stepping aside, pointed to a form wrapped in blankets, that reclined half on the snowy earth just beyond the threshold, half in the arms of a boy about sixteen, who, like the elder Indian, had no mantle or blanket to protect him from the icy wind and drifting snow, which even during this short interval, came on the eddying wind like frozen spray into the room.

'My wife is sick,' said he earnestly, 'or an Indian would not ask the pale-face for what he wants to keep. But it is cold for the woman in the forest, and the wind is freezing her heart like a pool. Through the tempest she hears the voice of her fathers, calling from the gardens of the happy, and her spirit is ready to fly away like a summer bird when the leaves are falling. But the fire of the paleface would bid the bird linger in her nest, and the food that is in my brother's lodge would give her strength to go forward on her path when the sun shines again.'

'Hearken to me,' said Hewston, in a voice whose very sternness and coldness were the effects of concentrated though controlled emotion. 'Hearken to me, Indian! When the summer came last I had three sons—now I have one. The other two were tortured to death by Indian hands, and their bones are bleaching far away in the wilderness, where I cannot go to bury them. And women mocked them in their agony, and children laughed at their torments; and neither man, or woman, or child of your race shall ever receive kindness or friendship at my hands.'

The Indian's eyes were fixed intently on Hewston's face while he was speaking, and when he had ended they turned steadily and inquiringly upon his son. But coldly and in silence William folded his arms, and stepped back, evidently resolved on no interference with whatever might be his father's will on the subject. Then the silence was broken by Margaret, who had glided to the old man's side.

'Father!' she exclaimed, 'you will not turn a fellow creature from the door on such a night as this?'

'Peace Margaret!' he said sternly. 'Did they remember my sons were their fellow creatures when they slew them cruelly in cold blood? Begone,' he continued, turning to the Indian. 'I have said, and I have sworn it with an oath I will not break, that not one of your accursed race shall ever come within these walls except on enmity.'

'Father, Father!' once more besought Margaret, clinging to his arm, 'on this night, of all others, you will not send away a woman to die, for want of those comforts which God has bestowed on us! At this season, when peace and good will towards men were proclaimed by angel voices, you cannot be so cruel, so unfeeling. Oh, show unto others the mercy which has been shown unto us! Father, father, you can be kindness itself! Oh, William, you are not hard-hearted!—do not, do not, I implore you, commit this outrage against humanity!'

But William turned away, resolved not, even by a look, to answer her appeal; and his father replied, coldly—'Silence girl; you know not what it is to lose a son. Shut the door William, we have had too much of this.'

As he spoke, he retreated towards the fire, still careful as he had been all along, to shelter with his thick loose coat the child who was nestling in his bosom. The Indian's eyes glared fiercely on him for a moment; but if the thought of violence entered his mind, it was but fleeting—perhaps the remembrance that there were two powerful men against one, armed though he was, and the sight of rifles resting in a corner of the room deterred him. How-

ever, after that one fiery glance, he stepped back haughtily, without another word; and, as William closed the door, he saw him raise the woman from the ground. Then their forms were shut out from view—the bright red flames soared up the ample chimney, and shed their warm glow on all around—and save the floor, and the black walnut table, still wet where the snow-drift had melted, there remained no signs of the homeless wanderers.

Deeply grieved, and sore at heart, Margaret returned to her seat, and, burying her face in her hands, wept bitterly, though in silence, while old Hewston sat gazing steadily on the blazing fire, and William resumed his walk to and fro the room, with downcast eyes and firmly-set teeth, as one but half satisfied with the part he had been playing, yet striving to find a sufficient warrant in his own outraged feelings. During the conference with the Indian, a lull had come over the violence of the tempest; and it still continued, rendering the general silence more perceptible and oppressive. The old man was the first to speak.

'Come Margaret, dry your tears, that's a good girl,' said he, kindly; 'there is no cause for all this grief. How know we that this story was not all a make up, to impose on us, and discover whether we had anything to make it worth while killing us—for these savages are wily as serpents, and quite as cruel. And if all was as it seemed, my dear girl, you need not even them be so distressed, and allow your fancy to run on people frozen to death, and all such horrors; for Indians have resources which we should never dream of; and depend upon it they would find a way to make themselves perfectly comfortable, if it were twice as cold, and twice as tempestuous. But, had they come into this house, Margaret, I must have gone forth into the woods, for never could I have rested beneath the same roof with one of the very savages, perhaps, that robbed me of my children.'

Margaret thought that still they might have done somewhat towards ameliorating the condition of the unfortunate wanderers; but she did not say so, for the nature of the blow which had once deprived him of his two younger sons, had mingled a bitterness, and almost ferocity, with his grief, which bade her shrink from irritating him uselessly; for, only five months before, the young Hewston's had visited an American village on the other side of Lake Huron, and, on the very night of their arrival, a band of Indians, in revenge for some affront, burst upon the village, laid it in ashes, killed all the inhabitants who did not escape into the woods, and, taking the two Hewstons alive, carried them off to their own village, where the unfortunate young men perished at the stake. Careless and cold as he had ever been towards all who did not really and truly belong to him, this was enough to excite in Hewston's heart an absolute hatred to every one in any way connected with the savage agents of his bereavement, and, however it might in time subside, his loss was far too recent for the tide of fierce excitement not to be still raging at its highest.

The evening passed sadly and gloomily, for painful thoughts were haunting each. By midnight the storm had moaned and wept itself to rest—but the memory of its mournful wail was lingering in the Hewstons' dreams, and thrilling in their ears, as the noises of those loved and lost, or vainly pined.

How brightly rose the Christmas sun over the snow-robed earth! When young Hewston opened the door and looked around him, he might have thought that no steps had ever penetrated to the shores of that lonely bay, so smooth and white the untrodden snow lay glittering in the morning sun-rays. All was calm and bright, as though the spirit of storm had never waved his pinions over the scene. William gazed on its deep repose, there came over him a feeling of wonder what had become of the Indian strangers, but he checked it hastily, and, speaking cheerfully to his father who had followed him from the house, untroubled by any such sensations, the two proceeded on their usual forenoon walk to visit the traps for hares and martins they had set in the forest, and examine the fishing lines which, according to Canadian custom, were fixed through holes broken in the ice; for although they made it a holiday by leaving their rifles at home, the few occupations winter permitted were regarded too much as amusements to be entirely relinquished, although it was Christmas day.

But, left alone with the children, who, engaged in their merry sports, heeded little her abstraction, Margaret's thoughts reverted, with painful frequency, to the past night's recurrences, and bitterly she reproached herself with the supineness which had allowed her to witness an act of inhumanity without making a greater effort to prevent it. But such regrets were useless now; and most welcome were the numerous tasks which Christmas brought thronging round her, to distract, in some degree, her thoughts from that distressing subject, though do what she would, she could not banish it entirely.

At length her tasks were almost ended, and as the hour drew near for dinner, Margaret looked with some satisfaction on her preparations for the annual festival. The cloth was neatly laid before the blazing fire, at which hung a sirloin, which, together with the partridge, looked fit for an alderman's board—for like most families in all comfortable circumstances, the Hewstons killed a bullock for winter consumption, a part of which was kept in a frozen state, perfectly fresh till Christmas. Then, on a side table, stood ready-bottled cider, from the older districts, of that unequalled quality obtained by freezing and separating

every drop of water from the more spirituous portion, with nuts, and cakes, and raspberry and strawberry tarts, made with fruit of her own preserving; and all looked so nice and tempting, she knew that William and his father must praise; and the children were already so nearly wild with delight; that to save the objects of their admiration from premature demolition, she had been obliged to send Harry out to play, and set Caroline to rock the cradle of her baby-brother.

And now she hears the welcome steps approach the door, and, with a joyful smile, hastens to open it. Old Hewston's eye took in the scene at a glance. 'You are the very girl for a settler's wife!' cried he embracing her affectionately. 'Show me another who could have prepared us such a Christmas feast in the wilderness, with no confusion, no fuss—but all as neat and quiet as if you'd half-a-dozen servants, and kitchen and parlor were not one. And here we come back, you see, just when you bade us, ready to carve your roast and do fall justice to your pies and puddings. But where is Harry?'

'Did he not come in with you? He is just outside then. Call him William.'

William did so, and, as the room was warm, and the day unusually mild, left the door open, expecting every moment the child would come bounding in. But the dinner was placed on the table, and yet no Harry made his appearance. The father went out again, but though he made the air resound with the boy's name, there was no answer; and, after making a rapid circuit of the house, and all spots near at hand where Harry was likely to be lingering, he returned once more to the house. The mother turned deadly pale at his tidings, and the grandfather rose from the table, while William, who possessed no arguments to soothe his wife's fears, resumed in silence the great coat and fur cap he had so lately laid aside, and took his rifle from its resting-place. The elder Hewston followed his example, but still little was said, for a horrible dread hung over all, to which none wished to give words.

'Oh, could I not go with you?' came at last from the pale lips of the young mother, with clasped hands, and marble-rigidity of form, she stood gazing on those who were about setting forth to seek her child.

'No, no, Margaret—stay to take care of those who are still spared to us!' replied William, as, with an agitation which betrayed the extent of his fears, he caught her to his heart, then, murmuring a blessing on her and then hastened from the house.

The traces of the child's little restless feet on the smooth snow were innumerable, but they formed a mazy net work, which made it difficult to tell where he had trodden last. He was so light also, that where the snow was crisper and firmer than usual, he scarcely could be tracked. Still, it seemed impossible that he could wander to any distance, without leaving signs of his passage sufficient for them to follow.

But though they searched carefully, no such traces were to be discovered beyond the space where the little foot-prints were so numerous, nor did the newly fallen snow, so ready to betray every step, give hint or sign of the child's whereabouts.

But, after a little time, just as they had abandoned the hope of tracing the child by such means, and were beginning to search in every direction without a clue, William chanced to cross the track by which he had gone forth in the morning. The strange appearance of one of the footprints caught his eye, and stooping to examine it carefully, he perceived that a second foot had trod in it. He instantly summoned his father, and though all alike wore moccasins, it became evident by comparing their own with the foot-prints, that some other person had passed in the same direction from the house, treading cautiously in the younger Hewston's steps; and a more rigid examination discovered, by a few betraying traces here and there, that the stranger had first gone towards the house, and then by his return, obliterated almost entirely the signs of all but what might pass for being William's footsteps.

They looked at each other for a moment, and each read the other's thoughts. There was no mistaking the hand that had struck the blow. The father grew ashy pale, and his brow like midnight was on the grandfather's brow; but the intensity of their feelings was too deep for words, and they spoke not until they had rapidly pursued the track down to where it was lost on the glare ice of the bay, where they had themselves crossed it on their outward path. Then a fierce execration burst from the elder's lips, while the younger's words, 'My poor, unhappy Margaret!' showed how much, even at this moment, his distress was aggravated by the thought of her.

[To be continued.]

From Hogg's Instructor.

THE PRESENT AGE.

ITS CHARACTERISTICS AND REAGTIVE TENDENCIES.

We are now ready in glance at some of the leading characteristics of the present age, at those which lie on the surface, and in which all are more or less interested. It is an age of

1. Scientific research, eager and successful. Without attempting logical accuracy, we may say that all science has respect to such questions as these: 'What are we? Where do we dwell? What is the universe? To answer the first question is the province of mental and of moral science, with those of health, disease,