

THE COLUMBIA DEMOCRAT.

"I have sworn upon the Altar of God, eternal hostility to every form of Tyranny over the Mind of Man."—Thomas Jefferson.

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MISCELLANEOUS.

From the Lady's Book.

MY UNCLE NICHOLAS.

BY RICHARD PEEN SMITH.

Call no man happy 'till you know the nature of his death; he is at best but fortunate.

Solon to Creesus.

Time eats the children he begets, and the memory of few men outlive their monuments; nay, myriads pass into oblivion even before the elements have sullied their epitaphs. My Uncle Nicholas, notwithstanding his deserts, has not escaped this order of things. I knew him in the April of my years—the flower-time of life; and as my mind reverts to those sunny days, the first object it rests upon is the beloved image of my uncle Nicholas.

He was a placid being, over flowing with the best of humanities. His heart and his doors were open to all his fellow beings, and there was not a creature endowed with animal life, towards which he did not sidiously avoid giving pain. His dogs loved him, and he could not walk abroad into his fields but his cattle followed him, and fed out of his hand.

"He was a scholar, a ripe and a good one," at least I viewed him as such in my boyhood. His mind was stored with good learning, but his favorite companions were those hearty old poets who have retained their freshness for centuries, and who possess a re-productive faculty that will make them bionom through succeeding ages.—With what delight would he pore over the harmonious numbers of Spenser, and Drayton, and Drummond, and the vigorous dramatists of those times! and there was scarcely a gem of the minor poets that he had not culled to grace his memory. These he would recite with all the feeling and enthusiasm of early life, and at times I imagined they were golden links that inseparably bound him to his boyhood. They appeared to possess the faculty of making him young again.

He was a quiet humorist, but with no more gall than might be found in a dove.—His face was ever mantling with some pleasant thought, and his mind flowed on as gently as a secret brook, that ever and anon dimples and smiles at its own babbling.

He was married, and my aunt was one of the gentlest of creatures. You might have searched the world without finding a pair whose hearts and minds so perfectly harmonised. She was a delicately attuned instrument, ever breathing the softest music; never depressed to sadness, and seldom exhilarated beyond a placid smile.—If perchance she laughed, it was at some jest of my uncle Nicholas; not that it excited her risible faculties, but that she perceived by the mantling of his countenance there was more intended than came within the scope of her apprehension; and she would laugh outright that he might more fully enjoy the freak of his imagination. How they loved each other!

My uncle dwelt on a farm in the outskirts of a village. He had selected it as his residence in early life, and lived long enough to see the primitive settlement assume something like a name on the map of his county. He was identified with the spot; all the villagers in a measure looked upon him as their patriarch, and even the children would

break off their amusements to salute him as he passed; and he ever had a kind word and a jest to bestow upon the humblest of the little troglodytes. They all called him uncle Nicholas, and he was so kind to them, that many grew up in the belief that he was actually the uncle of the whole village.

His residence was a delightful spot. His farm was well cultivated, and his buildings, while they afforded every comfort, were not so ostentatious as to awaken the envy of his less prosperous neighbors. A river flowed beside it, and in the rear where shady walks of sugar maple, to which the villagers would resort of a summer afternoon for recreation and few would fail in returning to stop at my uncle's cottage and partake of the hospitality of his board. Indeed, he and his wive were looked up as common property.

At these social gatherings, all the belles of the village would rival each other to secure my uncle's attention. He was ever the gayest among the gay, while his gentle manners and playful fancy ministered to the delight of all; and it was amusing to behold the quiet complacency of my aunt as she gazed on his little gallantries, and to watch her countenance gradually light up, as her mind would pass from the scene before her, to the halcyon days when he wooed and won her, and then she would turn to her next neighbor and whisper in a tone mingled with pride and fondness,—“You see his winning ways have not yet left him.” And then she would smile and look on in silence, as if life could afford no delight like gazing on my uncle Nicholas, when he was happy.

Happy!—The heavens themselves are never so bright and clear, but that a cloud over shadows some portion, and there lives not that man whose mind is so free, but that at some period a phantom pursues it, from which he fears escape is impossible. My uncle's phantom was the dread of poverty. He had lived generously, and from his habits and tone of mind was ill calculated to increase his possessions. As he advanced in age his property had imperceptibly wasted away; and to increase his terrors, there was a lawsuit against him that had been pending many years. He dreaded its termination would result in ruin, though convinced that justice was on his side; but the boasted trial by jury is by no means as infallible, as its encomiasts pretend, for it is a difficult matter for one man who does not understand his case, to explain it to twelve, who frequently are incapable of comprehending the matter under any circumstances. And by this frail tenure do we cling to our possessions, liberty and life. The sword of Damocles is a type of the trial by jury.

It was a melancholy sight to behold the old gentleman, term after term, attending court to learn the issue of his cause. It absorbed all his faculties and sapped the very foundation of his mind. He was wont to have a word and a cheerful smile for all he met, but now he would pass his next neighbor without token of recognition. His little friends, the children, no longer followed him. His favorite volumes remained undusted on the shelves—their charm had passed away, and those vernal fancies, that were wont to make his heart like a singing bird in the spring, had died, and it sung no more.

He would at times struggle to disengage his mind from the phantom that embraced it with iron clutches, and affect more cheerfulness in the presence of my aunt, for he perceived that his melancholy was contagious. How tenderly she watched over him, and soothed him and encouraged him!—At one of these tender interviews which were frequent, he appeared suddenly animated with hope—the world was open to him—he was a man and could labor like other men—his countenance brightened, and he exclaimed exultingly.

“The spider taken hold with her hands and is in king's palaces.” He fondly looked into the recess of his wife's heart through her glistening eyes, and continued, “The ants are people not strong.” He paused, and finished the proverb in a tone scarcely audible—“yet they prepare their meat in

the summer. Alas the snows of many winters are on my head.”—A tear dropped from his eye on the pale forehead of the partner of his bosom. She consoled him no more that day.

He had contracted various small debts with the tradesman of the village, among whom were some new-comers who had not known him in his palmy days. And even if they had, the chances are that it would not have altered their conduct towards him. Few men makes an ægis of the past to shield them from present evils. True he had been as liberal as the sun that shines on all alike without distinction; but how soon do we forget the splendor of yesterday, if the sun rise in clouds to-morrow.

His creditors became impatient, & though there were some hesitation in taking out the first execution, yet that being done, others followed as regularly as links of the same chain. There was a time when he felt as confident and secure among the villagers as in the bosom of his own family; but now there was no longer safety for the sole of his foot on his hearth stone. He was humbled and he moved among his neighbors, a broken down man, with fear, and trembling, dreading all whom he chanced to meet.

At length his library was seized upon and sold. His books were of no great value to any other than himself, but he prized them beyond every thing. He had bought them in his boyhood; they had been the companion of his life—the never-failing ministers of purest delight—and they at length had departed from him. True, their places might have been filled by modern reprints, but he would not have known his own familiar friends in their gaudy dresses. To take from them the rude simplicity of their birth, was to break the wau by which they charmed him. To take the little treasure of his boyhood, was to sever the chain that bound him to happier days, and as he beheld them scattering one by one, he wept as if they were things of life that had abandoned him in his misfortunes.

It was a melancholy sight to behold him after this event, seated in his study gazing on the empty shelves, and repeating various choice passages from his favorite volumes. I witnessed him once, looking intently on the vacant spot where a fine, old copy of Herrick's poems had stood for near half a century. I knew the place well, for at the time it was my delight to delve for the pure ore of that “very best of English lyric poets.” A melancholy smile came over his bland countenance, and he repeated in a low tremulous voice:

Call me no more,
As heretofore,
The music of the feast;
Since now, alas!
The mirth that was
In me, is dead or ceased.

Before I went
To banishment
Into the loathed west;
I could rehearse
A lyric verse
And spend it with the best.

But time, ah me!
Has laid, I see,
My organ fast asleep;
And turn'd my voice
Into the noise
Of those that sit and weep.

His eyes slowly moved along the empty shelves until they rested upon a place that had been occupied by a collection of the old dramatists. He smiled though he shed tears, and continued to repeat in the same tremulous tone:

Adieu; farewell earth's bliss,
This world uncertain is;
Fond are life's lustful joys,
Death proves them all but toys,
None from his darts can fly.
I am sick, I must die—
Lord have mercy on us!

Rich men, trust not in wealth;
Gold cannot buy your health;
Physic himself must fade;

All things to end are made.
The plague full swift goes by.
I am sick, I must die—
Lord have mercy on us!

Haste, therefore, each degree,
To welcome destiny;
Heaven is our heritage,
Earth but a player's stage.
Mount me into the sky.
I am sick, I must die—
Lord have mercy on us!

“Beshrew me but thy song hath moved me.” I turned from the window through which I was gazing, unperceived, & left him repeating fragment upon fragment.

My uncle was accustomed to rise with the sun, and continued his habit to the last. But he no longer enjoyed the songs of the birds, the babbling of the waterfall, nor the fresh breeze of morning laden with fragrance—their influence had departed from them; still he adhered to his custom, and would wander from his green meadows to the maple grove, and from the grove to the river, as if in pursuit of something—he knew not what. On his return, his usual remark was, “Is it not strange that the flowers should have lost their fragrance, and the little birds their skill in singing?” In happier days how he would praise the flowers and the birds.

As term-time approached, his malady even increased. His morning meal would scarcely be over when he would adjust his dress, and call for his hat and cane, and on being asked wether he was going, he would invariably reply, “To the village to see my friends—Of late they have ceased to come hear, and it is right that I should see them.”

He would for hours walk from one end of the village to the other, and bow to all who accosted him, yet pause to converse with none. And on his return, when my good aunt would inquire whether he had seen his friends the constant reply was, “No; I have fallen in with none of them.” Alas! my poor uncle, how thy brain must have been shattered to imagine that a man in adversity can ever find his friends!

At length the dreaded day arrived—his cause was marked for trial, and in a few hours the result would be known. The matter in dispute was not of such great moment, but he had brooded over it until his fears had magnified it to vital importance.—His opponent was a coarse and brutal man and in their protracted contest the abruptness of his demeanor had awakened whatever latent asperity had found a hiding place in my uncle's bosom. He looked upon that cause trifling as it was, as the most important matter of his life. His daily thoughts and irritated feelings had magnified it. Even the little ant by constant application can create a mound altogether disproportionate to its own size, and there is not a column so beautiful that may not be defaced by the rail of a slimy snail. My poor uncle feared the ant hill and recoiled the filth of the worm.

The morn his case was to be tried, he dressed himself with unusual care, and my aunt, knowing the bent of his mind, exercised all her appliances to encourage him. He went to the court house, and took his seat, a dejected man. He looked around as if in search of some one to sit beside him to aid and sustain him, but none such were present, and he sat alone.

The cause was called, the jury empanelled, and the investigation proceeded. Every question that arose in its progress, wrought up my uncle's mind to painful intensity. In the order of his feelings he at times interrupted the proceedings, and he was rudely ordered by the court to sit down and be silent. He obeyed, while ever fibre of his frame shook with passion, and offended pride. His opponent smiled in triumph as he beheld his confusion; my uncle sat alone; no one approached to sympathize with him, and he felt as if deserted by all. In consequence of the distracted state of his mind, his defence though a just one, had been imperfectly made out. Facts had escaped his memory; papers were missing

that should have been produced, and the result was, the jury returned a verdict against him without leaving the box. It felt like a thunderbolt upon him: he fancied the last business of his life was over, and in the triumph of the moment, his adversary taunted him, and openly charged him with dishonesty. The old man rose to repel the insult while every limb shook with passion as if palsy struck. All was confusion. The judges interfered to preserve order. My uncle heard them not. He was commanded to sit down but still persisted to vindicate his character. A second—a third time was he called upon to sit down and be silent, which awakened him to a sense of his position. He beheld his antagonist still smiling, he slowly sunk into his seat, and as if abashed his head hung over his bosom and gradually descended until it rested on the desk before him. Order was again restored, and the court proceeded in its business. A few moments after, some one, approached my uncle and on raising him he was found to be dead.

Thus died that good old man. There was a time when I looked upon him as being secure from the shafts of fate; but who may boast of to-morrow!—He was healthy had health and friends, and his gentle spirit made his home a paradise. His sources of enjoyment were boundless, for all nature, from her sublime mysteries, even down to the petals of a simple flower was one mighty minister, and he drew wisdom and delight from all. And yet a single cloud was magnified until it overshadowed his heaven of happiness, and he died friendless and heart-broken: all had vanished that made earth beautiful. But is this strange!—The flowers of life pass away as the flowers of seasons, without being conscious of the cause of their decay, and there breathes not that man, however prosperous, but like my poor uncle, hath his phantom, and in time discovers that “even in laughter the heart is sorrowful and the end of that mirth is heaviness.”

An old lady in the country, of the class said to make good stepmothers, had an exquisite from the city to dine with her on a certain occasion. For the desert, was an enormous apple-pie. “La ma'am,” said the gentleman, “how do you manage to handle such a pie?” “Easy enough,” was the quiet reply, “we make the crust in a wheelbarrow wheel it under an apple tree, and then shake the fruit into it!”

Selfishness.—Within his house in a great arm chair before the fire sat an old grey head ed man ripe for the grave. 'Twas winter, and the cold wind whistled among the leafless branches from the trees, and the snow and sleet rattled against the windows. The old man chuckled, for he was warm and comfortable, and the biting blast touched him not. He said “I have enough—I am rich—so blow ye winds and drift ye snows—I am safe.” A servant entered and, “Sir a woman is at the door trembling with cold, has no where to sleep, no home to go to; she begs for a corner of your kitchen to pass the night in.” “Away, I've no room for theiving beggars; there is a tavern close by—tell her to go there.” “She says she has no money, and begs you to give her enough to buy a meal and lodging.” “Begone drive her off, what I've got is my own, and I'll keep it too. I've none to squander on worthless mendicants.”

The next morning the old man stepped out into the porch, and there upon one of the benches sat the poor beggar woman—His rage was kindled.

“Did I not tell you I have nothing for you, impudence! Come, come, tramp. Leave my house, I say, d'ye hear?” She heard him not! She was dead! The old man smote his breast and entered his house. He never left it again—for he also died, and died miserable, though rich.

Wellerisms.—A chief's among ye, takin notes—as the pickpocket said ven he was at the race-course.

“That's flat burglary!”—as the justice said ven he saw the women stealing the cake off the griddle.