HOW TO TELL A STORY.

BY MRS. SEBA SMITH.

No character is more genial to a child than a good story-teller—one that with a serene fullness pours out incident and narrative, peril and "hair-breadth 'scape," tale of enormous serpent or deadly beast, of wild or chivalric adventure, till the old clock behind the door is heard to tick with a solemn loudness, and the elders begin to yawn and stir the ashes in token of weariness. Most heartily do I pity either man or woman who has no such delicious reminiscence. It was my good fortune when a child to pass much of my time at an old country farm-house, where the many retainers, the primitive and exact ordering of the household had in it much of the baronial style of which we read amongst our Saxon ancestors. The principal apartment for ordinary occasions was a long hall, or dining-room, in the centre of which was spread a table capable of holding the whole family—from the head down to the youngest servant. Our New England gentry are exact observers of precedence, and in the old families where any degree of state is observed, a single glance at the ordering of the table betrays the relative position of each member. At the head sit the master and mistress, then occasional visiters, next the children ranged according to the age of each, and then come the upper domestics, as they might be termed, old, respectable retainers, who sometimes join a few words in the conversation at the head of the table; but always in a subdued and respectful voice—followed next by the younger servants, "to the manor born" as it were, but as yet too young to share in its dignities.

After the morning and evening meal, which is announced by the blowing of a horn, each member places his chair to the wall, and the patriarch of the family reads a portion of scripture from the "big ha' bible, once his father's pride," and then,

"The saint, the husband, and the father prays."

At night, when the household arrangements were completed, this long room with its dim recesses, its antique furniture and quaint ornaments, was the place to give impressiveness to a story. Here might one shudder at the supernatural, stare at the marvelous, and thrill at the bold and magnanimous. Here was the place, too, to bemoan the cruelty of "Queen Eleanor" to "Fair Rosamond," to weep for the lover by "Yarrow flowing," and to rejoice in the retribution of the proud and "cruel Barbara Allen." These and many other ballads, such as the "Milk White Doe," "Fair Margaret and Sweet William," "Lord James and Fair Eleanor," were preserved in rude manuscript and learned orally, and most have been in this way preserved by tradition and brought over to this country by the first settlers; the writer having never seen them in print till he found them in Perry's reliques and long after she had been familiar with them as chanted in the old farm-house.

The city is no place for story-telling—nothing is in harmony. A story to go well must be either in a rich antique room, or old-fashioned farm-house, where things have an air of quaintness and permanency; in our rough cottage with smoky rafters; or, better still, in some rude cabin upon the wild frontier. In such places we abandon ourselves to any fantastic illusion, and are not ashamed to yield faith, nor to be swayed by the emotions of the tale. A sea story need be told by some weather-beaten tar by the sea shore, or by a dim wood fire with a fierce tempest raging without; unless you have the good fortune to hear it by the forecastle itself. A good story-teller should be exceedingly careful never to mis-time, nor mis-place his narrative. If his miserable fortune afford him nothing better than a carpeted room, with sofas and chandeliers, be sure to make the light dim; let it come from behind some piece of statuary or heavy-stuffed chair, a rose bush, or large geranium, that outline and faint shadows be cast—then if he have a quiet voice, and not too much of the detail, a very good illusion may be produced.

Children, in whom the love of the marvelous is alway predominant, and who never weary at the twice-told tale, will adopt all sorts of expedients to hear one. They may be found in the garret turning over musty relics and old records, in the desire for suggestion; and they drag forth triumphantly a rusty sword, a cocked hat, a worm-eaten log book, or time hallowed garment, any one of which may afford material for a story. The boy sits on the steps of the grocer, lolls upon the pump at the corner, or leans over the tafferel of the ship, and he is listening to some history of stirring adventure. Do not call him away, he is building up the materials for a man—a man firm, enterprising and self-sustained—the only wealth, the only true dignity.

A story-teller should never hurry, least of all be interrupted—as for himself he should think for the time being only of his story; give himself up and become a part of what he relates. Nothing mars a story like pre-occupation. I believe all I am writing was suggested to me when about eight years old, from the fact of having unfortunately asked Mrs. Smith, a respectable country woman, rejoicing in that rarest of names,

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to tell me the story of a Catamount. Her husband was also happy in the name of John, but as these two favorite names happened to conjoin in union as well as many of his neighbors, it was not always easy to determine the individual specified. In a transition state of society, a man frequently receives a soubriquet, indicating some quality of mind, person or achievement, by which he is distinguished from those about him. It is an ancient practice sanctioned by history, and one mode by which names were created. The aborigines in this way named their chiefs and warriors. Mr. John Smith, of the country town of which I am speaking, was hence called Catamount Smith.

Great was my curiosity to learn why. I questioned every one. Why is Mr. Smith called Catamount John?

"Why? Because he killed the Catamount."

There was the fact; but I wanted the story—all the details—the enormous size of the animal, his growl, his tremendous leap, the fierce contest, the peril, and finally to be in at the death. Once seduced by the good-natured face of Catamount John, I ventured to crave the story, blushing up to the eyes while I did so.

"Mr. Smith, will you tell me how you killed the Catamount?"

He turned his bland face full upon mine, placed his rough, broad palm upon my head and answered,

"My dear, I shot him."

"But how, Mr. Smith, how?"

"I took my gun and pointed, so—' suiting the action to the word,' and shot him through the ——." I ran out of the room to hide my vexation.

At this moment, Mrs. Catamount Smith passed by me, bearing an enormous pan of butter, fresh from the churn. Now Mrs. Smith would never have deluded any thing but a child into a belief that she could tell a story. She was entirely deficient in that quality of repose, so essential to the thing. She was a little, plump, bustling dame, forever on the alert to see that all was neat and tidy. Her sleeves were always up at the elbow, her apron white as snow, and the frill of her cap blowing back with her quick tread. Short people never stoop, and Mrs. Smith being very short and very round, tipped somewhat backward when she walked.

That night, when all the family were in bed, except a faithful domestic named Polly, I seated myself beside the good old lady, to hear the story of the Catamount. The reader must bear with me while I relate the thing just as it transpired.

Mrs. Smith gave one keen look about the apartment, to convince herself that all was right, and then stuck her needle into a sheath affixed to her belt, and commenced knitting and talking at the same moment.

"John and I began house-keeping in the log house down by the pond, about a mile from the place where the meeting-house now—(la, Polly, there's Jacob's buskins on the back of your chair, and they must be bound round to-night; do go right to work on them) —where did I leave off?—where the meeting-house now stands. 'Twas another thing to be fixed out then, to what it is now-a-days. I was considered very well off—my father gave me a cow and a pig—and I had spun and wove sheets and kiverlids, besides airning enough to buy a chist of draws, and a couple of chairs. Then my mother launched out a nice bed, a wheel, and some kettles. We had n't much company in them times, our nighest neighbor was over the mountain, five mile off—(now did you ever—I liked to forgot them are trousis of Ephraim's—he's tied his handhercher round his knee all day, to kiver up the hole—Polly, get my wax and thimble, and the patches, and I'll go right to work.) Well, what was I sayin'? Oh, we had n't much company, and my old man made a settle, with a high back, and bought chairs two at a time, as our family grew larger."

"But, my dear ma'am, you promised to tell me about the Catamount."

"Yes, yes, I'm comin along to it. Well, John had got together a yoke of oxen, some sheep, and other cattle, and we began to be pretty considerable fore-handed. He was a nice, smart man, and nobody should say he had a lazy wife. (Polly, just sweep the hearth up.)

We had no machines then to card our wool, and I had to card it all myself—for I never hired *help* till after our Jacob was—"

"Dear Mrs. Smith, the Catamount!"

"Yes, child, I'm eeny most to it. Let me see—till after Jacob was born—then I hired Lydia Keene, as smart a girl she was, as ever wore shoe leather. By this time we had eighteen or twenty sheep, and John used to drive them into the pen and count them every night, to be sure that the wolves or panthers had n't got any of 'em; for the beasts were pretty thick about the mountain, and many a time I've stood to the door, and heard them howl and cry, to say nothing of the foxes and screech-owls that kept up a rumpus all night long. (Dear me, this snappy wood now has burnt a hole in my apron—it looks jist like a pipe hole—I do so hate to see it. I'll mend it now, and then 'twill be done with. I never put off any thing till to-morrow, that can be done to-day—that's the way to—) Now do n't fidget, child, you see I'm almost to it; that's the way to get fore-handed, as I was saying. Well, one morning John went out, and found the sheep all huddled together into a corner, trembling pitifully. He counted them, and one was missing. This was a loss, for I needed the wool for winter kiverlids. (There, Polly, you've forgot the apples you're a goin to pare for the pan-dowdy, now the buskins is done, you better get them under way.)

"Well, the next night John took Rover—now Rover was the largest dog I ever see, near about as large as a heifer, and the knowingest critter I ever laid eyes on. Well, John took him out to the pen, and told him to watch the sheep. John 'll never forget how that critter looked up in his face, and licked his hand when he left him, just as if he knew what would come of it, and wanted to say good bye; nor how he crouched down before the bars, and laid his nose upon his paws, and looked after him solemn-like. Poor Rover! The next morning John was up airly, for he felt kind a worried. He went out to the sheep pen, and sure enough the first thing he see, was—(Polly, you've just cut a worm-hole into your

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apples)—the first thing he see, was poor Rover dead by the bars, his head torn right open, and another sheep gone. John's dander was fairly up—he took down the gun, there it hangs on the hooks, took his powder-horn and bullets, and started off. I tried to coax him to set a trap, or to watch by the sheep-pen. But John always had a will of his own, and was the courageousest man in the town, and he declared he'd have nothing to do with any such cowardly tricks. He'd kill the critter in broad day-light, if 'twas only to revenge poor Rover. So he started off. He tracked the critter about a mile round by the mountain, which in them days was covered with trees to the very top. (Polly, jist take them are trousis, and lay them down by Ephraim's chamber door; he'll want them in the morning.)

Well, John now missed Rover dreadfully, to scent out the beast—he moved along carefully, searching into the trees—expectin he might be down upon him every minit. All at once he heard the bark ripped up from a tree almost over his head, and then a low, quick growl, and there was the Catamount jist ready for his spring—(my conscience, Polly, there's that new soap all running out o' the barrel into the cellar, I saw it had sprung a leak about supper time, and then I forgot all about it again.")

The word "spring" had been the unlucky association, and away she darted to the cellar, followed by the faithful Polly.

"Mrs. Smith, Mrs. Smith, do finish the story!"

"La! child—John shot him!" she screamed from the foot of the stairs.

THE BELFRY OF BRUGES.

BY HENRY W. LONGFELLOW.

In the market-place of Bruges stands the Belfry old and brown
Thrice consumed and thrice re-builded, still it watches o'er the town;
As the summer morn was breaking on that lofty tower I stood,
And the world threw off the darkness, like the weeds of widowhood.

Thick with towns and hamlets studded, and with streams and vapors gray
Like a shield embossed with silver, round and vast the landscape lay.
At my feet the city slumbered. From its chimneys here and there
Wreaths of snow-white smoke ascending, vanished ghost-like into air.

Not a sound rose from the city at that early morning hour,
But I heard a heart of iron beating in that ancient tower.
From their nests beneath its rafters sang the swallows wild and high,
And the world beneath me sleeping seemed more distant than the sky.

Then most musical and solemn, bringing back the olden times
With their strange, unearthly changes, rang the melancholy chimes,
Like the psalms from some old cloister, when the nuns sing in the choir,
And the great bell tolled among them, like the chanting of a friar.

Visions of the days departed, shadowy phantoms filled my brain!
They who live in history only seemed to walk the earth again!
All the Foresters of Flanders, mighty Baldwin Bras-de-Fer,
Lyderick du Bucq, and Crécy, Philip, Guy de Dampierre!

I beheld the pageants splendid, that adorned those days of old,
Stately dames, like queens attended, knights who bore the Flower of Gold,
Lombard and Venetian merchants with deep-laden argosies,
Ministers from twenty nations—more than royal pomp and ease.

I beheld proud Maximilian, kneeling humbly on the ground:
I beheld the gentle Mary, hunting with her hawk and hound;
And her lighted bridal chamber, where a duke slept with the queen,
And the armed guard around them, and a sword unsheathed between.

I beheld the Flemish weavers, with the brave Count of Namurs,
Marching home to Ghent and Bruges, from the Battle of the Spurs;
Saw the fight at Minnewater, saw the White Hoods moving west,
Saw great Arteveldt, victorious, scale the Golden Dragon's nest.*

And again the whisker'd Spaniard all the land with terror smote,
And again the wild alarum sounded from the tocsin's throat,
Till the bell of Ghent responded, o'er lagoon and dike of sand,
"I am Roland! I am Roland! there is victory in the land!"†

Then the sound of drums arous'd me. The awaken'd city's roar
Chased the phantoms I had summoned back into their grave once more.
Hours had passed away like winter; and before I was aware,
Lo, the shadow of the Belfry crossed the sun-illumined square.

* The Golden Dragon, taken from the Church of St. Sophia in Constantinople in one of the Crusades, and placed on the Belfry of Bruges, was afterward transported to Ghent by Philip Van Artevalde, and still adorns the Belfry of that city.

† The inscription on the alarm bell at Ghent is "*Mynen naem is Roland; als ik klep is er brant; en als ik luy is er victorie in het landt.*"

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