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The Lost Child: A True Tradition of Wachusett

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THE LOST CHILD.

A TRUE TRADITION

of

WACHUSETT.

BY

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A True Tradition of Wachusett.

BY WILLIAM T. HARLOW.

Robert Keyes was a pioneer. A hundred years ago pioneers were not fighting Indians, nor hunting grizzly bears in the Sierra Nevadas or the Rocky mountains, nor building Pacific railways, nor shaking with chills and fever in the valleys of the Sacramento and the Yellowstone. Neither chills nor railways had ever been heard of. But then as now fighting Indians was the occasional necessity of the pioneer; and if grizzlies did not then dispute the pioneer's right to his newly found home, divers of their congeners, nearer or more remote, claiming seizin thereof for long periods whereof memory of neither man nor beast ran to the contrary, refused to recognize any other title than their own, whether based upon discovery, disseizin or conquest. The pioneers of America were then rough-hewing New England. Robert Keyes was hewing out for his family a home on the eastern slope of Wachusett mountain, "in ye township of Princeton, in ye countie of Middlesex,* & colonie of Massachusetts bay."

Mountains, like everything else, are great or small only by comparison. Wachusett may be a very humble mountain as compared with Shasta, and other snowy peaks of the great continental ranges of America. But in the estimation of the people who live within sight of Wachusett, it is a great mountain; and they call it, by way of eminence, *the mountain*. Do they not visit it, and boast that they have actually ascended its peak once, twice, thrice, or more, in the course of their lives? Have not divers enterprising persons built famous summer taverns upon it and about it for the accommodation of its admirers? Is not *the mountain* a more infallible prophet than ever Old Probabilities himself to the farmer, who is able according as Wachusett hath his rain-cap on, or otherwise in the morning, to divine the prospect of the day for hay-making, or other fair-weather work? I have seen an alpenstock, carried by a Worcester county traveler, whereon was affectionately engraved the name of Wachusett in the same column with the Jungfrau and the Matterhorn.

It was in 1751 that Robert Keyes commenced his pioneering on the slope of Wachusett; and the same year his wife bore to him a daughter, whom the parents named Lucy and who was to be the subject of a tragic mystery which should baffle all attempts to solve it for more than half a cen-

tury then to come. The Keyes family was the fourth that settled in Princeton, and at that time the parents were about forty years old. Besides Lucy, they had also two other daughters considerably older than she. There was at the distance of about a mile from the clearing which Robert had made, and in which he had built his house, a pond called Wachusett pond, whither the two elder sisters went one April morning in 1755 to get sand for house-cleaning. The route to the pond lay through the woods, and was only indicated by blazed trees. Unobserved by the elder sisters, Lucy, then four years old, followed them into the woods. The mother felt no concern about the absence of the child, supposing her to be in the care of her elder sisters, till their return without her; when it appeared that they were unaware that she had followed them, and had seen nothing of her either going or returning.

Search is immediately commenced by the mother and elder sisters, who explore the woods all the way to the pond, without finding any trace of the missing child. Loud and earnest calls of the child's name are only followed by reverberating echoes from the mountain sides. The father, ploughing in his field, hears the eager calls, and joins the searchers. He suggests that probably Lucy has fallen asleep upon some rock, where she may have sat down to rest or to play, and does not hear their calls. He raises his own voice to the highest pitch; and in the stillness of that April morning his call to his child might have been heard for miles. But there is no answer. The woods are now more carefully searched. Every place that could be supposed to conceal a child is examined; and the forenoon is spent before they are aware of it. It occurs to the father that the child may have fallen into the pond, whither he hastens, dreading the discovery that he expects. The margin of the pond is sandy, and he looks for little footprints in the sand, but can find none. He peers anxiously into the water, but fails to make the dreaded discovery. Meantime it occurs to the mother that while they have been looking for Lucy in the woods, she may have herself returned to the house (a possibility that she wonders they did not think of before), and with her daughters hurries home. The kitchen door is open just as they left it; but no trace of Lucy's having been there is visible. The whole house, barn, and all the other buildings, enclosures, and possible places of concealment, are searched in vain.

The father also returns home, and meets his family near his door, about to return to the woods. Neither has any discovery to report to the other. He casts an anxious look at the sun, which is noticed by both

*The northern part of Worcester county was originally included in Middlesex.

Robert Keyes, son of
 she was dau. by Asa Barker & Martha (Eager). Asa was probably a son of John & Mary (Howe).
 The name is of Swedish origin and was also spelled, Boucher, Bowker &c.
 Robert was admitted to the church in Shrewsbury in 1742, and his wife in 1745.

Children born in Shrewsbury:-

Stephen, born Jan. 19, 1742. Died 1748.

Jonas, " Dec. 24, 1743

Martha, " Dec. 6, 1745

Anna, " June 21, 1748

Lucy, " Aug. 15, 1750

Phoebe, " July 31, 1752

Abraham, " March 10, 1755

Mary, " July 19, 1757 "At Wachusett, but not in any township."

Solomon, " June 28, 1762

Robert died in Princeton, March 1, 1795, aged 84.

mother and daughters. The sun is already past the meridian, and has commenced his descent of the western sky. Absorbed in the anxiety of the search, they had taken no thought of the flight of time; and their usual dinner-hour had come and gone unnoticed by any of them. And the father had forgotten that he had left his oxen in the yoke attached to the plough in the furrow. Besides the possibility that Lucy might have fallen into the pond and been drowned, there are other possibilities, which all have thought of, but none have dared trust tongue to name. There are beasts of prey, wolves certainly, and perhaps other wild beasts upon the mountain. And there are hostile savages in the vicinity. Lucy may have been carried off by wolves or Indians. As we shall have occasion to speak of these possibilities again, let us, for the sake of brevity and distinction, designate them severally as the wolf theory, the Indian theory, and the pond theory.

Night is coming; and an appalling sense of their situation seems, simultaneously with the father's glance at the descending sun, to seize both parents and children. All possible theories and fears seem to occur to each of them at once. The mother bursts out into a loud, heart-rending wail of despair, vainly calling her child by name, "My Lucy; my Lucy!" She reproaches first herself and then her daughters, and even her husband,

for carelessness for not looking after the child, and again wails out her despairing cry for her Lucy. Nor is the grief of the sisters scarcely less than their mother's. And the father himself is for the moment completely unmanned and undecided what to do. Lucy is the pet and darling of his life. He rushes wildly back into the woods, shouting the child's name at the top of his voice, which breaks and quavers under the burden of grief that has come over him. But in a few moments he returns, and calls his family into the house. He has a plan; he will appeal to his neighbors to come and help him. One daughter shall go in one direction; the other shall go in another; he will go to town; and they will rally all the help they can. He is a man of Puritan descent, faith and practice; and without so much as stopping to mention his plan to his family, as soon as they have come into the house, he says, "Let us pray." In their presence he explains his plan to God, and invokes his blessing upon it.

The amen is no sooner said than the daughters, without waiting for direct orders, hasten away to rally the neighbors. He saddles his horse and rides to town as fast as spurs and whip can drive him.

"Is Deacon Keyes going for the doctor? and is his house on fire? or is he crazy?" asked the people of one another as they saw

him come into the village. It did not take him long to tell them what was the matter, and what he wanted. Would they come and help him? Yes, indeed, they would! And as the farmer had left his plough to hunt for his lost child, so his neighbor the blacksmith leaves his iron in the fire, and his neighbor the minister leaves his sermon half finished, and his neighbor the storekeeper leaves his store, and brings along his customers, too, to help the farmer find his child. An hour before sunset at least fifty men have arrived at the house of their distressed neighbor, and more are coming.

Among the first to come is Robert Keyes' near neighbor, John Littlejohn. True, the two neighbors have been for a long time on bad terms; and hard words have passed between them only the day before. Littlejohn is now profuse in offers of sympathy and assistance. "One touch of nature makes the whole world kin;" and evidently the calamity of the Keyes family has affected their old enemy like all the rest. He offers his advice about methods of hunting and proposes to act as guide to the child-hunters. He is an old hunter, and knows the mountain like a book; has hunted foxes and partridges, and game of all sorts, including wolves, bears and wild-cats all over it; can find his way by night over every foot of it just as well as by day. So says Littlejohn. And as hunting was known to be his chief occupation and he was believed to have more knowledge of the mountain than any one else, he was selected to act as chief director of the whole party, and for the occasion called the captain.

The captain divides up his force into squads, or small parties, and sends one squad in this direction, another in that, and another in a third, and so on, giving each its instructions. This squad will find such and such paths, rocks and blazed trees; let them search them. Another squad will find other paths, boulders and trees; let them search them and thereabouts. He will establish headquarters in a central part of the forest, near a fallen tree that he knows of, and after dark will build a big fire there, so that they shall know where to report if they find the child, or make any discovery that seems to throw light on her disappearance. And before the light of day is gone, the child hunters, under the direction of Littlejohn, are scattered all over the eastern slope of Wachuset. Can there be any doubt that they will find Lucy now? "Of course we shall find her," said the people. "But hark," says one, do you hear that barking? Is it dogs, or wolves?"—"It is wolves," says the captain. The short twilight is attended with the deep gloom peculiar to mountain forests,

and is very shortly followed by total darkness. The squads collect material for lights, and continue the search by the aid of lighted torches carried in the hand; and after a little while the captain's big fire begins to be visible. Soon a cry of "Child found!" is raised, which causes a rush of all the hunters to headquarters. But it is a mistake, due to some one's over-zeal; and the squads all depart again with instructions to build fires all over the mountain. The fires will show what ground they have been over. They will light up the woods; and perhaps the child will see them, and come to them. And they will scare away the wolves.

The tedious night wears slowly away, and morning comes at last; but no light dawns yet upon the mystery of the lost child. Wolves have not only been heard growling and barking in the distance, but actually seen skulking away before the advance of the hunters, and lurking around as near as they dare to the fires. The opinion generally prevails that the child has been devoured by wolves; and the captain thinks it is certain. The evening before, some persons had urged Littleton to get his fox hounds, and see if they would not take scent from some article of the child's clothing, and trace the direction that she took in the woods. "That would never do," was the reply. In the night, the hounds would soon get out of sight, and he would lose control over them. They were savage dogs; and it would be dangerous to let them loose on the child's track, unless he were close with them. Now that morning has come, he thinks it will do no harm to try them, and goes for his hounds.

After a brief absence in the morning to get breakfast, and attend to such domestic affairs as need some brief daily attention, the child-hunters return again with large re-enforcements. Littlejohn also soon returns with his fox-hounds, and all the Keyes family watch with gratitude and hope his attempt to make them trace the little steps. The intelligent brutes evidently understood well enough what is wanted, and do their best to find them. They follow the scent easily enough a little way into the woods, and then appear to lose it; nor are they able to recover it again, though making many ineffectual attempts to do so. Where-upon Littlejohn announces that he has changed his mind from the wolf theory to the Indian theory. The reason why his dogs cannot follow the scent farther is because the child was lifted off the ground, and carried off in some one's arms. Meantime the news has spread, and is spreading to neighboring towns: and before ten o'clock more than a thousand people have arrived; and fresh arrivals are constantly coming. All the different theories are discussed.

Against the wolf theory it is urged that, if correct, some fragment of the child, or certainly of her clothing, ought to be found. And this argument, together with Littlejohn's experiment with the hounds, as explained by

him, causes general abandonment of the wolf theory in favor of the Indian theory. And so a strong party is organized, and placed under the Captain Littlejohn, to start off with guns in search of Indians. But Robert Keyes, with the assistance of the greater part of the people, proceeds to carry into effect a plan that he reverently believes has been suggested to him in answer to his prayer for divine guidance. He will form the people in a great circle around the base of Wachusett and they shall advance slowly up the mountain, searching every foot of ground as they go. Whether his child be living now or not, he will solve the mystery of her disappearance God willing, and the people assisting him. And the day is spent in attempting to carry out his plan. But it is less perfectly carried out than he could wish, for want of sufficient men to completely surround the mountain, and have them as near together as they should be. It would be tedious to dwell upon the details of this and other plans, and their repetitions on this and subsequent days. On the third day there was no lack of men. Thousands of people were there; all the able-bodied men and boys within thirty miles were there. From Lancaster, Worcester and Barre, and all the neighboring towns they came, and continued to come day after day. And the father's plan, and many other plans, were tried with great thoroughness over and over again. Suffice it to say, there was not one foot of ground on Wachusett, or around its base for miles, that was not searched; all in vain. And all the Indians that could be found anywhere were arrested by Capt. Littlejohn's company, questioned, threatened with hanging, burning alive, and all sorts of tortures, if they did not produce the child, or tell all they knew about her. They all without exception denied all knowledge of her disappearance or whereabouts.

In the course of another day or two public opinion changed again from Indian theory to the pond theory. Boats and hooks were procured, and Wachusett pond was thoroughly dragged; and sentries, regularly relieved, carefully watched the pond day and night for the body to rise to the surface. The hunt was continued with great zeal for several weeks by great numbers of people,—some at the pond, others on and around the mountain, and others still at places far remote. Rumors of some fact or discovery at a long distance away would come; and, seeming worthy of investigation, parties would start off to investigate them. None of

these investigations ever resulted in finding anything. But the news spread all over New England and New York, and became the common talk of people living hundreds of miles from Wachusett.

In the course of time, however, everybody gave up the search as hopeless, excepting the Keyes family. It was of no use to tell Robert Keyes or his wife that their child could not be found. They continued the search for the rest of their lives. Robert lived forty years afterwards, and died at the age of eighty-four; and his wife lived nearly to the same age. It is said no day of all those years ever passed that she did not go out into the woods and hunt behind rocks and trees. Just at nightfall she would go to the edge of the forest behind her house, where her child passed out of sight forever, call her name three times, and add, "Why don't you come home?" The next morning after her child's disappearance, it was observed that her hair had turned from black to gray; and in less than two weeks it was white as snow. It is not for mortal tongue or pen to describe that mother's woe. If her child had died in her arms, and she had laid her in the grave with decent burial, it would have been no more than other mothers have endured without becoming insane. But the unfathomable mystery of the child's fate was too great a burden for her intellect to survive.

Robert did not lose his intellect; but a deep sadness settled down on the rest of his life. He never gave up the idea that the child might be alive; and to find her became the main purpose of his life. He did not continue to search in the woods behind the house as his wife did; but, in pursuit of his purpose, he traveled far and long, tracing rumors—some of them exceedingly wild, and all of them baseless—to their sources. Recital of his different journeys and adventures in pursuit of these rumors would fill a volume. I will mention but two of them. There came a story of a white child having been seen in possession of Indians in Canada. With strong hopes the father started off to search for his child among a tribe of Indians reported to dwell in some remote wilderness somewhere north of the St. Lawrence river, and was gone a year upon the fruitless journey. He found the Indians, and was not unkindly received by them; but could learn nothing of any white child. Another story was of a young woman, living with Indians at Niagara Falls, who could speak English, and recollected living, when a child, on *Chusset Hill*. And the father's hopes revived again. He would find out about this young woman. And he went to Niagara and found her; but she was not his daughter. His daughter would at that time, if living, have

been nineteen years old. This woman was without doubt at least thirty; and that part of the story which attributed her to recollection of living on a hill with a name somewhat resembling Wachusett turned out to be a fabrication. Notwithstanding these disappointments, the mind of Robert Keyes settled down more and more firmly, as he advanced in years, in conviction of the truth of the Indian theory; but his wife always regarded the woods behind her house as the proper place to look for her child. And she was right; but both parents went down to their graves without a ray of light upon the fate of their lost Lucy.

The true theory has not yet been named. Half a century passes away, and there lies upon his death-bed, at Deerfield, in the state of New York, a wretched old man, apparently dying for many days, suffering untold agonies of body and horrors of mind. Day after day he languishes, and languishing doth live, longing, praying, hoping to die. Why cannot the old man die? It is not unlikely that the experienced reader may have suspected the true theory, and recognized the devil of our tragic story; but so far as known, neither Robert Keyes, nor any of his family, nor neighbors, nor of all the thousands who in 1755 searched the slopes and base of Wachusett for the lost child, ever had a suspicion that one who was apparently among the most zealous of the child hunters was himself the guilty author of the whole mystery. The wretched old man, on his death-bed at Deerfield, cannot die till he has made a confession. He appeals to those about him to send for a minister. The minister is sent for, and comes. Then uprose John Littlejohn in his bed, and confessed.

When he was a young man, less than thirty years old, living at Princeton, Mass., in a fit of revenge he killed a little girl, the daughter of his neighbor, with whom he had had a quarrel about the boundary of their farms. Seeing the child in the woods the next day after an angry interview with her father, he struck her a mortal blow on the head with a heavy stick, and hid her body in a hollow tree, which had fallen down. When the cry of "Lost child!" was raised, he came with the other neighbors, and pretended to hunt; but his real object was to prevent the others from finding the body, and to divert suspicion from himself. On the first night of the hunt, he persuaded the others to follow his directions, and directed them away from the tree. After dark he took the body from the hollow tree, buried it in a deep hole made by its upturned roots, and built a big fire over the spot to prevent disturbance of the soil being noticed and to destroy the scent, so neither dogs nor other animals could find it. He

never had any reason to think his crime was suspected; but he could not endure to live near the scene of it, and, in less than two years afterwards, moved away. Every time he went through Wachusett woods, by day or by night, he saw the child running before him with her little hand on her head, and calling her father to come and save her from being killed; and he wondered none of the Keyes family ever saw her. Every evening he heard the wail of the insane mother, calling her child to come home, as she stood on the edge of the wood with her white hair streaming in the wind, seeming less even than the little ghost, like a being of this world; and he wondered the mother could not hear her child, as he did, answer back every time she called. And then the murderer fell back upon his bed, and died.

The story of the lost child is not a fiction. The writer when a child first heard it from his mother, as received from her grandfather, who went more than twenty miles to participate in the great child hunt, on Wachusett in 1755. Some years afterwards when a student, being moved on one of his spring vacations, to make a pilgrimage to the mountain, he arrived, just at night, at an old house on the eastern slope, where his challenge for hospitality was generously honored, and where, during the evening, he was entertained with a recital of the story, with many additional details, and the sequel, substanti-

ally as herein given, by his hostess, an aged lady, who was born and had always lived in Princeton, and who was in some way, either by blood or marriage, not now remembered, related to the Keyes family. The old house stood on the same spot where the parents of Lucy Keyes lived and died, and where she was born. The story is a well known tradition in Princeton; and doubtless there are great numbers of people in Worcester county still living, who have heard it, as did the writer, from persons only one remove from actual participators in the great hunt. The main facts of the child's mysterious disappearance are very briefly told in "Whitney's History of Worcester County," published in 1795, and copied, almost verbatim, into both Russell's and Hannaford's histories of Princeton. Whitney wrote before the sequel, as contained in the confession of Littlejohn, was known, and in fact before it was made; and adopted the Indian theory as the most probable solution of the mystery. The story is also alluded to in a poem written by Prof. Erastus Everett for the Princeton centennial celebration in 1859, and published with the historical address of Hon. Charles T. Russell, and other papers relating to the celebration, among which, as an appendix to the poem, is a very interesting note by Mr. Russell, giving the result of some correspondence with persons at Deerfield, and elsewhere, about the confession.

Clinton Courant March 7, 1874