

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

WHERE IT LISTETH.

By Evelyn Orchard.

Reyburn returned from South Africa, a poorer man than he had gone away. Poorer in pocket, in health, in spirits, perhaps in character, he told himself, somewhat bitterly, as he watched the sunset glow on Southampton water while they were getting into dock. Yet his heart warmed to England, mother England, who levies toll upon her sons, heaviest upon those who wander far.

Robert Reyburn wondered at the softness of his heart, as his eyes, misty hued, ranged from one green and lovely bank to the other, saw the stately homes and the cottage homes of his native land, and against the sky the silhouettes of Southampton town. He had been absent just eleven years. He remembered yet the raw November day on which he had joined the ship, and his feeling of wretchedness strangely mingled with hope. He had bidden good-bye to his mother, who in the interval had died, and now there was no one in the whole of the compact little country who would bid him welcome home. Casting his memory back over these years, he had little to reproach himself with. He had lived a sober, dull, hard working life, and the fierce temptations, which in a somewhat lawless region assailed other men, had passed him by. He had made a comfortable living, and had been able to keep his mother in quiet luxury to the very end of her days. Her letters, breathing gratitude and passionate enduring love, had been the green oases in his life; when these stopped, he had been unable to bear his lot.

Something drew him, something against which he fought for a long time, but in vain. He would see once more the little cottage on the edge of the forest, where she had lived in peace so long, the place his hard-earned gold had bought. It had to be disposed of somehow, before he returned to the post from which he had received six months' leave of absence.

At Southampton he was well upon his way home, if such designation could be given to an empty house, peopled only by memory. He had a letter in his pocket signed Edith Allbutt, from one who had been a neighbour of his mother, and who had shown her some neighbourly kindness, and been with her when she died. He knew nothing about this woman, whether she was married or single, but her letter, quite simple and kindly, had pleased him. It was not the letter of an ignorant woman, though the characters were a little laboriously formed, as if writing were not to her an every-day task. He had only to see Edith Allbutt, take over the house from her, acknowledge her kindness suitably, then pursue his lonely way.

He turned away bitterly and abruptly, from the landing stage, where the greetings were being made, these greetings which make at once the sadness and the gladness of the great deed. No voyager returns precisely as he went away. Something he must have gained or lost by the experience that has been his. Reyburn had little luggage, and that was quickly disposed of, being forwarded to an old fashioned hotel in the Strand his father used to frequent in his modest business journeys to London; then he was free for his excursion into the New Forest.

He had to wait until the boat train went out to run into Waterloo without a stop. Then he proceeded to the platform and got into the Lyndhurst train, which moved more leisurely, having no returning exiles in haste to reach London's throbbing heart.

Within the hour he was in the beautiful village which he had never forgotten. It had never seemed more beautiful than now, with the spring haloes on the trees, and the smell of the awakening earth everywhere. He began to think of green banks where the lilacs blew, of sheltered nooks aglow with the primrose radiance, of hedgerows where the violets hid. And there came upon the man that dreamy mood which makes for good. Old memories grew more tender, forgotten truths, the hymns his mother had taught him, stole across the misty bridge of the lost years like distant music. His hard heart melted within him, and became like the heart of a child. He needed none to guide him to the little clearing by the wayside, where the cottage stood. He expected to find it closed, the blinds down, perhaps even the windows boarded up, since Edith Allbutt had told him she would see that the place was kept intact, until she had his instructions. But when he came to the gate in the tender afternoon light, lo, the door was open, and the casements wide, the muslin curtains blowing in the sun. The little garden was bright with the gaiety of the spring—crocus, snow-drop, primrose, and here and there a blow of daffodils. It was all so homely and so inviting, that he could hardly believe it to be a tenanted house. He stood still a moment at the gate, just outside it, and listened. No smoke ascended from the quaint chimneys, but otherwise the house had an inhabited and homely look. Presently he heard a shrill child's voice.

"Mummy, mummy, here's anuvver one, a lot more, white and dear little weeny blue ones; they do smell so sweet. Wouldn't granny like them!"

Reyburn pushed open the gate and stepped up the path which went straight to the door, and then wound round to the open space behind which was immediately merged in the distant greenness of the Forest. He stepped rather softly, having a mind to see what was going on behind. At the gable end of the house he stood still, for it was a pretty picture, and his soul was eager for such pictures, his heart hungering for every suggestion of home. A woman was kneeling before a garden border, a young, slim-looking figure in black, with white at the throat and wrists, a plain band the significance of which Reyburn did not then understand. Her hair was fair, and seemed to grow in little tendrils, that made a most becoming frame to a very sweet, rather childish face. The little one, a boy of three or four, stood by her side, and they were contemplating a bed of violets, half hidden under the tangle of the periwinkle, which grew in too much luxuriance over all the place. Reyburn gave a little cough, the child looked round startled, the woman rose to her feet. She took off her garden gloves and came towards him, without any surprise or apprehension, holding out her hand.

"You are Mr. Reyburn," she said simply. "When I saw this morning that the Dunvegan would be in, I wondered whether you would be here."

"Yes, I am Reyburn, and you—"

"Mrs. Allbutt, Edith Allbutt, who wrote to you. This is my little boy, Eric."

Somewhat the sunshine changed for Reyburn, and the light that had sprung to his face was dulled again. It was all in a piece with the rest of his life, he told himself; there never could be anywhere a woman waiting for him, to whom his heart might go out in tenderness. He had been unfortunate in the few women friends he had ever possessed; they had always left him in the end

and married someone else. Marriage spoiled everything, he often said. Marriage as a career for himself had never occurred.

"It was very kind of you to write to me as you did at the time of my mother's illness, and to find the place like this is—is cheering," he said, a little stiffly. "I had pictured a different reception."

She smiled a little, and her hand dropped on the child's head.

"Run across and ask Betty to get some tea ready for a gentleman who will take tea with us in about half an hour. Come inside, Mr. Reyburn. I think you will find everything just as you left it."

He followed her obediently, noting the grace of her step, the gliding motion, which was all grace, the unaffected naturalness of the whole woman.

"It is looking so pretty to-day, and I am glad the sun shines. I was so afraid that you would come and find it very desolate that ever since I began to think you might come I have been here every day to open the windows and air the rooms. Eric and I have almost lived in the garden. That has been my payment for the little things I have done for we have no garden, we live above a little shop."

"Oh!" said Reyburn, more and more surprised. She did not look like a woman who would live above a shop.

"Sit down, won't you?" she asked, when they stepped into the sitting room. "And I will tell you about your dear mother. It was all so peaceful and happy. There was nothing to jar or pain one at all, right up to the very end. She did not suffer much, only seemed to get very tired, and fell asleep. She died that day when your letter came, saying you thought of coming home. I believe joy hastened it a little, but she was very happy."

Reyburn swallowed something in his throat.

"And you were with her a good deal, you were her friend?" he said eagerly.

"Oh, yes, I am afraid that latterly Eric and I have lived almost entirely here. Mrs. Reyburn was such a friend to me when I needed one most. She saved me from despair."

"You have had trouble, too?"

"Yes, great trouble. Will you come up and see the rest of the house? Then perhaps you would like to be left for a little while, till I see that they get tea ready. I think I understand how you must feel to-day."

"Never!" said Reyburn, on the spur of the moment, and she looked at him with a sudden surprise. She showed him the room where his mother had died, and all the little mementoes of her—her Bible, the books she had been reading last, the precious pile of letters, with the last one on the top. He remembered with a sudden rush of thankfulness that it had been a long, kind letter, breathing his deep affection and his desire to see her again. Ah, how magnified are such little trivial matters when death intervenes!

Seeing from his expression that his heart was touched, she turned to leave him, as she had said.

"Then you will come a little later on? We shall be looking for you."

"Where am I to find you?"

"Above the little shop at the head of the road as you go to the station; you can't miss it."

She nodded briefly to him and the next moment was gone. He was in no haste. The place drew and enchanted him; instead of a wilderness he had found a rose. The sense of home-sickness, the abomination of desolation had left him, something told him, for ever. He had asked no questions at Edith All-