

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## "LEANNESS OF SOUL."

(By A. Fraser Robertson.)

It was the schoolmaster in the Glen who flung the pebble, little dreaming how the circles were to widen in the pool.

"He'll make his mark one day, you take my word!" he prophesied, speaking of Sandy Maclean. "The boy's above the common!"

It fell out by chance that the subject of these remarks overheard one of them, and straightway struggling ambitions surged within the curly head and seethed behind the luminous blue eyes. Dazzling alicates reared themselves in the boy's brain, while his companions were chasing butterflies or "guddling" for minnows in the pools.

And because the minister was the biggest thing on the boy's horizon, his mind leaped easily to the climax. He would be a minister!

He voiced the daring resolution to his mother.

"I want to be a minister, mother!"

First the Widow gasped, then hid herself, hot-foot, to the schoolmaster.

"My Sandy wants to be a minister," she announced with a tremulous, half-shamed laugh.

"And what's to hinder him?" demanded the man of learning, moved to a generous pride in this thing he had had a hand in fashioning. Laboriously he explained the thorny path that was to lead to the coveted goal—of College and Divinity Hall.

A course of seven years! To Widow Maclean it seemed an eternity—seven years of screwing and scrimping and scraping for herself and the five other arrows who composed her quiverful, but all the mother in her leaped to meet the emergency.

So, one day, the boy went out from the Glen.

Among the rest, he took farewell of Flora Farquhar.

"We're going to be proud of you one day, Sandy!" the girl spurred him on, impressed by the sense of crisis in the air and the brand-new "heather mixture," with its reek of peat, a size too big, which clothed her companion.

"So you will," the boy assured her, a sober resolution in the blue eyes that robbed the words of arrogance. At the moment his eyes were more on the glowing future than on the girl's glowing face.

At intervals in the seven years—long, they seemed to be the waiting ones—he came to the Glen. And after each of these a change seemed to have come over him. The rustic air dropped from him. Subtly, indelibly, the "cut" of the man altered. He lost his ruddy freshness, his face "sickled" over with the pale cast of thought. He was as one who burns the "midnight oil," who lives the strenuous life, who semi-starves himself.

Then suddenly, one day, probation-time was at an end, and simultaneously the rigid, wearing economy in the cottage in the Glen. The next news that came—he had got an assistantship in a manufacturing town. The work was hard, chiefly in the slums.

A year of that, then advance so rapid as to leave the home-people almost breathless. A country charge, and ere he had fairly settled, promotion to a larger. After that, the climax, a city church!

With vision blurred by tears, the mother read one day in the papers: "The Reverend Alexander Maclean has been unanimously appointed to the parish church of St. Andrew's Mudbury."

It seemed in that moment as if the Widow's cup were full! She summoned Flora Farquhar. For the last ten years she had regularly summoned Flora when anything particular affected the distant Sandy. It had grown into a habit with the mother. She needed a confidante—one to whom to pour out something of the pride and love that were in her. And Flora passed the cottage every week-day on her way to the Castle to teach the Laird's younger children.

The Widow had hit on the plan of putting a certain white card in the window to catch the girl's eye, when there was special news of the absent one. That morning the card was there and the Widow herself at the door to greet Flora. The newspaper was in her hand. One toll-roughened finger pointed to the pregnant paragraph.

"To think that it should be my Sandy!" she exclaimed, in unsteady tones. "In a place like Mudbury, he'll be a real power for good," she added.

Later, as the girl took her way to the Castle, her heart thrilled beneath her pink gingham that view with the roses in her cheeks. Her head was filled with dazzling visions of the future. A "divine ambition" mingled with her human longings—to participate in that spiritual life-work that was Sandy's. In her mind she rehearsed again that night he had come to the Glen, to announce the getting of the assistantship. He had looked in her brown, deer-like eyes, and beneath the stars she had glimpsed their truth.

"I am not good enough for him," she had reflected then. Later, when he had left her, she had registered a vow—breathed a prayer rather—that she might in time grow "good enough." She was not afraid of falling short in a worldly sense. Inspired by that mighty Educator Love, it would not be hard to acquire those tricks of manner that to the girl's innocent soul constituted the barrier dividing class from class.

One Sunday, shortly after the Reverend Alexander Maclean had got St. Andrew's, he came North to the Glen to preach. It was a memorable day for the place—like a fair or a bygone Fast Day. The news got bruited abroad, and for miles round vehicles of every description, from smart motor-cars to ramshackle shandies, rolled in a continuous stream to the church door. It was the mother's hour of triumph! After service she and Flora walked home together. The Minister was detained in the vestry, whether the Laird himself had repaired to shake him by the hand.

"It was a grand discourse, Flora," the elder woman observed. (The fact that it had been completely above the good woman's head, in no way detracted from its brilliancy.)

"Sandy's a great preacher," agreed the girl, and felt—unaccountably—suddenly depressed.

"You could have heard a pin fall," continued her companion. "The folk were that attentive. He couldn't preach like that and not save souls," she added with conviction. Then, looking at the girl by her side, with a burst of magnanimity:

"The lad knew what he was about, when he chose you, Flora. You're cut out, if ever girl was, to be a minister's wife."

Next day the Minister went back to Mudbury. A warm glow went through him at thought of his reception in the Glen, nevertheless it was good to get back to the throbbing pulse of city life. He was not insensible to his success, as the world counts success.

Had he not striven and prayed for it? But underlying a very human gratification there was a deep-rooted, honest-hearted desire to use his success for God. Popularity, he reminded himself, was no guarantee of winning souls. He reflected incidentally that by and by, when he had got his footing in the place, he would marry Flora. Flora would help rather than hinder him work. But at the moment his work was more absorbing than any thought of marriage. Still, he decided he would go north some day, for a week-end, and arrange matters with Flora.

And meantime, all unsuspecting, temptation swooped upon him! The winter's work was in full swing. One Sunday the minister became aware, in

the pause after he had given out the first hymn, of an unwonted commotion in the front gallery. A lady and gentleman had arrived late. He glanced up. It was "the ruling elder," who had been absent since his introduction—a certain Dr. Hamilton.

His eye strayed to the daughter—a striking figure, with the up-to-date air of the woman of the world. She seemed to create a quite unnecessary stir in settling herself. Finally seated, she poised her tortoise-shell pince-nez and swept the congregation, including the minister, with cool deliberation. Irresistibly, at intervals in the service, the preacher found his eyes wandering in her direction. At the conclusion Dr. Hamilton came to the vestry to shake hands with him. Later the two went out of church together and found Miss Hamilton pacing the gravel walk at the church gate. She flashed a look of interest on the minister as her father introduced him.

"You have come to wake us up," she said. "High time, too! Under Mr. Whitson we had gone to sleep."

He looked at her keenly. Was the undercurrent of her words serious? But her eyes were mocking. She only jested. A couple of days later Dr. Hamilton asked him to dinner, and he went. Some pretext took him there again, within the week. Something about Diana—a certain, indelible atmosphere—engulfed him. Subtly flattering was the deference with which she treated his opinion. Her looks, her manner gloured him; her personality captivated his senses. As the days passed, her image began to get between him and his work—good God!—between him and his prayers. Or rather, it blended confusedly with his prayers. He wanted this thing as he had never wanted anything in life before. And—Heaven help him!—he was fettered to Flora!

On a multitude of subjects Diana's views were directly opposed to his.

"You preach too high an ideal," she criticised him. "The surest way of all to dispirit people. If a thing is not within easy reach, they let it alone." Or, "Why aim so high?" she threw at him flippantly, after one of his earnest appeals. "Is it on the principle of 'Who aims the sky, shoots higher far, than he who means a tree'?"

Before a week was out he had discovered that she had no real sympathy with his work. They met on common ground—on books, on art, on music; but when it came to spiritual things, his earnestness, his zeal, obviously bored her—she stifled a furtive yawn.

"You take life so seriously," she complained one day. "Is it the Celtic temperament?"

Persistently the minister shut his eyes to the fact that in the one great essential they two were not at one. But it would be all right later, he told himself. After marriage he would be able to imbibe her with his own zeal. Unconsciously strong in his own strength, it did not occur to him that she might first, like the vampire, suck his life-blood.

As the days passed, he became obsessed by her image. Already were iridescent indications of that devastation that any species of idolatry works in the soul of a man. His letters home grew rare and perfunctory. He postponed, from week to week, that week-end in the Glen which was to settle matters. Then, one day, preaching not far from home, he felt he could put off no longer.

His mother received him as she ever had; but Flora, the girl whom he meant to marry, by a mysterious wireless telegraphy seemed to have got an inkling of the state of his heart.

"I have been thinking," she told him one day, very quiet and white-faced, "I don't believe we should suit each other now. Our lives have been so different of late, and our ways of