

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

"YEA, THOUGH I WALK."

David Lyall in British Weekly.

Cornelius Breck lay dying in his upper room of the old house of Alton Breck, and the extremity of his case was the subject of a wide and general mourning in the place where he had lived the whole of his life.

Few knew, he least of all, how many yearning eyes were turned towards Alton Breck during these sad days, nor how many prayers, some of them scarcely articulate, ascended to the upper air on his behalf.

Cornelius Breck, in spite of a certain austerity which sometimes repelled those who met him for the first time, possessed, more than most men, the power to win love and respect.

It was not merely because he was well-to-do and was able to extend a helping hand in many directions where help was needed. Riches themselves have no power to win affection, though they may buy its semblance. Many rich men are hated with a cordial hatred; some are suffered because of their possessions; some few are loved. Cornelius Breck was one of the few. He was not an old man, only six-and-forty, and his life, long lonely, was now a singularly happy one. He had married, somewhat late in life, a woman he had long loved, but who had taken years to discover his worth and the riddle of her own heart. He had one son, a lovely boy growing up strong and sturdy to help the place, and now, unless some miracle should be wrought, he must leave it all.

He suffered from an obscure disease, which had baffled many physicians, and which it had been decided was beyond the reach of the surgeon's knife. His doctor and life-long friend, Archibald Amos, had just conveyed the news to him gently, and with a touch of indescribable pathos. The thing was sore on Amos, for they had been as brothers, and all the skill for which his name was famous was powerless to set back the clock even one hour for the man he loved.

"So that's the end, Archie," said Breck, and his deep-set eyes, tired with pain, looked out with a feverish gleam on the face of his friend.

"No, the beginning, old chap," said the doctor, in a low voice. "If all we've been taught to believe is true."

"But is it true?"

Breck edged forward on his pillow, and the pathos of his eyes deepened.

"How are we to know? It seems true enough when we're about and all right, but when we're up against it, as the Yankees say, that's a different matter."

"I wonder what you'll say, Archie, when I tell you I'm afraid to die."

"I shouldn't believe it," was the prompt response.

"But it's true, man; last night I woke up in a cold sweat, thinking I had reached the last hurdle and was afraid to take it. I don't want to die, Archie, because I don't know what's on the other side. Frankly, I'm afraid."

He took out his handkerchief and wiped some quite real drops from his brow, and again the doctor's heart was wrung with pain.

Here he was on unfamiliar ground. The hurt of the body he could generally either ease or wholly remove; the deeper hurt of the soul was beyond him.

"Would you like to see Dinwoodie?" he asked, naming the minister of the parish "the hunting parson," as he was sometimes called, but there was a hesitation in his voice.

Breck shook his head.

"Dinwoodie's a good chap, Archie, and an excellent judge of port, but he wouldn't understand. No, I must dree my weid by myle lane, as the bairns

say. I'm not ashamed of myself in the least; I'm only afraid of what's over the fence."

He smiled a faint melancholy smile, which once more wrung the heart of his friend, and caused him to make what he called afterwards a clumsy effort to offer a crumb of comfort.

He sat down on the front of the bed and looked down from his tall height of splendid health and strength on the wan face of his friend.

"But you know, Corny," he said, using the old familiar name of their boyhood, "you—you needn't; you've simply been ripping—done everything a man could do to live his life well. They adore you from one end of the parish to the other. Why? Because there isn't a man, woman or child in it that hasn't been the better because you've lived. Hang it all, man, that counts; it's—it's everything."

Breck shook his head.

"If I read my Bible aright, it isn't anything, Archie. The heart of the little child, that's what's wanted—the heart that can believe everything, and know that it's all right. Now that you can't patch up the old body, try what you can do for the dilapidated soul."

These words pursued Amos into the open, taking such complete possession of him that he forgot where he had to go next. And yet they comforted him oddly, too, and he remembered how his mother in the long-gone days used to speak of dying grace, which came out of the mysterious shadows of the unknown for the great need of all. She had said often that she had never seen a don't-need benefit of this dying grace. There, unless all he had been taught to believe was false, such grace must come to Breck, and that speedily, else were there no justice in heaven.

Amos knew the age of miracles to be past, yet his thoughts dwelt persistently on the thought that since Breck was so reluctant to quit his hold on life, the time had not yet come.

No sooner had he left the room than Breck's wife entered it. She seldom left his side, and had only done so at that moment at his request because he wished to unburden his soul to his friend. When she glided in again, her fair pale face composed to peace, because she would not wound or vex him, nor show to him the anguish of her soul, he turned his uneasy eyes to her.

"Come here, lassie, and sit down, quite close, and put your hands over mine and tell me things."

"What kind of things, darling?" she asked as she knelt beside him, and closed her firm white pulsing fingers over his wasted hands.

"Oh, strong, fine things, of all the men and women you have known that have gone out with a smile on their lips. I don't want to die the coward's death, Edie, and yet, somehow, the way out seems dark."

She stifled her anguish and talked the God giving her the words. But in the midst of it he suddenly shook his head and touched her glistening hair with his hand.

"I'm wearying you, wife, and rending your heart. Go and fetch the bairn and leave me here with him, our two selves, for a little while."

When she came again, leading the little lad by the hand, and Breck's eyes covered them, the treasures that were dearer than his life's blood, a sudden passion of rebellion smote him. Edith saw his color rise, and flung a moment, afraid lest the strain of their talk and the presence of the lively little boy were too much for his feeble strength. But he motioned her to leave them, and bade the boy climb on the bed, which he did without care or fear, finding it impossible to realize what suffering meant.

"Now, Cosmo," said his father, with a brave attempt to marshal some of his old genial forces; "talk to the old man, tell him stories, talk for all you're worth."

"What kind of stories, dad? I'd rather you told me one."

"I only happen to know one today, about a man who was afraid."

"What was he afraid of?"

"Well, you see, it was like this, he had walked a long time on a quite pleasant and easy road, and though he had heard there was a hard bit coming, he didn't realize it till he got there, then he—then he—"

"Punked it," said the little chap with a knowing nod. "I know, I've been like that. Last day the hounds were out, dad, and we came to the hurdles at the Black Cleugh. Don wanted to go on, but I was awful afraid, and thought I would get off and lead Don through the gate."

"And what did you do, old chap, what did you do," asked Breck with an almost painful eagerness.

"I remembered that you didn't like me to funk it, and I—I sat tight and shut my eyes, and gave him his head, and the next minute I was on the other side."

To Cosmo's astonishment his father suddenly clasped his hands.

"You sat tight and shut your eyes and the next minute you were on the other side—that's it, my man, the very thing."

The lad laughed shyly and slipped down off the bed.

"I'll bring the book of the spinney, dad; there's a picture in it mum says is like me."

He made for the door, and so to his playroom, where, in searching for the book, he spent quite ten minutes. When he came back his father had slipped down in the bed and seemed to be asleep. Then the boy stole away a little disconcerted, missing his strong virile companion and playmate, and a little at a loss how to behave in a sickroom, where it was necessary to move quietly, and make as little noise as possible.

Cornelius Breck slept, and in his sleep he dreamed. And in his dream, which is not for men to set down, since it was of the mystery of the spirit world, the God of his fathers spoke to him, and the heart of the little child came back. It had never really left him; he was one of the few who carry it intact through life; it had only suffered a little overshadowing in view of the stupendous sentence to which he had that day listened.

He slept very long, a sleep so unlike any that he had enjoyed for weeks that his wife could scarcely tear herself away from his side.

"Doctor," said Edith, meeting him in the hall, "he's been sleeping right steadily on, just like a child, since one o'clock, and now it is near four. I'm so glad you've come."

"The strain is off him, in a sense, Mrs. Breck, so I suppose it is sheer fatigue. Let's go up and see him."

They entered the room together, and at the moment Breck turned on his pillow and opened his eyes. He murmured drowsily and when they bent over to catch the words they were filled with surprise.

"I've been at the hurdles and didn't funk it," he said with a strange joyousness. "That's you, Edith and Archie; well, turn up the lights. I'm going to live."

A new terror sprang into Edith Breck's eyes and she turned them imploringly on the doctor's face.

Amos turned up the light and came to the bed, and laid his finger on Breck's pulse, at the same time covering him with his keen eyes.

"You've had a good sleep, old chap, and feel the better for it?"