

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE GIFT.

By Evelyn Orchard.

The clear morning light fell somewhat cruelly on her face where she sat between the two long windows writing busily. It was her birthday morning, and her age was fifty-seven. She felt every day of it as she knit her brows and made her pen fly faster as if she were making a race against time. It was ordinary note paper on which she wrote, but the thing seemed to bear the aspect of a legal document.

At a certain sentence she paused, erased it, wrote afresh, and then sat back with a puzzled, even irritated air.

"It doesn't read right," she muttered to herself. "I must try again."

"To Jerome Wheatley, J.P., of Hatherley, Durham, in memory of an episode which I daresay he has forgotten, and to mark my appreciative remembrance of its actual occurrence, on the 15th of March, 1847."

It was here she had paused, and sat back with a puzzled sigh.

"Thirty-three years; it hardly seems worth while to recall or perpetuate it, and yet—"

Her reverie was interrupted by a knock and the immediate entrance of a well-trained servant.

"Please, ma'am, the young person from the Institute has arrived."

"Where have you put her?" enquired his mistress without looking round.

"In the morning room, ma'am."

"You may bring her here in ten minutes' time. How did she get from the station, do you know?"

"Walked, ma'am, and she seems very wet. I have taken her mackintosh to the stillroom to dry."

"Very good; get her some tea, and bring her here in fifteen minutes' time, Jarvis, not a moment before."

"Yes, ma'am." The door silently closed, and Miss Garvice was alone.

She took her pen again and essayed to write.

"To Jerome Wheatley, Esq., J.P., of Hatherley, Durham, the cedarwood box in the bottom drawer of the oak bureau, together with all its contents. Their value to him will entirely depend on his point of view. To me they have been invaluable in the last thirty years, and have aided me to shape my whole life as well as my conduct towards individuals. I can only wish for the cedarwood box and its contents a continued career of usefulness."

She laid down the pen again, folded the sheet, and locked it in the inner drawer of the desk, a frail and dainty thing of satinwood inlaid with mother-of-pearl, a fitting adornment in a lady's boudoir.

When she stood up her tall figure seemed to droop a little, and to be lost in the folds of her velvet tea-gown. Rare lace fell from the neck and about the thin frail wrists, and there was an air of extreme daintiness about her at once pathetic and dignified.

But she looked like a woman walking with the ghosts of another day. Ill-health had blanched her face and whitened her hair, and loosened her hold upon the things of time. But the dominating expression of her face was a harsh courage, rather than that sweetness of resignation which can take the sting from death.

Her own tea was brought, but she had not touched it when the servant announced Miss Ellen Brooke. Miss Garvice turned sharply, and without rising bade her a brief good afternoon.

But her eyes softened insensibly as they fell on the sweet young face and a slight girlish figure in the garb of the Sisterhood whence she had come. It was long since a thing so fair had been seen within the precincts of Porth Hall.

"Good afternoon. How is it you came without letting me know? You would have been met at the station. You must have had a most unpleasant walk."

"Oh no, I enjoyed it. I love the country, and I see so little of it. The wind was glorious. I got a little wet, yes, but it won't hurt me."

"You have a cheerful spirit evidently, invaluable to a person in your profession. Well, I hope they made clear to you the duties you will be expected to fulfil here."

"Yes, Miss Garvice, the Lady Superintendent gave them to me in writing, and sent me here to-day to make sure that everything was right."

"You understand that it is not so much a nurse I want, as someone who is not a fool, and who will see what needs to be done. I warn you that I am not good-tempered, and that as I grow worse in health my temper is not likely to improve."

The young girl regarded her with a touch of compassion in her eyes.

"I hope I shall be a help to you," was all she said, but her voice struck the note of a perfect sincerity.

"And it may be for months; I don't want to change in the middle of the time, perhaps, when I have learned to depend on you. So you had better weigh up the matter well. For a time at least you won't get that practice in your profession which I understand a good nurse is always anxious about."

"I am tired going about from house to house," replied the girl unexpectedly. "In five weeks I have been at as many cases. I should like to settle down for a time, and my people would like it better."

"Where are they?"

"At a place called Hatherley in Durham."

Miss Garvice started.

"Hatherley in Durham! I used to know some people there."

"It is only a small place," replied the nurse, and her face flushed a little.

"If you know people there I ought to tell you that I am not nursing under my own name. I have taken my mother's to please her. My father's name is Wheatley."

"Oh, and why this deception? It is not a very promising beginning, Miss Brooke."

"My father is not well off. He has had many troubles," said the girl, and her eyes grew very soft and tender. "Some of us had to go out and help. But my mother did not like the idea of people knowing what we did, and to please her I took another name. It can't make any difference to my capability, Miss Garvice. It was only a private reason after all."

She added this, fancying some hardening in the old lady's face.

"It doesn't sound well, it's shame over honest work, in which there never can be any shame. So it was for your father's sake, he has been a good father to you then?"

"The very best," replied the girl, and the ring in her voice was almost passionate in its intensity.

"And your mother?"

The girl hesitated, and did not answer.

"I don't ask out of curiosity, but because through such questioning we

may arrive at a better understanding of one another. Have you had a happy home?"

"My father has done his best to make it so for us," she replied, struggling with her reluctance to draw aside the veil. "But—but I am afraid he has not had a very happy life."

"The girls are pretty evenly divided in this world, as you will learn when you are old like me. To some wealth, to some power, to some fame, and to a very few happiness, which is the greatest of all gifts. Then what is your real name?" asked Miss Garvice sharply.

"Edith Wheatley."

Scarcely a tremor crossed the old lady's impassive face.

"How soon can you come for good—to-morrow, or can you stay now, and have your things sent down?"

"I can stay. My box is ready at the Institute to be lifted, though the superintendent told me I should have to come back."

"I will telegraph to her; and listen, I prefer that you do not mention to your people at home the name of your employer. Can I believe that you will respect my wish?"

"Yes, madam, if you desire it."

So the compact was made, and Edith Wheatley took up her position under Miss Garvice's roof. She was there just nine weeks, and when she went in one morning to her usual duties, she found the old lady had entered on her last sleep. A genuine regret was in her heart as she looked upon the placid face, from which kind death had smoothed away all the lines. For she had been very kind to her, displaying fitful gleams of tenderness which had served to bind the girl's heart to her in strong bonds.

That morning she wrote to her father and told him the name of the woman in whose house she had lived during these weeks, feeling that Death had absolved her from the promise that had been faithfully kept.

She was surprised when, late next day, he came to answer her letter in person. Loving him so dearly, she could gather from his face, even in the surprise of her greeting, that something had deeply moved him.

"You are surprised to see me, Edie; it was your letter that brought me. Can I see Miss Garvice?"

"Yes, father; you knew her then? Somehow I do not feel surprised."

He bowed his head and followed her to the upper room where the lonely woman lay in the majesty of death. His shoulders heaved as he stood motionless by the bed, and after a long silence, he bent down and pressed his lips to the cold white hand.

"She was the only woman I really loved, Edie," he said, as they turned to go. "It's all you need know. Thank God, she will know everything now, all the misery and the agony I could not explain."

When they descended the stairs a servant met them, saying that Mr. Tressillian, the lawyer, hearing that Mr. Wheatley was in the house, wished to speak with him.

Wheatley was quite conscious of the lawyer's keen swift scrutiny as they met on the floor of the library.

"Good evening. I am glad you have arrived. I suppose you have been aware for some time that you are a considerable beneficiary under Miss Garvice's will?"

"I hear it now for the first time, sir, and I sincerely hope it is not true," replied Wheatley, with a touch of passionate sincerity which duly impressed the lawyer.