

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE STORY OF A PRIZE POEM.

By Maggie C. Reid.

Chapter I.

Johnston and I have been chums for years, and we have an unmitigated respect for each other. We were boys together, though, as a matter of fact, I was expelled from school some time after him and we lost sight of each other awhile. We met again rather strangely. At the age of eighteen I got a very junior post in the office of Totup and Graball. On the day of my arrival who should I see grinning at me from his perch at the opposite end of the room but by old chum Johnston! We resumed our friendship that day, and though we do not now work in the same place of business we have lodged together ever since. At present we are boarding, and we revel in the luxury of a double-bedded apartment and a private parlor, to which we retire after meals.

I think a literary taste in common has been the affinity in our case—not that we have done anything remarkable in a literary way, you understand! There's no doubt, though, that we have the ability. It only wants recognition. The only thing I have ever really had in print was a poem in our "School Magazine," at the age of fourteen. I was ambitious then, and very sentimental. All I got for my contribution was a severe reprimand from my father. Johnston also at that time attempted a poem in blank verse—in very blank verse, indeed! Now, though that is the sum-total of our accomplishments, our literary zeal—especially Johnston's—is unabated.

Johnston's pet hobby is competitions, particularly poetry. He buys stacks of weekly and monthly papers, and eagerly scans the pages for competitions. I don't think you could mention one for years back that he hasn't tried. I had been visiting one evening lately, and had arrived home about nine o'clock. In the parlor I found Johnston, as often before, in the throes of a composition. A pile of magazines stood at his right hand, and a bundle of manuscript paper at his left. His ears were filled with cotton wool, and the clock had been put off tick. I regret to say he greeted my entrance with a scowl.

"Hallo! old man," I said, sideling up to him in a friendly way, "are you busy?"

He grunted out something about "peace." I glanced over his shoulder, and saw that he was wrestling with the muse. The paper in front of him was ruled off in three equal divisions, and, with the perception of a Sherlock Holmes, I concluded that he contemplated perpetrating three stanzas. Beyond the figures 1, 2, 3 and the first line of the projected poem, however, the paper was blank.

"Trying to beat Shakespeare at his own game, are you?" I went on, unabashed, in that kindly way which is one of my chief charms. "What's it all about, Johnston? You might—"

"I say, Jackson will you shut up?" he growled. He was evidently in a bad mood that night. "Read that if you must know what I'm doing."

"That," was of course, a competition to which he pointed with the stub-end of his pen. There I read that the Editor was offering a prize of five guineas, and he required that competitors write three verses of poetry stating what they would do were they sud-

denly to become the possessors of great wealth and power. The last line of each verse was to be—"If I were lord of all!"

"Shouldn't mind having a shot at that myself, Johnston," I said, clapping him affectionately on the shoulder as I grasped the details of the case.

"Oh keep quiet, will you?" he rapped out testily. There's no pleasing Johnston sometimes.

"Let's have a look at your first line, then won't you?" I went on, for there's no squashing that cheery manner of mine. Bending over the neatly-spaced-off sheet of paper I read—

"I'd stride along the battlemented crags!" His maiden effort tickled me immensely, but still in a kindly manner I suggested "rags" to him as a good rhyme for the second line. The look he gave me was meant to annihilate, but didn't.

With one fell swoop he denuded that table of all its literary appurtenances and marched off with his spoil to our sleeping apartment, muttering all the road, and not in a friendly manner as I should have liked, either!

He sat late that night struggling with his three verses. I went off to bed with the easy assurance of superior ability. My last waking thought was "I'll wait a day or two yet then I'll surprise Johnston when he sees what I'd do."

"If I were lord of all!"

It was a morning a few days later. The housemaid had done me a little service, and I was offering her a shilling. To my amazement, she declined to take it. I stared in blank astonishment.

"You'd rather not have it?" I repeated as though I had not heard aright. You see, I have been lodging and boarding for years, and to have a "tip" refused nearly brought on a "stroke!" "Aren't you allowed—to—to—er?" I stammered, questioningly.

She understood, and smiled prettily. "Oh, yes; I believe so, she replied, but I'd rather not. My hand slunk back to my pocket with the coin, and while I eyed her as one would eye a new and rare specimen. She stood as though she meant to say something further. "But might I ask you," she said at length, "to lend me a book on English composition? I should like to refer to it a little. I should take great care of it."

"Most certainly," I replied, marvelling inwardly while I stepped to my bookcase to procure it for her.

"And if at any other time—" She interrupted me at this point with profuse thanks and ere I had half finished my sentence she was off like a flash, the coveted volume under her apron.

I mopped my brow, sat down, and reflected. What with boarders burning the midnight oil at the sacred shrine of poesy, and the very maids borrowing mighty tomes with a view to mind culture, there was no doubt that things were beginning to "hum."

Three mornings later, I strolled into our little parlor as fresh as a daisy. I was very early—early rising is another of my little virtues, by the way. I had left Johnston having his "last five minutes" in bed. The parlor fire was still green. A crumpled sheet of notepaper lying on the hearthrug attracted my attention. I picked it up, and, to my amazement, read thereon a verse of poetry ending—

"If I were lord of all!"

An extraordinary fine verse it was, too—a hundred times too good to be Johnston's. It might also have been mine, but that mine was still simmering in my brain. I was standing staring at it when I

heard a hurried footstep, the parlor door was unceremoniously opened, and Minnie, the maid, entered. She had come in quest of that scrap of paper, and was taken aback to find me in possession of it.

"If you please, that is mine," she said, nervously, holding out her hand. "It must have fallen out of my apron pocket when I was brushing up the fire-side."

"Is this your own composition?" I asked, still withholding it.

"Oh, yes," she answered, smiling and blushing prettily. "Please give it to me; it isn't worth reading."

"Do you write much?" I asked her, handing it over to her.

"Just a little," she replied. "I haven't really time for it, but I love it. If you please, sir, you might not mention this to anyone."

Of course, I promised, though I had been simply dying to tell Johnston that his poem had no chance with this girl's. I did not tell the maiden, either, that I knew she was writing poetry for competition. I looked over the staircase with interest at her retreating form. I was utterly amazed, to put it mildly. Hitherto, I had regarded all maids as fixtures, more or less, going along with the establishment, but this one was different. She was so pretty, too, and had such a refined and lady-like manner. I could not understand how she came to be occupying the position of housemaid.

I did not know whether she finished her poem for the competition, but I do know that Johnston's effort was finished and dispatched. Whether I entered for the competition is a matter of no moment whatever. Johnston's poem, it is true, was in a high falutin strain, but it really wasn't bad. In fact, so assured was he that it was tremendously fine that he showed me a list of all the things he meant to buy when the five guineas should come along! I think he had everything on that list from a watch-keg to an overcoat. I remember feeling relieved by the thought that that was a shopping expedition he would probably be saved, for I don't think he would have survived it.

Johnston was hilariously happy those few weeks while we awaited the result of the competition. I was treated to his poem morn, noon, and night, till I was even more familiar with his effort than I was with my—no, not that's a mistake. He would spring up suddenly from the table, strike an attitude, and proceed to recite the verses. I got so accustomed to his frenzied outbursts that I was shortly able to correct any little inaccuracy.

The result was to be published on a certain Friday in the ordinary weekly issue of the paper. Johnston was alternately jubilant and moody that day. I saw that he was in a state of suppressed excitement.

When I reached home in the evening he was seated at the table with a paper spread out before him. He made no reply to my cheery salutation.

"Well, have I to congratulate you?" I asked, pleasantly.

"I guess not," he answered in sarcastic tones.

I lifted the paper and read there—"The prize of five guineas for the best poem goes to No. 5 Shandwick Place, Edinburgh, and the winner is Minnie F. Selby." He watched while I read.

"What does that mean?" he asked, witheringly.

"Great Scot!" I ejaculated, "it means that the prize has been won by our housemaid."

"What?" he demanded, seizing me by the lapels of my coat. "Is that not your non-de-plume?"