

# The Inglenook

## An Observant Man.

The school house stood on the top of the high hill above the little town. Some said it was placed there to typify the steep ascent of the road to knowledge; others, the more commonplace and practical, said it was because it was such a healthy spot. Certainly, when the wind blew, as it generally did up there, it was hard to believe that disease or anything else could linger long in so uncongenial a spot. In the little parlor of the schoolmistress' cottage, adjoining the schoolhouse, Miss Ophelia Smale sat alone. The fire burned brightly, the lamp was lighted, on the table beside her tea-things stood ready. The kettle sang loudly, and now and then the water boiled over, as though to remind its mistress that it was ready. But Miss Ophelia was reading, and only paused to look at the clock, and every time she looked she sighed impatiently. "How Georgina does dawdle," she said, crossly; "she has no consideration."

It was a fearful night, offering no temptation to anyone to linger outside; the wind beat furiously against the sturdy walls of the cottage, as though determined to do away with such a paltry obstruction, and with every gust the rain and hail swept against the windows in sheets, threatening every moment to smash them. That bleak spot had never been bleaker or colder. At last a sudden rush of wind through the house bespoke the fact that the front door had been opened; a moment later someone entered the sitting room. Miss Ophelia roused herself and looked around.

"Are you wet, Georgina?" she asked casually.

Miss Georgina was wet, and muddy, and blue with the cold. "I am, rather, dear," as soon as she could recover her breath.

"You are dreadfully late," reproachfully.

"Yes, I am sorry, but I really was afraid to send those tiny Luxmore children home alone; it is such a fearful night, and, you see, none of the others go that way."

"You don't mean to say that you have been to Russell Mill?"

"Yes, I have. I was glad of a walk to warm me; the schoolroom is very draughty when the wind is high. I should have been back sooner, but the wind was in my face on the way home, and I really could scarcely battle with it."

"I think it extremely wrong of you," said Miss Ophelia, angrily, "to be taking home these common children, as though you were some poor nursemaid. How are we ever to make the people understand how different was our birth and upbringing to our position now if you do such things?"

Miss Georgina looked guilty. "They are always very respectful," she said, apologetically, "and I did not tell Mrs. Luxmore that I had gone out on purpose to take them home."

Ophelia only shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Don't dawdle any longer. I have waited nearly an hour."

Miss Smale rose obediently and dragged herself wearily up to her bedroom. The struggle with the storm and the hurried walk up the hill at the end of a long day's work had exhausted her, and when she came down again her face looked white and pinched, and she breathed with difficulty. The rain had taken the wave out of her usually pretty hair, too, and she was looking plain and old. Miss Ophelia looked at her with a sense of annoyance that she should become so dishevelled and unladylike by a walk in the storm.

"How dreadful your hair has gone," she said, reproachfully, "and the cold has made you look

quite old."

"It doesn't need the cold to make me look that," said Georgina, wistfully, attempting to laugh. But she was uneasy and miserable under her sister's contemptuous eyes. They sat long over the meal by the cosy fireside, this being the most restful time of the day for Miss Georgina. The room was warm, too, and the rest of the house was chilly and comfortless. But even tea had to come to an end at last, and, with a sigh of regret, she rose to clear the table.

"I really think I will wash the things in here," she said, hesitatingly, looking at her sister for approval or the reverse; "the kitchen is so cold."

Ophelia looked round with a stiff lip and a disapproving eye. "I will take them out and do them," she said, in a tone which invariably awakened her sister to the fact that she had committed a terrible solecism.

"Oh, no; you sit still, Ophelia. I am on my feet; I will do them."

When she lifted the tea-tray she gave a little groan. "What is the matter?" asked Ophelia, looking up in surprise.

"Oh, it is nothing much; my shoulder is a little stiff. Tommy was rather heavy, and it is always awkward to hold up one's skirts and an umbrella when one's arms are full."

"You don't mean to say, Georgina, that you carried that child home?"

"His petticoats were so short, and his poor little legs were bare, and—"

"Well, it is evidently useless for me to speak, so for the future I will refrain, but how you expect to take any position here, I don't know, and—and it is a little hard on those connected with you. I only hope you did not meet Mr. Harden. I should be more than sorry that his opinion of us should be lowered."

Georgina's eyes filled with tears. Her limbs were aching, and she was cold and tired beyond words, but these were trifles compared with the sense of injustice which rose in her gentle heart. She did not answer the last part of Ophelia's harangue; she was really afraid to tell her that she had met Mr. Harden, and that he had taken Tommy from her arms and carried him the greater part of the way. The kind things he had said to her she could not have repeated to anyone.

When Miss Smale had obtained the post as schoolmistress in that place, she had brought with her her younger sister to share the little house which to her seemed so Providential a gift. Miss Ophelia was to be housekeeper and gardener—they could not afford to keep a servant—while her elder sister was the bread-winner. And to a certain extent she filled those posts. In the spring she made little holes in the ground with a stick and inserted seeds, in summer she coquetted with the few flowers which survived the blackness of that spot, and in the autumn went around, armed with gloves and scissors, and cut the dead heads off. She dusted and tidied the house in a lady-like, diletantish fashion, and had the table daintily laid by the time her sister came from school. But Miss Georgina prepared the food before she went.

The Sunday following that stormy Friday dawned fine and sunny, though cold. Miss Ophelia, wearing her best bonnet, her well preserved fur tippet, and an air of complete satisfaction, walked briskly down the hill to church, alone. Miss Georgina had to stay at home and cook the dinner, for Ophelia had decided that it was too cold for cold food. For her own part, Miss Georgina was sick of the sight of food, and would have been more than content with a slice of bread and butter and a cup of tea. But, as

Ophelia often remarked, it was "wrong to become lax in one's ways and careless as to the conventionalities of life."

Georgina was troubled though when attention to these details prevented her from attending service. After her long week's work she hungered more for food for her soul than for her body; she longed to get away for an hour or two from the petty cares of existence and to exchange the material for the spiritual. Mr. Harden, the minister, was so helpful, too, and so kind.

"If God can read all hearts, I must know that in mine I am not really a Sabbath-breaker," she said, with a sigh, as she seated herself by the kitchen fire with her Bible in her hand. "But I ought to be firmer, and—and sacrifice Ophelia's comforts? That is what troubles me. Am I culpably weak? I cannot ask Mr. Harden, for it would perhaps appear as though I were complaining of Ophelia."

She sat so long pondering the matter that she heard Ophelia return before she had begun to expect her, and—Ophelia was not alone, she was talking to some one. Miss Smale heard a voice enquiring for her, and her heart beat fast as she recognized it.

"It is Mr. Harden!" she gasped; "he must have walked back with Ophelia. How wicked he must think me. I am glad Ophelia had on her best bonnet; he is such an observant man."

She went on more slowly with her task of dishing the various things, listening the while for his departure. Five minutes passed and ten, then Ophelia's voice sounded, calling, "Georgina, Georgina, come and speak to Mr. Harden."

Georgina's color rose, and her eyes dilated with nervousness. "How can I?" she gasped, with a gesture of despair, "in this?" How thoughtless of Ophelia. But perhaps she couldn't refuse to call me. She did not answer, thinking Ophelia, having done her duty, would not call again, but in a moment or two she heard her step coming through the tiny passage to the kitchen. "I've asked him to dinner," she breathed hastily; then in a louder voice she said, briskly, "Oh, Georgina, here you are. Mr. Harden has been enquiring for you; he is going to stay to dinner with us."

"How could you? Ophelia, how could you? Look at me—my old frock, my apron, and—"

"Oh, he won't see. Men don't notice things."

"And such a homely dinner!"

Another step was heard approaching, and with a feeling of overwhelming dismay Miss Smale saw her minister himself standing in the doorway smiling at her. Her face was full of piteous mortification, her eyes of pleading for—she hardly knew what. She did not know that her pretty wavy hair was catching the gleam of the firelight, that her cheeks with the flush on them made her look younger and more attractive than the minister had ever seen her. She was only conscious of her shabbiness and her undignified position. One of the problems of her life at that time was how to get a meal cooked and placed on the table, and at the same time wear an air of unconsciousness as to how it all came about. And now—

"Miss Ophelia has invited me," said Mr. Harden, taking her little hat, shaking hand in his, "and as my housekeeper has provided me with only a cold meal, I could not resist your hospitality; I hope I do not bother you much."

"Oh no," she said, gracefully, with a thrill of pleasure at being able to do something for his comfort. "I am glad you came. Ours is a simple dinner, but hot. Surely your housekeeper—"

"When a man has a housekeeper, he has a tyrant over him," he answered. "How happy you must be to be independent of servants. I have come out to see if I can help you. You see, having roughed it in the Colonies, I know the ins and outs of domestic matters. But chiefly," he said, kindly, "I came to see how you were after your adventure the other night. When I missed you from service to-day I feared you were ill."

Then Miss Smale suddenly became aware that Ophelia had gone to remove her bonnet and that Mr. Harden was still holding her hand.