

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

IN REGENT STREET.

BY EVELYN ORCHARD.

There were many wanderers in London streets that night, but none more desolate than he. He was not proclaimed derelict by his clothing or looks, which were those of the respectable, even well-to-do. But he was none the less pariah and accursed by that desolation of the soul which is more difficult to reach or cure than any material need.

It was near midnight after a lovely February day, a soft, delicious night, with the balmy breath of spring in the air, and the soft parting of dappled clouds in a benignant sky, to let the moon shine through.

Its beauty, however, was for solitary places; the glare of the midnight streets, the flash of the electric lamps, all the artificial means whereby man seeks to convert night into day, troubled the gentle serenity of the sky, and dimmed its lustre. In holy places where peace reigned, in quiet hamlets sleeping in lonely glens, or nesting on green hill-sides, God spoke in the voices of the night. But not here. David Beardmore, long an exile from London, came out of one of the music-halls, where, in common with other strangers, he had sought some distraction from his loneliness, and walked up Regent street, a little cynical, wholly sick at heart. Here was no change, the vain show had not altered in the smallest degree. London of ten years ago was the London of today. The same hurrying, feverish throng on pleasure bent, seeking distraction and oblivion from real or imaginary cares, and thereby only adding to their burden; it filled him with a strange wonder. How long before men would awaken to the fact that not in such directions could happiness be found? But if not here, where, he might have asked, intoxicated with the blaze of colors, the flashing lights, the strong flow of the current that might so easily have swept him away. But there was nothing in midnight London to tempt David Beardmore, albeit he had spent the last ten years of his life far from its spell. At the corner of Vigo-street, as he walked up the wider thoroughfare, with his long swinging step, he chanced upon a little incident which touched and arrested him. A woman in what seemed to him nurse's garb, but was really that of a sister of the people, was the centre of a little group of girls, to whom she was talking earnestly. They listened, apparently with attention, but when she had done speaking, shook their heads and walked away. Beardmore turned round after he had passed to take another look at the nurse's face. She stood quite alone now, gazing down the street with a look of deep disappointment on her sweet face. Her errand of mercy had failed. She stood just under a lamp, but the light fell on her from behind, so that her features were not clearly discernible to Beardmore. But even then he was struck by something strangely familiar in her profile, and involuntarily took a step back to get a better look at her.

She turned then, and faced him. Then he was in doubt. She looked at him, however, without any sign of recognition in her kind but pathetic eyes, and even sought to move away a little quickly, not caring to be addressed by him.

"Agnes," he said quickly. "Is it possible it can be you, and that you don't know me?"

He saw her step waver, the colour come and go, her eyes filled with a sort of frightened appeal.

"David Beardmore!" she said in a breathless whisper, "I thought you were dead."

"And hoped it perhaps," he added a little sadly.

"Oh, no, no; but where have you been all these years; and when did you return to London?"

"What if I had never left it?" he said at random.

"Ah, that would not be possible, surely! If you have done that it makes it more difficult than ever for your friends to understand."

"To me it does not seem so very difficult. I was blamed unjustly for a fault I never committed. My place was taken from me. I might just as well have been brought to the bar of public judgment, then I should have had a better chance. I disappeared. Did it matter to anyone where?"

"Yes," she said with difficulty. "To some of us it mattered a good deal." The undoubted kindness of her tone, her growing distress, moved him strangely.

"Where can we meet to talk, not here?"

"No, not here, surely," she answered quickly. "I have to be going back to the Hostel now."

"You spend your life, Agnes, now, as ever, in doing good; but my heart rebels for you, when I see you engaged in this hopeless work."

"It is not hopeless, she said quickly, and with kindling eye. 'The Lord's work never is, even when it seems most so. That is its compensation.'"

He shook his head unconvinced.

"Where is this Hostel of which you speak? Can I walk with you to it?"

"No, not to-night. I have to meet my comrade immediately, a little lower down, and we shall be going home. Good-night, David."

She extended her hand a little timidly, for his face was forbidding in its gloom, and his whole attitude that of a man at war with fate.

"You have not told me yet where we can meet again. Is your home broken up altogether?"

"My mother is dead," she answered simply.

"You can get off surely for an hour and lunch with me. I am staying at De Keyser's Hotel on the Embankment. It is a quiet place, and we are not likely to meet anyone we know."

"I think I can get off. What time?"

"One o'clock, and it must be a long hour, a whole afternoon, do you hear?" he said jealously. "Never mind what they have for you to do, tell them there is a man who needs you more."

"I'll come," she answered, and there was a little tremulous note in her voice, which stirred his heart like the music of the long ago.

"Have you any other clothes? Don't come in this," he said, fingering for a moment the edge of her cloak.

She shook her head, smiling vaguely. "I have no other things. I am afraid you must take me as I am."

They shook hands, and she turned quietly away, leaving him standing looking after her with a strange expression on his face. So they met again, he and the woman whose image he had cherished for ten long years. She had not changed so much perhaps as he; her sweet face had grown a little worn, there were lines upon it he did not remember, but the clear, steadfast eyes had suffered no change.

Next day he walked on the Embankment, keeping near the hotel entrance, from twelve o'clock. At five minutes to one he caught sight of her figure in the distance, easily recognisable,

though she had changed her garb.

"I found my mother's old seal jacket; it covers a multitude of defects," she said with a smile, and when he made no answer she lifted her eyes once more with that timid glance to his face.

"Don't," he said, almost roughly: "I had no right to criticise your dress. Pray forgive me."

They entered the hotel, and in the far corner of the great room they were as much alone as if they had a private place. He waited upon her with the solicitous care a man bestows on that he greatly prizes; and she, accustomed to continuous and arduous service for others, appreciated it to the full. A little soft flush rose in her face, her eyes sparkled, she became almost gay. Watching her with the keenness born of unspeakable tenderness, he realized that he had not been the only sufferer, that this woman had been cheated too. Only the difference between them was that while he had grown cold and bitter, had cut himself off from his fellows, she had given herself for others, and in the Lord's work, as she had expressed it, found solace for her hurt.

Holy memories came back to him, as he sat there with her, and his garment of heaviness fell from him for ever. The fate that robbed him of so much had not dealt the final blow, since she was left.

"Tell me about yourself," she said, with a sudden playful command which revealed the changed woman. "Every single, solitary thing that has happened to you since you went away. Nothing else will satisfy me."

"That would take too long, Agnes, and would serve no purpose; all I care for is that I am back and that you are here."

"That is a good deal," she said soberly. "But a woman always wants to know about the years between."

"In this case won't she take them on trust?" he asked, leaning across the table. "There is nothing unworthy in them, else I should not have asked you to meet me here. Two things only I will tell you, and ask one."

"What are they?"

"I have been abroad, in Venezuela and I have prospered greatly. I have a home which no woman need despise, and what is more, an honorable place among my fellowmen. Will you come back with me to prove it?"

"I don't want to prove anything," she said with her eyes on her plate.

"You don't believe it, perhaps; it is no wonder."

"But I never believed the other thing," she said quickly. "If only you had waited you would have known; and afterwards, when it all came out and the guilty person had owned up, it was terrible, because nobody could find you."

"It didn't matter. Reparation of that kind is always tardy and futile. I didn't want it, but I thank you all the same."

There was no more said for a few minutes, but she grew uneasy under his steady gaze.

"Let us go out and walk somewhere," she said quickly.

"Not just yet, it is very comfortable here, and we can talk better. I'm waiting for my answer, Agnes."

"I'm so old," she said, with a sudden sob in her breath. "And I am not suited to the life you offer me now. I am needed here, I think, and I love my work."

"Better than me," he said jealously. "It is not the same. It may be my duty to stick to it."