

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE BEST THINGS.

(By Evelyn Orchard.)

The clink of the money was the dominant sound in the bank; the voices of those who handled it seemed subdued so that it might be heard.

It lay in piles along the counter, inside the brass rails which kept a greedy public at bay. Sinclair had often wondered why these close and heavy brass screens, with the tiny space below, just sufficient to shoot the gold through, were not more fiercely resented by customers. They so obviously presupposed on their part the desire to snatch. It was a stupid idea, perhaps, but Sinclair was a bit of a day-dreamer, to whom all sorts of odd ideals came. While he counted out the glittering horde of sovereigns at his end of the counter, never making a slip because his fingers had become expert in mechanical handling, he was thinking of something else, of a little flat in an uninteresting street, among a forest of dwellings; of an anxious-faced woman and a sick child. He had a fallow, almost sickly-looking face himself with thin cheeks and black-encircled eyes, the face of a man who lived an anxious life and seldom had enough to eat.

The average critic would have said that it served Sinclair right if he were miserable and underfed, for what right has a bank clerk with a hundred pounds a year to set up a home, and give hostages to fortune?

But nobody had ever put that question to Sinclair himself, because in some subtle way they feared his flashing eyes, and he was so desperately silent that one never knew what fires might be smouldering beneath.

On the whole he was not a favorite, though one or two customers preferred to be waited on by him, and were mildly interested in his private affairs. Not that he had put them in possession of any facts concerning them; his face and its expression were suggestive of an interesting personality, that was all.

The manager of the particular branch of the great banking house, a keen, alert-looking man of fifty or thereabouts, had made his branch, of recent establishments, a success. He had a cheery way with him, and conveyed the impression of solidity and worth. People trusted him, and his advice concerning investments had in several cases turned out well for the investors, so that his reputation as a safe man rose steadily. He had the optimistic appearance of the man whose position and future are assured; he differed in every respect from poor Sinclair, who had none of these attributes.

Germaine, the manager, was pleasant to his assistants, though exacting, and at times a trifle arbitrary. But he had a keen and nicely balanced sense of justice, and would always be fair to a man, even though he happened to dislike him. The usual routine of the hour of after-closing was gone through, the accounts balanced, the money locked away. One by one the assistants left. Sinclair was the last, and he stepped out just after Germaine, who turned at the door to bid him good-night.

"You don't look well, Sinclair," he said kindly, at the same time noticing the thin, worn overcoat that the young man wore, and his shabby boots. "You want a few days off. We must try to give you an extra day or so at Christmas."

"Thank you, sir," replied Sinclair, and Germaine wondered why his face flushed a little. It was a sensitive face, and there was something extremely winning about the mouth.

"Nothing wrong at home, I hope?" pursued the manager kindly.

Sinclair swallowed something in his throat.

"The little chap isn't well, sir. It makes a fellow anxious, naturally. But I hope he'll be all right."

"I hope so, sincerely," replied the manager, but as he walked away, his quick, alert step ringing on the pavement, he shook his head.

Unmarried himself, waiting the convenient season, the increased means which would satisfy his own idea of what is due to a man's dignity in the first instance, and to a woman's pride in the second, the best years of life, with all their capacity and opportunity, were passing. Germaine was now forty-seven. He had some thoughts of marrying the following year if certain investments should turn out well, but he was not sure. He pitied Sinclair with his shabby looks and downcast air, but blamed it all on the imprudence of an early and probably highly unsuitable marriage. He pondered on it as he walked home to his extremely comfortable chambers in a good house, and wondered that the image of Sinclair and his troubles should pursue him so persistently. He even wished he had asked his private address, so that he might pay a call that evening to inquire for the sick child. He dined rather early, because he was due at the home of his fiancée at half-past eight. He had just poured out his coffee and lit his cigar, when his sitting-room door opened, and the maid enquired whether he would see Mr. Sinclair.

"Certainly, show him in at once," he answered readily, and Sinclair was shown in. He looked so ill and desperate that Germaine rose in alarm.

"Surely something has happened, Sinclair. Curious that I have been thinking of you all the evening. What is it? Nothing serious with the child, I hope?"

"He's dead," replied Sinclair dully. "I was just in time to see him die."

"I'm very sorry indeed," said Germaine in a shocked voice. "Believe me, I would have given a good deal to prevent this."

Sinclair looked round vaguely, his hand fumbling in his pocket.

From its recesses, after some trouble, he drew a sovereign, and laid it on the table.

"I've brought it back," he said quietly.

"Brought it back! What for?"

"I took it this afternoon. He needed some things, the little chap, I mean, and I hadn't a penny in my pocket. You'll never understand what it means to a man to feel like that. He wanted the things, and I was tempted. When I got there with them it was too late; they cost me eleven shillings. I had nine left. I pawned my overcoat, and there's the rest. I thought of putting it back to-morrow without saying anything, but when I looked at the kid's face I knew he'd want me to own up, so I've brought it. I don't suppose you'll want to see me at Tarvit Street to-morrow."

"Good God, Sinclair!" exclaimed the manager in a voice of horror. "You don't mean to tell me things have been so bad with you?"

"I've told you all there is to tell. We've had a lot of sickness, we got behind; I owe over twelve pounds now, and I'll never be able to pay it. Now it doesn't matter. If he'd lived I might have pulled through. His mother has given up 400. I suppose it's all up, isn't it? I feel easier now I've told you. We'll sell some of the things in the house to pay for the funeral."

"You won't do that," said Germaine quickly. "All the hardness died out of his face, even the alertness from his manner; nothing but kindness and human feeling were visible, brought there by that bit of real tragedy, the existence of which was such a revelation to him."

"You might have told me, Sinclair. Surely I must have proved myself rather a brute that you couldn't trust me even a little bit. Yet I thought we got on not so badly at Tarvit street."

"It didn't occur to me," replied Sinclair dully. "And after all, a man has no right to intrude his troubles on other men. I know your views on things, and of course I am aware that I have brought my troubles on myself. I don't regret that, no, by God I don't! If only the little chap had been left."

His voice trembled a little, and he seemed to steady himself with a great effort.

"Will you take the sovereign! And what happens then; will you report it?"

Germaine walked over to his desk and sat down there for a brief moment. He came back holding out a pink slip of paper to Sinclair.

"I shan't expect you to-morrow, of course not, how could I? Get that cashed to-morrow, and pay up everything. No, not a word!"

"But twenty pounds, sir. I can't take it! I shall never be able to pay it back."

"It doesn't want any paying back. Take it, Sinclair. You must. I tell you, for—for a reason I'll perhaps tell you later on."

"And will you let me come back to Tarvit Street?"

"Yes, of course, when you are able. I'll make that all right."

"But—but it might happen again. Who can be sure?" he said with a faint, ghastly smile.

"It won't happen again, old chap. Don't I know that? There, there, don't give way, go home to your wife. Ask her if she will see me if I call to-morrow; and you'll let me come, I hope, to see you lay the little chap in his last bed."

Sinclair went out without a spoken word. Germaine cleared his throat, and wondered at the warm glow at his heart. Half an hour later he was telling the story to the woman he was supposed to love, and who had been waiting for him for ten long years. She was still a comely woman, though something of the brightness had gone from her eyes, and the bloom from her cheeks. Her face seemed to change as she listened, but she did not speak a word.

"Of course it has been disastrous folly on his part to marry on such a screw, mere madness. And the queer thing is he doesn't seem to regret it."

"No, why should he?" she cried, then, with a mighty passion in her eyes. "He has lived! He has had the best things in life. He has them now, even though he has had to make a grave. It is life."

Germaine rose to his feet, and his face grew a little pale.

"Anna, if I had known you felt like that!" he stammered. "I have been afraid to ask you to leave this luxurious home."

"Oh, hush!" she cried, with a bitter note in her voice. "It shows what a poor thing I must have seemed in your eyes. Will you give me the address of that poor mother, so that I may go to-morrow and tell her she has something to bless God for."

"I will take you myself," replied Germaine, with a strange new note in his voice. "God forgive me, Anna, it is I who have made a mistake."—British Weekly.

An immense natural cave of great beauty has been discovered underlying three of the principal streets of Constantine, Algeria. The interior is of dazzling white stone, worn by the forces of nature into all kinds of fantastic and beautiful forms. There are three ponds, the water being lukewarm, and crowded with fish.