

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

A TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS.

David Lyall, in British Weekly.

"People have no right to have children for whom they can't provide."

With these few snappish words, Harold Croft's wife disposed of the problem of a small niece for whom a series of family calamities had ordained that they should make provision.

"And then to die on top of it; but it is just what might have been expected from Wilfred and Sara. They never were quite like other people."

"I don't suppose they could have prevented the last happening," observed Croft, with a small sigh; "but you'll be kind to the child, Evelyn. After all, it isn't her fault."

"Kind! I won't beat or starve her; but there's no getting away from the fact that she's superfluous, Harold. There ought to be a place for children like that—unwanted children. And we haven't room here. You know how congested we are, and what a struggle it is! I have three girls to launch already. I simply don't know what I'm going to do with a fourth."

Croft's face was very grave as he made ready for his usual morning departure to the city. He was a large, solid-looking man, slow of speech, and too slow of action for his extremely clever and very ambitious wife. He was a man, however, whom men liked, and women trusted. He would go out of his way to do a kind deed, and afterwards dismiss it from his mind as of no importance. And his wife's words concerning the orphan niece who was coming to them that very day struck him with a kind of dull pain. He did not think of reminding her how much he had done all through their married life for her people, some of whom were very trying and shiftless. But he felt as he turned to leave his suburban home that chill May morning that he had unaccountably missed something in his life.

When he was quite ready to go, he stepped back to the dining-room, not to take an affectionate farewell—that had been consigned to the limbo of forgotten things. Croft would not have admitted it, but his big, simple, and really tender heart was often starved. He was made for warm, family joys, for the tender ministrations of a loving woman's heart, and Evelyn had cheated him. Superficial, shallow-hearted, and entirely selfish, she had suffered the disappointment and the slow haste of her husband to get rich to embitter all her relations with him. She had indeed developed into a shrew.

"I'll go off an hour and a half earlier this afternoon, Evelyn, and meet the child at Victoria. We shall probably be down by the 6.10."

She did not answer, and he went out slowly, and with a heavy heart which pursued him all day. At the appointed time he was at the station to meet the girl who had made a solitary journey to the new home, of which she stood in some awe. Croft had never seen his brother's child since she was a baby. There had been very few comings and goings between them, especially since they had settled in Lille, where the younger Croft had a share in a silk factory. He certainly would not have recognized in the tall, slim girl, with the foreign look and the undoubted air of distinction, the small black-eyed child who had been the idol of Wilfred's life. She smiled when she saw him, a smile which gave a singular charm and loveliness to her face.

"Uncle Harold, how very kind of you to come and meet me!" she said, and lifted her face to be kissed. Her manners were certainly perfect, and she had such pretty ways; more than once Croft noticed in her some trick which brought Wilfred back, Wilfred the shiftless and lovable, who had been nobody's enemy but his own.

The two girls, Hester and Rosamond, met them at the station, and opened their eyes wide at the sight of their very tall cousin.

"Why, she's grown up, Dad!" they cried almost in a breath. "Mother said she was a kid."

"I am seventeen," said the young girl, with her charmingly simple air; "and my name is Aida."

She seemed so pleased to be with her new-found relatives, and was apparently so unconscious that there could be any undercurrents which would mar the pleasure of her home-coming to them that Croft inwardly trembled. For no one could tell how Evelyn would accept this striking-looking young creature, who, beyond all doubt, would put her daughters in the shade and accentuate the fact that they were commonplace.

He saw the effects of the shock in his wife's eyes when they arrived at the house; yet she softened in a manner which surprised him when the child approached her with the exquisite mixture of humility and appeal.

"It is very kind of you to have me here, Aunt Evelyn. I will try not to be in the way."

Croft was struck by the words, and remembered that she had not said anything of the kind to him. The first evening passed more pleasantly than he had dared to hope. The younger children, of whom there were three, immediately attached themselves to the new-comer, whose tenderness and resource with them was surprising in one so young.

"What do you think of her, Evelyn?" inquired Croft, rather anxiously, when she left the room to assist in putting the younger children to bed.

"I don't know what to think. She is very different to anything I expected—older looking, for one thing, and so very self-possessed."

"But charming, Evelyn? It would not be possible to dislike her, would it?"

"No," admitted Evelyn, with some reluctance. "She reminds me of Wilfred in his best moods. I should say she has the artistic temperament. There is no doubt that foreign life improves a girl's manners. I wish that we could afford to send our two abroad."

"Perhaps we may next year; but I question whether that has anything to do with Aida's manners. They are inherent. You never saw Wilfred's wife. She was a lady."

Evelyn's lip curled ever so slightly, fancying her husband's words conveyed a comparison. She was merely the daughter of a well-to-do tradesman, whose ample means had been scattered by ne'er-do-well sons, who had been a source of much anxiety to Harold Croft. The Crofts, though impoverished, were of good family. It was a point on which Evelyn was extraordinarily sensitive.

Six months passed away, and at the end of that time misfortune overtook the Crofts. Through no fault of his own, Harold Croft had to become a bankrupt, and the whole circumstances of the family were altered. Ways and means had to be discussed. It was imperative that they should leave their pretty and commodious house, and seek a less expensive habitation; also that two of the servants should be dismissed. It was then that Aida felt that she was superfluous. On the day after the family conclave had been held, and Croft had proceeded, a sad and perplexed man, to the city, she came to her aunt.

"Aunt Evelyn," she said in a low voice, "I know that there is trouble, and that there is not so much money. I realise that it costs something to have me here. I would leave, only I do not know where to go or what to do. I should not know how to serve strange people."

"Who talks of your serving anybody, child?" asked Evelyn, with a rasping note in her voice, born of her keen and terrible disappointment. The blow had fallen at a moment when she least expected it—at the moment, indeed, when she had felt that they were socially on the crest of the wave. Hester and Rosamond were at a boarding-school in Brussels, and various other outlays had been made in the course of the year, which had, as Evelyn imagined, solidified their position. And now all was over.

"May I say something, Aunt Evelyn?" said the girl, a little timidly.

"Say what you wish, of course; but don't keep me longer than you can help. I have a great deal to do this morning, and many letters to write."

"It is only this. When we go to the small house of which Uncle Harold has told me, let me do the work. I assure you I am very strong and able, and I am quite—quite a good cook. Mamma taught me; and at the last, when she was so often ill, I did everything. I have been taught in the French way, which is very economical. Don't let us have any servant—at least, let me try."

Evelyn's eyes almost filled with tears. She was feeling very wretched, and the practical sympathy touched her on a tender spot.

"You are a good child, Aida, even to think of it. It would not be fair. You are a young girl, too, and should not be made into a drudge."

"Oh, I should not mind that. It is not being a drudge to work for those one loves; and at least the girls must not come home from Brussels before the end of summer. Couldn't we manage that?"

"That is the chief thing I care about! and if you and I between us could manage for a little in the small house, Aida, it might be done. Servants, especially the sort we shall be able to keep now, are so wasteful. I can't cook anything—nobody has ever taught me; but I could do other things."

"Oh, do let me try!" cried the girl joyously; then suddenly her face flushed a little. "I shall be much happier, for all along I have felt that I did nothing, that I was of no use."

"Nonsense. At least you have been lovely with the children, Aida, and I shall look to you to help me with them still."

What Aida was to the family at that time they hardly realized, though realization came later, when a man, who recognized her worth, persuaded her to share his palatial home and great wealth. She was, in a sense, the power behind the throne. Far happier in the strenuous life of the little Clapton house, she proceeded to show her aunt the wonders that can be done with limited means, when the true art of spending has been mastered.

So much together, sharing the problems, the anxieties, and the hopes of that trying year, these two became so deeply attached to one another that Harold Croft sometimes said, with a smile, that he was jealous for his own children's sakes. But that was a mere jest.

"Do you remember the day when the letter came to Flowermead about Aida, and how angry I was?" said Evelyn one day when she had been recounting the achievements of the day to her husband.

"I remember," he answered, and wondered anew at the sweetness of her looks.

"It was the best thing that ever happened to me, Harold. I didn't know that God was spreading a table in the wilderness for me."

"I don't understand."

"Don't you, dear?" she said, as she put up a wifely hand to pat his cheek. "I am only trying to tell you that Aida was sent by God, so that I might get to know myself."