

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE GAP IN THE HEDGE.

With a whoop of joy the little curly headed boy next door came rushing out into the sunlit garden. In one hand he held an old walking-stick of his father's, his favorite steed; in the other a tiny whip. The walking-stick had a piece of string tied round it below the handle for a bridle.

He had got astride his fiery steed, and was on the point of careering off, when he caught sight of me. With great difficulty he curbed the creature's restlessness while he stayed to speak an occasional flick of the whip and a stentorian shout being necessary to keep it in anything like subjection.

"Having a gallop before lessons begin?" I asked, when we had exchanged "good-mornings."

"Haven't got any lessons today. I've got a holiday!" he cried gleefully.

"Oh, how is that?"

"Daddy isn't well, and Jane sent me out to play. I've got to be not very noisy, daddy says; Jane said, 'very quiet,' but Jane is cross."

"I am very sorry daddy is not well," I said gravely; "aren't you?"

"Oh, yes," he said, "but I am very glad of a holiday."

"Poor daddy!" I sighed, half reproachfully.

"Oh! but daddy is glad too," he said quickly; "daddy is always glad when I am glad, and I am not glad if daddy isn't. Good-bye, next door lady," and away he galloped.

All the morning through he played happily in the sunshine, first at one game and then at another; but when afternoon came I noticed that his gaiety flagged. At last, when he drew near the hedge, I asked him if he would not like to come in and have tea with me in my garden. He ran off delightedly to ask leave, and returned evidently prepared to stay.

"I tidied myself," he explained proudly, and I tried not to see the high-water mark on his chubby face and wrists. After tea I told him stories and we sang nursery songs together, but suddenly, as we came to the end of "Three Blind Mice," he slipped off his chair and held out his hand.

"I think I will go in now," he said, with just a faint quiver in his voice; "I want to see daddy. Good-bye, and thank you very much."

The next morning he was out again alone, grasping his beloved "horse" by the neck. "Good morning, next-door lady," he shouted, with his usual bright smile.

"Good-morning," I said, "how is daddy?"

"Not very well, thank you," he said, gravely. "I've got another holiday today."

"So you are very happy, I suppose?" "Yes, but I wish daddy could come out with me. I don't like it by myself—not very much."

I recalled, with a pang I could not account for, the grave, delicate looking father and the little son strolling about the garden, as they did every morning, taking long walks together, or spending long summer days on the lawn, when "daddy" lay in his long chair with a book in his hand, watching his small son more than he read, or holding the boy in his arms, while both looked through some picture book. Always together.

He galloped away on his steed presently, but I noticed it was not so fiery as usual, and before very long was hitched up by its bridle to a bush that it might have a "feed" while its master

dipped into a book for a change. After I had watched him for some time turning the pages listlessly, while his eyes wandered everywhere as though he could find no interest in anything, I called to him.

"Shall I look at your book with you?" I asked.

He agreed gladly, and, unhitching his steed, brought it with him through the gap in the hedge. By and by he looked up at me, coloring faintly, and whispered very shyly, "May I have tea with you today? Jane won't let me have it with daddy, and—I don't like having it with Jane. Do you mind?"

"I am delighted, darling," I said, kissing him; "and if daddy will let you you shall have it with me every day until he is well again."

"Thank you," he said, gratefully; "I think daddy will be quite well tomorrow. Oh! with a sudden delight, "and then I'll bring daddy, too—shall I?"

"Yes, darling, please," I said, but I had to gain control of my voice before I could reply.

There was no one at all in the steed the next day; it came trailing along behind its master in the most dejected manner possible. "Lady-next-door," he called, when he caught sight of me in the garden. "daddy won't be able to come to tea to-day. When I told Jane you had asked him, she said, 'Rubbidge, don't talk nonsense, it's too bad.' But she said I might come."

"That is nice. Are you going for a gallop now?"

He looked at his steed indifferently. "I don't think so." Then, after a moment's silence. "I would rather come and talk to you. May I?"

He spent all the day with me, very quietly. At times I managed to cajole him into a game, or he would help me with any little task I had, but he liked best to clamber on my lap and "be cuddled and talk," as he said. So I held him close; and we talked of all manner of things. Now and then his baby laugh would ring out for a brief spell, but he was mostly very quiet and grave, and I, fearing what might be happening behind those darkened windows, felt jarred and troubled when the laugh rang out, even though I longed to see him merry. I carried him home that night in my arms sound asleep, but the fiery steed, I am sorry to say, spent the night tethered to the bush, forgotten.

The next day and the next were wet, and I did not see my little neighbor; but, suddenly remembering the neglected steed, I went out in the rain and darkness and brought him in, and as I placed it in a cozy corner of my room a tear or two fell on the poor old battered walking stick and the toy whip still thrust through its bridle.

The next day broke warm and sunny after a dry night, and I went out early, hoping to see my curly-headed neighbor. He came at last, but not running to inquire for his steed, as I expected. He was walking dejectedly, and his eyes, as he turned them up to mine, were misty with the tears he was fighting back.

"Good morning, dear," I said wondering, for he looked at me but did not speak.

"Morning, next door lady," he said, absently. Then as if he could contain himself no longer. "Daddy's gone—away, and he—and he—" the tears getting the mastery—"never said good-bye, nor nuffing."

"My poor darling," I cried. "come to me." He pushed his way through the hedge and crept into my arms. From his blouse he produced a tiny, very grubby handkerchief and mopped his eyes,

while I for the moment was stricken silent.

"Daddy's gone to meet mummy. Jane says, but mummy went away and didn't come back, and I don't believe daddy will—do you?"

The young mother had died just six months ago, and he had not forgotten her. I lifted him up and strolled down to where I could see the front of the house. The blinds were all down! With a cruel ache at my heart I went back again to the summer-house where we loved to sit. "Darling, if he does not come back you will go to him and mummy some day, if you try always to be a good boy, and do what daddy and mummy would wish. You will try, won't you?"

"Yes," he said, gravely; "I—I didn't hit Jane to-day when she put soap in my eyes, because daddy told me not to. That was good, wasn't it?"

"Yes, for a beginning," I said, surreptitiously dabbing my own eyes with my handkerchief. He looked up sharply. "Next-door lady, you are crying. Is it 'cause daddy's gone away? Do you love daddy, too?"

"He has always been a very kind neighbor," I said; "I shall miss him dreadfully."

"I wish," he said, presently, laying his curly head on my breast—"I wish I could come to live with you till I meet daddy again."

"Oh, so do I, so do I," I cried, with a longing almost unbearable, as I pictured the days and weeks before me, when there would be no little neighbor, no grave, kind smile from the sad-faced father, no fiery steed.

The next day strangers came and filled the house over-flung into the garden. The little son, the "chief mourner," was kept indoors, as being more becoming and respectful to the dead. Then they all went away, taking him with them.

But before he left he came in for a moment—in the charge of a grim aunt—to say good-bye. He was very unhappy, poor mite, but he cheered up once, when he whispered, "I am going away like daddy did; perhaps I shall meet him quite soon."

"It is the first step on the way, darling," I answered.

As he was leaving I whispered again to him, as he hung on to me that I had his fiery steed—would he like to take it?

"No," he whispered back; "you keep it, please, till I come back. I don't want them," nodding towards his aunt, "to see it—they might laugh—and please will you keep this, too—they might take it away."

"This," was the stem of an old pipe, one of his greatest treasures, because it had been "daddy's." Then he left me. "Good-bye, next-door lady," he cried, as he was taken away. "Oh, I want to stay, I do want to—"

"Do be more respectful child," said his aunt, "and call people by their proper names."

I put up my hand to stop her. "Please let me keep my name," I begged.

Strangers fill the next house now, and the gap in my hedge is mended. I sit in my garden still, but I have had my seat moved, so that I may not see the changes. But, wherever I am, I have "the fiery steed" fastened up "to feed" the baby whip still thrust through the bridle, and sometimes—very, very often—I feel that I shall surely presently hear that baby