

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

AN AFTERNOON CALLER.

(By Cora S. Day.)

"I won't be gone more than half an hour. You will be a good girl, and stay right in the house or close by, Madeline, that's a dear," Katie put on her sunbonnet and turned to smile persuasively back at the small maiden who was busy at her play on the shaded kitchen door-step.

"Yes, I will stay right here, Katie, of course. I couldn't go 'way and leave my Agnes Elinor sick abed, you know," was the solemn response, as Madeline bent tenderly over the stricken doll in its improvised box bed. Katie smiled again, and went on her way rejoicing, to spend half the afternoon with her sister who worked on a neighboring farm. That her own mistress had gone away and left her in charge of the house and the small daughter for the day troubled her not at all.

"For it is not bit of danger that Madeline will get into any mischief in just the little while that I shall be gone," she argued with her own mind. "And as for anything or anybody coming along to harm her or the house, there is little danger of that, either, on this lonely back road. I might just as well run over and have a nice little visit with Belle as to stay here all day and do nothing."

Madeline crooned a little song to herself and the doll for a little while, happy and content in her solitary possession of the big farmyard and house. She coaxed the gray kitten to come and sleep with Agnes Elinor in the comfortable box, and laughed softly to herself when the two were cozily settled for a nap. Then she wondered what she should do while they obtained their much-needed rest.

"O h, I know," she said to her small self, presently, with a sudden brightening of her blue eyes. "I'll get my money box, and see how much I have saved. It'll be Christmas fore long—even if it is summer time now, and I've such a lot of presents to buy. O h, won't I have fun when mother takes me 'long to town to get the Christmas things." Her dimpled face was smiling as she tripped into the sitting-room and drew her treasured money box from its place in the sideboard drawer. It had long ago been decided that it was useless to put it in any more remote place. She usually counted her accumulation of pennies and nickels and dimes two or three times a day.

In a moment she was back in her seat on the broad step, spreading the coins out before her, and counting them over as painstakingly as if she had never done it before. In her absorption in the interesting task, she did not hear the gate open, or the crunch of a footstep upon the smooth path. It was not until a voice addressed her that she looked up, with a start of surprise.

Before her stood a tall young man, a grip in his hand and a tired look in the dark eyes that surveyed her with a curious light in their depths.

"Well, well," he said, a slight smile coming to his lips, as her eyes looked straight up into his fearlessly, in spite of her surprise, "this looks as if you were quite a wealthy young lady. And is it all really yours—every cent?"

Madeline was smiling back, even as he spoke. There had never in all her small experience, come an occasion when she had reasons to be afraid of any one. The few people she had met in her quiet country home or her few trips abroad had been all friends and neighbors; people to whom she gave her confidence and trust and friendship as freely as she did

to her own people. So now, though she had never seen this stranger before, his pleasant greeting and friendly smile received instant response.

"Yes, it is all mine—every cent," she replied. "I've saved it all since last Christmas, too," with pardonable pride in her own frugality. The stranger smiled again as he set down his bag and took off his hat to wipe his brow.

"You have done well," he said. But his voice lacked the intimate tone of his first remark. There was an absent-minded note in it that her sharp ear caught. Her pretty child face was grave when he asked his next question.

"Are your folks home?"

"No, sir. Mother and father went to Aunt Mary's to spend the day," she explained, carefully. He looked surprised. "And left you here alone?"

"O h, no," the smile coming back and bringing the dimple with it. She enlightened him as to the existence of the faithless Katie, and her present whereabouts. He frowned over the reply, as if something displeased him. Then he turned and looked slowly about him; over the big yard and fields beyond, through the open door of the clean, empty kitchen, and back again to the child.

"And your folks will not be back until evening?" he asked, half carelessly.

"Not till milking time," she corrected him, indulgently. He looked as if he was not quite familiar with the rural expression, but said nothing for a moment. When he spoke again it was with a faint note of weariness in his tone.

"I wonder if you would give me a drink of milk, dearie," he said, with a motion to seat himself on a bench that stood beside the doorway.

The housewife instinct awoke in the small maiden instantly. She sprang up with a sudden realization that she had not been very cordial in her welcome to her caller.

"Yes, sir. I will get you some milk and some cookies—if you like cookies," with sudden memory of the strange indifference of some grown folks to her favorite dainty. "Won't you come in, sir?" and she led the way into the kitchen, he following her as he answered:

"Thank you, yes. I am very fond of cookies."

She set a chair for him at the uncovered table, and in a few minutes had a pitcher of cool milk and a glass and plate of cookies before him. He murmured his thanks once more, and set to work upon his lunch with evident relish. She watched him with pleased satisfaction for a few seconds; then she slipped from the chair she had taken, and brought out another glass for herself. In a moment they were luncheon together sociably, chatting as they demolished the cookies and emptied the pitcher.

"So your father and mother went to see Aunt Mary, did they?" he said, more for something to say than from any real desire to know their whereabouts—just so they stayed away until he had finished his lunch with this confident little hostess and gotten safely away.

"Yes. But father was going on to the bank this afternoon," she amended her former statement. Into the dark eyes that watched her face there leaped a sudden flash of light.

"To the bank? What was he going there for?" He tried to make the question as careless as the first, and she did not notice the suppressed eager interest.

"He was going to get a whole lot of money," she said, frankly. Then, glad of such an attentive hearer, she made the most of her uncommon opportunity to entertain a caller all herself.

"You see, there is a man who has a—something they call a mortgage, that belongs on this place, and father is going to get a lot of money and buy it, and bring it home with him to-night. I don't know what it is, exactly. Father says it is just a piece of paper, but I don't see how that can be worth so many dollars. But he has been saving his money, like me—only he has been saving a long time before Christmas—years and years, he told me. I hope he gets the paper. I want to see it," she ended, with a smile of happy anticipation.

The dark eyes opposite her looked absent-minded, and she was a little disappointed with the apparent failure of her story to interest her caller.

The man was seeing a vivid mental picture that her story had called up—a strong, honest farmer, toiling eagerly, happily, in his fields year after year; crops hauled to market, and the money carefully deposited in the little country bank, to accumulate slowly, bit by bit, until there was enough for the great event of his life, the paying of this "mortgage" which "belonged on the place." His eyes wandered to the grip, which he had set inside the door as he entered.

And then he saw something which banished the vision instantly. A big, slouching, unkempt figure was bending over the step, where Madeline had left her treasure outspread upon her awakening to her duties as hostess; a dirty hand was stretched forth, in the very act of sweeping the coins together. In all the years of freedom from tramp visitations, the one exception had come in the absence of all the older members of the household.

"Hi, there—drop it," cried the caller, springing to his feet with a suddenness that made the glasses jump. Madeline looked about quickly, and in her confiding, hitherto fearless little heart there awoke a vague terror that was a strange and awful sensation.

The tramp straightened up, and gave the man within an ugly look. His hand slid into his pocket, carrying with it a good part of the money. Then he turned swiftly and started for the gate at a rapid run. Madeline gave a little cry of fear and indignation.

"O h, please make him stop! He's took my money."

His guest was out of the door and in swift pursuit before she had finished the appeal. He was in far better condition for the race than the burly specimen of tramping, and caught him before he had gotten down the lane and out on the road. Madeline ran to the gate and saw the capture with a thrill of joy—her one thought that she would not lose her money now—that her unknown friend would get it for her.

And he did. There was a short, fierce struggle—a wordless encounter, that took all the youth and skill of the one to overcome the more brute force and bulk of the other. But when it was over he carried back in his hand the few small coins, and laid them beside the others on the step. He sank down beside them, gasping, breathless, speechless for a moment. But when she sank down beside him, white and frightened at his inability to answer her eager thanks, he smiled reassuringly, and for one instant he put his arm about the small figure and held her close to him. Then he stood up, and looking down into the eager, excited little face, spoke.

"I must go now, little one," he said, with a new note of haste in his voice. "I think there will be no danger of that fellow coming back to disturb you. He will not know but what I am still here, you know. I wish I could stay