

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

SHEAVES.

By Evelyn Orchard.

The time for which Rachel Drew had longed through many grey and desolate days had come. As she busied herself about her dismantled house, she was surprised that so little elation was hers. Thirteen years had she lived under the roof of the ugly yellow brick house standing in the yard which looked out upon the waste heaps of the works. She remembered the night she had seen it first, and what hopes had filled her buoyant heart.

Nothing had the power to damp her enthusiasm then. She had brought, as she fancied, an inexhaustible store. But when the years are persistently grey, marching slowly, yet with a kind of grim relentlessness, they rob us, whether we will or no. "The years the locust had eaten," she had called them in her heart before she rose that morning, bringing to the new day a passionate thanksgiving because soon her eyes would open upon other scenes. She had come to Kyneton young and gay and full of hope, and it had been a gradual quenching, that was all. It is so common an experience in the lives of women, and of some men, that it hardly calls for comment. But Rachel Drew, being cast perhaps in mould a little finer than most, had suffered rather keenly. But she had made no sign. The light had just faded out of her eyes at the bidding of her heart, her smile had become a little less ready, though none the less sweet, a singular quiet had grown up and round about her, so that strangers, seeing her for the first time, felt a little repelled. She had not been a success in Kyneton, though her husband had been. Drew was a noisier brook, but he filled very ably the post assigned to him, and in due course promotion had come.

There were no children in the yellow brick house; had been the grave of many kinds of hopes. Rachel Drew, cheated of half the compensations of life, has never uttered a single complaint. She had striven to bear herself with dignity, and she had done her duty wherever it had appeared in that light before her. She had not the remotest idea of the place she actually filled in Kyneton, nor how she had consolidated her husband's position and smoothed the day for him in countless directions. She was ignorant, and it is equally certain that Drew would never have believed it.

There is a kind of man that despises his props, or is simply blind to their existence. Drew believed that such success as he had achieved had come entirely through his own unaided efforts. He loved his wife, but he knew very little about her. Quite early in their married life the doors of her innermost sanctuary had been closed to him. But he was totally unaware of the magnitude of his own loss. This also is an experience by no means uncommon in the lives of the married.

Rachel Drew was now thirty-seven, and she had no illusions, about the future. But she was pleased to leave Kyneton, to which she was only bound by one small grave. She was still busily retrospective, when Annie Chard, the young maid-servant, who was going to accompany them to their new sphere, came in from the front hall to say that there was a carriage waiting in the yard, and that the Hon. Mrs. Lascelles wished to know whether she could see Mrs. Drew.

"Why, of course, Annie, take her into the sitting-room at once," she answered, not in the least put out by the dismantled state of the house, or the fact that she was herself in working gait. She removed her apron when Annie showed the visitor in, and followed her immediately. The Hon. Mrs. Lascelles was the great lady of the neighborhood, her

husband the largest shareholder in the Kyneton Chemical Works.

"Good afternoon, Mrs. Drew, I've come to say good-bye. I hope I don't intrude. I see you are very busy."

"I am rather," answered Rachel, with her slight sweet smile. "The removal people came this morning, and they seem to need constant watching."

"Of course they do," assented Mrs. Lascelles. She was a tall, handsome woman, stylishly dressed, and with a slightly patronising air. Rachel neither resented nor noticed it. Mrs. Lascelles was quite outside her world, and she was at a loss to understand the meaning of this visit. She had only once been in her house before, when she called for the character of a girl she proposed to take into the kitchen at Astley Towers. Yet Mrs. Lascelles might have done a great deal to make the years brighter for Rachel Drew.

"We're all so sorry you are going away, and what do you think my husband said this morning at breakfast when he told me I must call on you to-day? He said you were the tongue of the trump, and that nobody knew just how good you were, or how much you would be missed, and he asked me to give you this to us."

She held out an envelope, but Rachel hesitated before touching it.

"I believe it's a fifty-pound bank-note; Reginald said so, and he has written something inside. So sorry I can't wait to say more. I am due at the Town Hall for something at three. I think it's the Nursing Association meeting to-day; always something to keep one busy. Good-bye, dear Mrs. Drew; so sorry not to have seen more of you, and I sincerely hope you will like the place you're going to; at least, it could not be any uglier than it is here. I can't think how you have managed to exist so long in such a hopeless house."

She was gone in the whirlwind of her speech, and Rachel was left looking rather helplessly at the envelope. She took the banknote out, and her eyes fell on the small sheet of paper which enclosed it.

"Dear Mrs. Drew," it said, "Please do not send this back. Buy books, music, anything you like with it. It comes from one who has been a better man because of your presence in this place. God bless and reward you.—Reginald Lascelles."

She was still looking at it when Annie appeared again.

"Someone else, please: Mrs. Fellowes, the Doctor's wife. May she come in?"

"Yes, of course, and if she's walking she will want a cup of tea. I know you'll get it quickly, Annie."

She slipped the note in her pocket and turned to greet the small, thin, harassed-looking woman who was at the door.

"Dear Mrs. Fellowes," she said, "you ought not to have climbed the hill to-day. I was coming to say good-bye to-morrow after we got the first van-load away. I'm sure you are frightfully tired."

"I wanted to come. It isn't the same seeing you at our house. This has been the haven of my heart for the last ten years. How I'm to go on without it I don't know, and I want you to tell me."

Rachel set her in her chair, unfastened her cloak, brought a stool for her feet, and smiled upon her with a kind of subdued cheerfulness.

"Oh, nonsense; I've done nothing, only come and sat with you sometimes, and had the children when you could spare them. Think how dull I would have been without them; but you know you have promised me Derek and Maisie for Christmas."

Mrs. Fellowes put up her hand with

a little gesture of dismay.

"A hundred and thirty miles away. Rachel! I've traced it on the map. You might as well almost be dead. Tell me how you suppose I'm going to get through my days without you? You've been my moral support for the last ten years. I should have given up long ago but for you."

"Nonsense; if you feel like that you've been the worse of me, and not the better. If I've been really your friend you must prove how strong you are, and write me lovely cheerful letters."

Rachel Drew knew, rather by intuition than by actual proof, the hidden tragedy of this woman's life, and having divined it, she had thrown herself into the breach and tried to make her strong, for her daily battle. It had all been done so quietly, mostly without words, and she realized that perhaps of all the people she knew in Kyneton, this woman would be the only one to really miss her. How much she had been able to do for her she had no idea. Rachel did not wear her heart on her sleeve, nor yet prate of duty or of ideals, or of anything above or beyond the daily round, the common task. But she had been a preacher and a messenger all the same.

"I'll try not to give up, Rachel, because that would be mean. I just want to tell you that what you said, is only time we ever talked it over, is really coming to pass. I'm winning him back, and if I ever get my lost happiness again, it will be you who has restored it."

"Oh, no, dear," said Rachel, softly. "You forget God."

"I had lost God too, and now I'm beginning to believe in Him again. You'll write to me often, won't you?"

Rachel promised, and her heart was very full by the time she had said good-bye to the Doctor's wife. She had hardly left the gate when a girl rode up on a bicycle with a small brown-paper parcel.

"No, dear Mrs. Drew, I won't come in. This is just a little bit of the work you admired. I've sewed it for you, and my heart is in every stitch. You know what you've done for me. You've made me good, and I might have been so bad. I can't think why God takes you away, unless it is that He has found another place where people need you more. Good-bye; will you give me a kiss, and once in a long time write to me? I'll always remember what you've been to me, and what you've said."

"But I've never been anything, nor said anything," said Rachel desperately, and there was a delicate flush, almost of shame, on her cheek.

"Oh, oh! how can you say that? You must know better. Good-bye, darling Mrs. Drew, here's the rector coming, and I saw Will Alderton in the village. He's coming too."

She waved her hand and ran off, and the middle-aged Rector of Kyneton took her place.

"I'm afraid you are having a great many rather trying leavetakings, Mrs. Drew, but, after you have got through them, their memory will fill your heart with sweet incense. Have you any idea, I wonder, how you are beloved in this place?"

Rachel shook her head.

"I can't understand it."

"Ah, that is so like you; you are always far too modest and shrinking, but no doubt it is the secret of your power over people. I've come to discharge my own particular debt, to thank you for your close and regular attendances at the church, for your reverent men, for the whole-hearted way in which you have listened to me even in my most futile moments. Knowing what you expected and came prepared for, I never dared be slack in my preparation, and if there were more listeners like you, we should hear rather less of slackness in the pulpit."