

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

A WOODLAND WAY.

By Evelyn Orchard.

It stretched from the gate of a small cottage house across a breadth of meadow land to a belt of woodland where it melted into green shadow and enchanted spaces. It had always been a lovers' walk; from time immemorial youths and maidens from the village yonder, and from further haunts (since the woodland way was known and loved far beyond its own ken) had strayed there, and often, ay, very often, the old tale had been told, the tale which can even make the old world new.

Its sylvan beauty was the more noticed and memorable, perhaps, that it was set unexpectedly, and it might be a trifle incongruously, in a somewhat bare and inhospitable country, in a remote unfrequented part of Sussex, inland from the sea, so that the open breadths of the big bare lands had no excuse for their being and could not properly be called downs.

The land being of harsh quality and ungenerous, even in response to faithful toil, the neighborhood was sparsely populated, and very few young people were to be found, either in the village or in any of the homes within a six mile radius. There were no openings for the young men; they had to seek a lifework beyond the spell of the woodland way, and the maidens followed them. It is the inexorable course of nature, and of life. But in a small and quiet home, the cottage house already alluded to, there dwelt one who had not followed in nature's way. She had been left to her own imaginings, to dreams which had never had any fulfilment, and so we find her as we pass that way.

She walked often in the woodland way, partly because it was the most natural course her feet should take from her own door, but chiefly because there her loneliness found some strange companionship, which comforted a solitary life. She knew the cleft where was to be found the first primrose; the snowdrop, the wood violet had no haunt she did not know, and all the birds welcomed her with their songs; even the timid squirrel would crack his nuts above her head without so much as a tremor of his bright eyes. She came so often there they had learned to know her. Sometimes when the weather was hard, she would bring a little basket and feed the birds and beasts and creeping things, for she loved them all. She had scarcely grown old, though she had lived many years in the cottage house. But there was no stress there. Long, quiet days, full of loving service, were followed by nights of sound sleep sent by God, so that there might be no tears shed. For wakeful nights are hard upon the solitary—they are haunted by spectres that do not sleep.

She had a soft, sunshiny face, albeit there was just a little vacant expression on it at times, as of one who lived so far away from the world and the things that are in the world, that her spirit had become at last a little detached. Some who did not know, and who hastily judged from the merest outward signs, would tap their foreheads significantly when her name was mentioned, and say she was a little touched, as I have said, a little detached from the ordinary ways and walks of life.

She came one day to the woodland way, a spring day when the air was high and clear, and full of that nameless life which can be felt in the veins when spring is at hand. She felt it too, for her step, always light, seemed

scarcely to tread the waking earth; her eyes often sought the dappled sky, where the mackerel clouds promised all sorts of beauty, and once, as the birds chirped overhead in the budding boughs, she hummed a scrap of song. She carried a little basket, hoping to be able to fill it with fresh primroses for a sick child, who looked for her visits as if they had been an angel's. She came lightly and happy-heartedly to the deep copse where she usually found the primroses, nor was she disappointed. She was so busy on her knees, picking them with great care, and a little regretful tenderness, because their days of natural bloom were over, that she did not hear a football on the pine needles in the path above.

Presently, however, she beheld a shadow fall athwart the sunshine, and rose up, looking round a little hurriedly, though not at all afraid. Then she gave a little cry and her basket fell, and all her golden treasure was scattered at her feet. A man stood before her, a man she had once known well in the long ago time, the sun loved, and whose image she had cherished in secret and sweetly, all these years. She knew him at once, though he had gone away with the sun on his hair and came back grey; for his smile and his steadfast look were the same. He stood silent before her a moment, partly because she was so little changed, and yet so greatly changed, if the paradox could be understood. It was quite clear to him, and he was conscious of it, a gulf which might or might not be possible to bridge.

"So you have come back?" she said, with a little falter in her voice. "I thought you must be dead."

"Perhaps you wished it," he made answer, with a certain strain in his voice.

"Oh no. I have never wished that," she answered, and stopped to pick up the primroses at her feet. Then he saw that her youth was gone for ever, and he wondered whether she saw and mourned the like change in him.

"I suppose we could not begin where we left off?" he said wistfully. "I could explain and make clear all that has gone between."

She stood up; her pale, clear face flushed a little, either with the exertion of stooping, or with some inward agitation, she could not altogether control.

"Oh no, that could not happen, she answered, with no uncertain note in her voice.

"Why?" he asked, briefly.

"Well, because we are both grown old, and it—it would be impossible. I should be afraid."

"I am fifty-three, you are fifty-one. I could name even the day," he said, calmly. "Many who are older have risked it. Why not?"

"I could not," she answered, but the color was high in her cheek, like any girl's. "I have suffered the best years; what are left are scarcely worth considering."

"I would doubt it. Marian; at least let us make the experiment. That I have come back proves that I have thought the one slender chance worth trying. For, look you, no one had ever told me whether you had lived or died."

"Something within me died when you went without explanation or a word of farewell," she said quietly, "and although she afterwards, before she died, confessed what she had done to separate us, that part of me remained dead. Do you understand?"

His face hardened a little. She guessed he had hard thoughts of the dead.

"It is no use," she said gently. "She was never happy herself, and she died without hope. It was very sad. These

things have weighed upon me. But I know that all will be well on the other side."

The flickering color died out of her cameo-like face; her fingers grew firmer as they grasped the basket, the brief glow from the other years faded from her whole being. Once more she was the dreamer of the woodland way. He felt a little chill upon his heart, as one might feel when a sudden cloud falls athwart the sunshine. And he knew that he had come in vain.

"The other side is far away," he said gloomily, "even supposing you believe in it, which I have never professed to do."

"Not so far. I am never afraid of it now. Familiarity makes everything easy."

"Well, if that is true, give me another chance. Let us get to know each other again. Life has not been fair to us here, and there are still a few years left."

She put a little handful of moss about the primroses, because it was her nature to make even dumb things comfortable. Then she looked at him a little timidly, but with a certain firmness.

"It is too late," she said, very gently. "It has passed us by."

He turned upon his heel, and would have left her, but she called him back.

"Could we not be friends?" she asked. "I have never had a friend, for after her I was afraid to trust anyone. I have been alone all these years, and no one cares."

His eyes filled with compassion at the emptiness of his these words revealed.

"I might try," he said awkwardly, "but I am not the kind of man. It must be all or nothing. You remember how I was in my youth."

"Masterful," she murmured, "always masterful."

"I am not masterful now, for I have been out in the world, where there are many masters," he said grimly. "But I am still thorough in all I do. I have never cared for another woman but you all my life, and though, as you say, we have lost or suffered the best, we ought not to throw the rest away."

She shook her head again, but she fancied a little wavering in her looks.

"Let me come here, at least, back to the old village, and let us meet sometimes. Then after a time, if we get to know one another no better, I promise you I will go away, and not trouble you any further."

She smiled, for she was very solitary, and the words opened up a pleasing vista. "It is a very quiet village, even quieter than it used to be, and I am shut out. They think me a little queer, dear souls, and it does not trouble me, for always the old people, and the sad, and the little children understand, and the others do not matter, for they are busy with their own affairs, and make much noise over very little."

He smiled too, for he remembered such quaint manner of speech like the savor of some half-forgotten perfume.

"Then I may come?"

Oh, yes, why not? Only after the big world, I warn you, you will find us very slow and dull. Even I used to find it so until I got to know how little anything mattered after all."

"You'll live again, Marian, in six months' time, I promise you," he said, and his tone had in it the masterful note of long ago.

She shook her head, smiling a little, too.

"We shall see who will be the wiser," was all she said, as they turned to walk together along the woodland way.

But at the end of six months a great wonder happened, for the little woman