

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE TEST.

By David Lyall.

Branksome had been alone in his consulting room for over an hour. It was a small, comfortably furnished room overlooking the garden of a city square, a place of pleasant greenness. Beyond was the roar and the traffic of one of the busiest of London streets. He was thinking deeply of a case that had come under his notice that morning, and which had suggested an ethical problem as well as an interesting surgical case. It wanted only 10 minutes to his dinner hour, and he was due to read a paper before a private medical society at the other side of London in an hour's time. But he had promised to write a letter to the husband of his patient before he slept. He did not know what to say. The clear sheet lay on the desk before him, and his pen was in his hand, but no words were ready to flow from it. Branksome was a middle-aged Scotchman, with a strong dour face and an uncommon breadth well set, his hands broad and arresting thing about him. They were long and firm and fine, suggesting strength and nervousness and exceeding tenderness. It was the hands, guided by the wonderful brain, that had made Branksome's fortune, and that had enabled him at forty-five to take a position in his own world that was the envy of all his contemporaries. He was a bachelor, and lived alone in his shabby house, which lacked the finishing touches that can only be put to it by a woman's hands. It would be too much to say that Branksome had never given a thought to the difference a woman's presence would make in his life as well as in his home. He had not been able to marry the only woman who had ever tempted him to think lightly of his freedom and he had never seen another. She was the woman who had consulted him that morning, but she was unaware how he regarded her. She had come to him for two reasons: because his opinion was the first in the surgical world, and because he was an old friend whom she could trust. And she had trusted him with an absolute fulness, entirely ignorant of the fact that what she told him stabbed him in his dearest part. She had left the house without guessing it, only comforted by his immense tenderness, by his instant and astonishing grasp of the subject. He was disturbed in his grey reverie by his manservant, who had come to him from the Scotch village at home for sheer love, and whose life was wholly wrapped up in his master.

"Dinner is it, Wylie? I'm coming. I've got a letter to write, my man, that I find a bit difficult."

"It wants ten minutes to eight, sir, and there's a gentleman in the waiting-room name of Rushbrook. Will you see him?"

Branksome straightened himself in his chair and finally rose.

"Yes, show him in."

He placed the blotting paper over the page on which the words, "Dear Mr. Rushbrook," were already written, and stepped over the hearthrug on which he took up his place. The door opened and Rushbrook was shown in.

"Evening," he said curtly, "I'm much obliged to you for seeing me out of business hours; but my wife telephoned to me, and I called in on my way from the city."

"It has saved me writing a letter, Mr. Rushbrook; will you take a chair?" said Branksome politely, but coldly. He looked at him with distaste; his air of prosperity, the aggressively arrogant manner of the successful man strangely irritated him.

"What's the matter with my wife,

Branksome?" he said brusquely. He was the type of man who seldom used a prefix in addressing even comparative strangers. That also irritated Branksome, but then he was not in a very conciliatory mood. "Is she really bad?"

Branksome ran his fingers through his short hair. "She's very bad; she has, broadly speaking, about three months to live."

Rushbrook looked blankly dismayed.

"Three months to live! But she looks perfectly well, except for a tired look she gets with rushing about too much. I thought it was all imagination on her part, I've told her so."

"Yes, so she told me."

Rushbrook's color faintly rose.

"I suppose she's been embroidering the facts. Women mostly do. Please explain the case to me, as I suppose you intended to do in the letter."

Branksome at some length went into the details of the case, using no superfluous words, and certainly not attempting in any way to gloss over or to minimise it.

"But if an operation will save her, in the name of wonder why can't it be done?"

Branksome slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"It can't be done without the consent of the patient, even in the simplest case."

"No, of course not; but why won't she consent? Have you explained it to her thoroughly and frankly?"

"I have. I told her as much, or nearly so, as I have told you. The risks, generally speaking, are not very great. My average of such operations successfully carried through are about twenty-five in the year."

"And you think she would be a successful case?"

"I am certain of it."

"What—what reason did she give for refusing then? She isn't a coward. I've known her be very brave in several emergencies, and nobody can say she thinks of herself before everybody else."

"No," said Branksome, getting out the word with difficulty. "In this case she puts herself last. She thinks only of you."

"Well, but what have I got to do with it? She can't think I would hesitate about the fee, surely. We don't hit it off very well, perhaps, but that would be unthinkable."

"I don't think she considered that. The issue lies deeper, Mr. Rushbrook. She thinks it would probably be better for both if the knot were untied; frankly speaking, she has no desire to live."

"But why?" said Rushbrook, moving uneasily on his chair. "She has a very comfortable home and everything money can buy."

"I have seen behind the scene in a good many women's lives," answered the surgeon, drily, "and I have come to the conclusion that the majority of them set less store by these things than one would imagine. Mrs. Rushbrook has no quarrel with her outward circumstances. She said very little about the actual state of her mind. What she did say was that it was hardly worth it, and she had no fear of death. Life was not so precious a thing that one should seek to cling to it. These were her words; the words she charged me to tell you if need be."

"But, bless me, you wouldn't take such words as final in a case like this! You are certain you assured her the risks were worth undertaking?"

"I gave her that assurance. The disease is not very far advanced, and the operation most certainly would be a radical cure. I was never more certain of anything, and I explained it to her carefully. That was her decision, and she charged me to convey it to you. I have done so. There

is no more I can do."

He made a movement towards the door, which indicated that he wished the interview closed. Rushbrook had now risen, but he did not immediately take the hint.

"You must have formed an opinion on the merits of the case outside its physical aspects," he said, a trifle awkwardly. "What was the impression left on your mind?"

"You wish me to tell you frankly?"

"Yes, why would I ask it if I didn't?"

"Then the impression left was that Mrs. Rushbrook has nothing to live for, and that she will not be sorry to die."

Rushbrook turned about quickly, and without so much as a good night left the room and the house. In the square he called a hansom and gave the address of his house in Hyde Park Terrace. His face wore a very strange expression as he was driven rapidly west. He was in love with life, there was nothing he wished to put further away from him than the day when he must leave it; but here was Wylie, ready any day to welcome the charge he beheld in the far distance as a nightmare. Why would she welcome it? Was it any fault of his?

The drive seemed very short; it was too short indeed for the problem he had to solve. He paid the man correctly, and fitting his key in the door let himself in. The appetising odor of his evening meal greeted his nostrils as he took off his coat. The man-servant came out of the dining-room to offer his help just a moment too late.

"Where is your mistress, Shipley?"

"In the drawing-room, sir; she is dressed and has been there for some little time."

Rushbrook braced himself and went up. He opened the door softly and saw her before she was aware of his approach. She was sitting before the fire, but from the position of the door he could see her face. The light from a shaded lamp by the piano fell full upon it. It was a very sweet face, though the charm of its youthfulness was long since gone.

What struck him most was the far-offness of her look; she seemed to be seeing in front of her visions of something removed from earth. Something smote him, a vast remorse. He had tired of her long ago; the brief bond between them had been irksome to him, whatever it might have proved to her. But he had never felt that because of it he would welcome death. To him that was a terrible thing. He came swiftly up the long room, and even while she looked round to welcome him with the smile that had so seldom failed, though neglect and indifference had robbed it perhaps of some of its sweetness, he fell upon his knees. She bent her head until it rested on his breast, and never a word passed between them.

Next day Branksome received Mrs. Rushbrook for operation into his private nursing home.

A NEW BABY.

A baby came to our house
Not very long ago,
And father says we'll keep it here
'Cause mother loves it so.
I didn't understand at first;
My heart felt very sore.
It seemed to me that mother
Wouldn't love me any more.

But mother took me in her arms
Just as she used to do,
And told me that a mother's heart
Was big enough for two,
And that she loved me just the same.
Because of this, you see,
The place I have in mother's heart
Is always kept for me.

In St. Nicholas.