

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## THE CALL IN THE NIGHT.

Chavasse rose from his bed at five o'clock on the morning of the 3rd of December with a strange clearness of vision in front of him, and a very definite purpose. There was no hardship in the hour of his awakening because it was a Calcutta morning, where they begin the day early. As he took his bath and figured out his plans for the day, he wondered whether the chances of his desire and purpose being fulfilled were favorable or the reverse. He would know before he returned from his ride, in which, in all probability, he would be joined by his chief. Chavasse made a good figure on horseback, where he was much admired by various ladies, who, had he been matrimonially inclined, might have tempted him from his bachelorhood. But he was now thirty-six, and was called in the circles where he moved "the hard nut." It was not a very appropriate title, for in reality he was not a hard man at all, though keen in business, sensible in social life, and loyal in his friendships. He was a man's man, however, and though one of the most eligible of his set in India, seemed wholly invulnerable to the charms of the other sex. His clean-cut, pleasant face, lit by a pair of singularly fine and steady grey eyes, wore rather a grave look as he rode out the familiar way to meet the man whose junior partner he was, and to whom he owed almost entirely the success of his life. The story of the friendship between these two men would fill a greater space than is here available, and might prove interesting enough, but all we are concerned with at present is a single episode in Chavasse's life, which happened in that particular month of December, and had its beginning in a dream. He met Deloraine where they always met, and they had a canter together, without any superfluous speech. It was when they were on the homeward journey that Chavasse put a vital question to his companion, an austere, thin, silent man of middle age, who was often misunderstood because he had not the winning power over people possessed by his junior.

"Do you think, sir, that I might be given three months' leave of absence?" "Sure, after Christmas, if you want it, boy," answered Deloraine without a moment's hesitation, though he was inwardly much surprised. Chavasse had now been five years out, and had never so much as hinted that he wished to go home.

"That would be too late, sir; I want it now, to begin to-morrow, in fact. I must sail on Saturday if it's to be any use."

"Had a cable?" enquired Deloraine, in his brusque way.

"No, nothing more definite than a call in the night," answered Chavasse steadily and quietly.

The elder man turned in his saddle, and looked rather quickly and keenly at his companion's face, but it was quite impassive.

"What are you talking about, Gilbert," he asked rather sharply.

"I'd rather not explain just now," replied Chavasse, evasively. "It will be easier when I come back. Somebody wants and needs me in England, and if I can be spared I'll go."

This announcement, made so quietly, and yet so fraught with mystery, astonished Deloraine, because it was altogether so foreign to the nature of the man who made it. Frank, fearless, above-board in all the relations of his life, the idea of any hidden currents where Chavasse was concerned never suggested itself. But Deloraine was not a talking man. He lived his own life austere, and, in a sense, remotely, and he could respect more than most men reticence in another.

"Very well, you can go, of course. There are three days before Saturday, plenty of time to make what arrangements are necessary. And when you

are home you needn't hurry back, you know. We shall miss you, of course, and lose something by it, as I daresay you know, but you've earned your leave if ever man did."

"Thank you, sir," replied Chavasse, and, in spite of himself, his eyes moistened. Deloraine observed it, and was still further surprised. He drew rein a moment and soothingly patting his horse's head leaned forward toward him companion.

"I'm not a prying man, Chavasse, but if it's trouble, I'm with you, boy, through thick and thin."

Chavasse did not speak.

"May I ask one question?—Is it a woman?"

"Yes," answered Chavasse, "And I hope to God that the time has come when I can bring her here."

It might have been supposed that after such an avowal full confidence would have followed, but it did not, and Chavasse departed on the Saturday, leaving his chief as much in the dark as ever. But their parting was one of extreme cordiality, and slightly emotional, which surprised and a little irritated them both. Chavasse had an uneventful but quite pleasant voyage, and arrived at Marseilles on the 15th of December.

Pursued by odd restlessness, a hunted feeling which bid him get on as fast as possible, he left the ship there, and took the overland mail. It was a dreary, wet night when he arrived in London, mistress of the cities of the world, which had treated him so ill and cheated him of so much. Yet so wondrous and potent is her spell that he was glad with a boyish gladness when his feet once more trod her miry streets. He had left London a poor man who had not disdained the shelter of the humblest lodging; he returned with a fat pocket-book and an accommodating cheque-book, of which he took full advantage. But he was not an extravagant man, therefore he sought out a somewhat old-fashioned hotel in one of the small streets off the Strand, where he had kept his first appointment with John Deloraine. Because of that, probably, he cherished an affection for it. He enjoyed his English dinner, and, after it, over a cup of uncommonly good coffee, he studied the A.B.C. timetable.

Christmas fell on a Saturday that year, and it was now Thursday night. He found that in order to reach his destination before traffic was wholly disorganized by the great festival of Christendom, he had better start at half-past four in the morning. Accustomed to early rising in India, this was no hardship, though he found his drive to the station in the raw of the morning an uncommonly cold one.

The journey seemed long; in reality it occupied exactly eight hours and a half, and brought him to a certain little Devon village at lunch time. He was hungry then, because he had had to leave the mail train before lunch came on, and wait half an hour at an unspeakable junction for a local train. Therefore he enquired at the station whether there was an inn of any sort where he could obtain a decent meal. The porter looked doubtful.

"Only the 'Hen and Chequers,' sir, just at the village green, not five minutes' walk. They'll cook you a chop there, and the ale's uncommon."

He added confidentially. "Make you as right as a trivet, it will."

Chavasse liked the look of the old-world village, which somehow seemed familiar, though he now betheld it with the eyes of the flesh for the first time. The "Hen and Chequers" was a broad, two-storied house with an old-fashioned porch, and the coffee-room was comfortable enough. He found himself in luck, for a hot joint of prime English beef had just come out of the oven, and the baked potatoes surrounding it, with the accompaniment of a batter pudding, was the best food Chavasse had tasted for many a

day. He found the landlady inclined to talk, and extremely anxious to learn his business.

"For the Hall, sir, p'raps," she suggested persuasively. "Ah, such trouble there now, and we're to lose our dear Miss Prissy. She's a-leavin' this very ev'nin', they say, and a crool shame I do call it, but there I furgits, sir, you can't possibly know our dear Miss Prissy."

"Tell me about her, anyway," said Chavasse, in the careless way of the casual stranger. Mrs. Pendownen prepared herself for talk.

"Well, you see, she's just Miss Prissy, an' she's been at the Hall all her days, a-sacrificin' of 'erself for folks that's been ungrateful, and weren't fit to tie her shoe-strings. First she looked after Miss Frayne, who was the most cantankerest cretur' that ever was borned, and she didn't leave her a single farthing, though she was her own sister's child. Then she stopped on to help Master Harold, till he got a wife what was delicate. So Miss Prissy kep' on, slavin' and killin' 'erself for 'em all, and never a word of thanks."

Then Mrs. Frayne, she died, and still Miss Prissy stopped on to look after the children, and pretty dears she did make 'em, to be sure; an' kep' Master Harold straight, too. Then what does he do, but goes to marry again, a terrible person, not a lady, and she was that unkind to the pore childer that Miss Prissy had to stop on again jes' to keep 'em from bein' too cruelly used. And now it's Master Harold himself that 'as died, an' Madam, they do say, as she has put Miss Prissy to the door, and that not a penny has been left to 'er, that has worked her fingers to the bone for 'em all. But for Miss Prissy, the'd ardy be a stick or stone left of the old Hall; she've kep' the place together."

"She must be a most wonderful person," said the stranger quietly.

"That she do, sir, y' wouldn't believe an' it's this very night she's to leave, an' Christmas to-morrow, an' 'er not a place to go to. Master Harold was buried yesterday, sir. An' they do say as 'ow Miss Prissy had a lover, once, in Miss Frayne's time, and that she thought it was 'er duty to stay w' the old lady. Ah! but it's a wicked world."

The stranger agreed that it was, paid his reckoning, and went his way. His face was set in a grim determination as, following the directions given, he found his way to the gate of the old hall, which was close to the village, and though the avenue through the beeches was a quarter of a mile long, he quickly covered it. The fine old house made an imposing and beautiful picture, but he had no eyes for it, his sole concern was with one woman under its roof. His enquiry for her by the servant who answered his summons, was courteously received, and he was at once shown into the library. A lady was there, not the one he sought, a tall, commanding figure in widow's weeds, who rose with a faint gesture of surprise. She was about to say that a caller for Miss Frayne ought not to have been shown there, but something in Chavasse's look and mien deterred her. She bowed coldly to him as she passed out, saying she would send Miss Frayne to him. Chavasse, however, thought it was his query, declined to give his name.

Chavasse stood still quite near the door, and, after about five minutes she came in. She had grown old, and there were some grey threads in the soft brown of her hair, but her face had lost none of its sweetness. He never forgot the look on her face at the moment, the half-tremulous joy, the utter bewilderment. He did not speak, it was not time for speech. His hour had come.

"So I have my innings at last, Priscilla," he said, as he put his strong arms about her. "I've come to gather up the fragments and take them away."

He spoke lightly, but there was a very deep undercurrent in his voice.

"On, Gilbert," she said, and her