

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## A MODEST HERO.

By Evelyn Orchard.

William Muir was a youth of no particular distinction. He had had the misfortune at a very early stage in his career to disappoint the dearest expectation of his parents. He was their second child. The first-born, a little girl, had died at the sweetest of all ages—the toddling stage. And both had prayed for another child, with what earnestness can only be understood by those who have been similarly bereft. The baby girl had been an angel of beauty; the new baby, so eagerly expected, and for whom all his small sister's dainty belongings had been longingly prepared, had no beauty. He was squat, featureless, vacuous in expression from his infancy up. His mother cried when she beheld him, and his father turned away. Such had been their attitude towards William from his youth up. Other children followed in quick succession. William remained the outsider of the family. No pet abbreviation of his name was bestowed upon him; he remained as he had begun, plain William. The atmosphere by which he was environed in his childhood and youth had its due effect upon William. He became self-contained, a playless child, a companionless lad, who wandered solitary, pursuing his own thoughts. There was not much money spent on his education, it being decided that he had no conspicuous ability. At an early age he was hustled into his father's office, a commercial office, wherein he occupied the humblest stool. And there he remained quietly and apparently contented for two years. At the end of that time he went to his father, being then seventeen years of age.

"I want to go abroad," he said, in that quiet, rather dull way of his.

"I cannot remain here any longer. My life is without meaning. Give me fifty pounds and let me go."

Muir senior started. Never had William surprised him more.

"It is a cool request," he grunted, "I must talk it over with your mother."

He went home to Streatham Common an hour earlier than usual for the purpose, with the result that the following week William said good-bye to his family, and left London. They gave him a good plain outfit, paid his passage to New York, and gave him a bank draft for fifty pounds.

"I will pay it all back," he said quietly. "You speak with great confidence," observed his mother drily. "What if you don't get on? Those who don't get on here don't generally shine abroad."

"I mean to get on," he said quietly, and pretending he had forgotten something he went upstairs again. But it was only to kiss his sister Lucy again. They were passionately attached to each other, and Lucy believed in him.

So William disappeared, and for four years his family heard nothing of him. Then a letter came containing a cheque for fifty pounds, which indicated that he had a banking account. The postmark was a small frontier town in Northern India. Quite evidently, he had not remained in Canada. There was no address, however, so they could not write. Four more years passed.

Colonel Sir Frank Lemoine sat on the verandah of the dak bungalow smoking a very long cigar. A soda-water bottle and a glass stood suggestively on a bamboo table at his side, together with a pair of powerful field glasses, through which he had been examining off and on for the last hour, the desolate which led through the gorge, and so to the desert plains beyond. His brows were knit, his keen grey eyes were troubled, the strenuous face had aged in twenty-four

hours beyond the telling. The thing that had aged him does not happily occur in many fictions, nor more than once in one. Suddenly he leaped to his feet. A horseman was in view in the bridge path which cut the defile in two, a few moments more and he saw the white folds of the turban on the rider's head. In less than half an hour the spent steed was at the verandah steps, and Lemoine conversing with the rider thereof. It was a colloquy both brief and unsatisfactory. Lemoine, having dismissed him, passed within.

"Are you there, Una?"

"Yes, Papa." She came to him as she spoke. A young girl, who bore herself well, as a soldier's daughter should, but whose womanly charm far surpassed her dignity.

"Ahmed is here, and his report could not be worse."

She leaned against a chair, and for a moment her face became white as the soft muslin of her gown.

"What does he say?"

"Only what we have feared. They are cut off at Ragotte, and nothing can save them."

His face worked as he spoke these words. And small wonder. At the hill station of which he spoke were his wife, his younger children, a handful of friends; and they were at the mercy, it not now in the hands of a hostile tribe, who, in comparison with the slender garrison, were as the sands of the sea for multitude.

"And we are here!" she cried desperately. "But Ahmed sometimes lies. I don't trust him. If we had had a trusty messenger Dalton's company would have got to Ragotte in time."

"A trusty messenger!" he retorted curtly. "That is the curse of this cursed country. Outside our own people, there are none."

She was silent a moment, and a faint flicker of colour rose in her cheek.

"Papa, we have forgotten William Muir."

Then did the Colonel laugh in sheer disdain.

"Did we forget him, what's the odds? How could a little civilian, good chap though he is, work a miracle?"

"He has been gone three weeks," she said.

"And dead two of them, I could swear," he retorted. "No, no, Una, there is nothing left but the mercy of God."

He went back to his chair and his solitary, desperate musing, which was interrupted once more by the apparition of another horseman in the defile. He stood up and raised his glasses to his eyes, and his face began to work. He did not wait the arrival, but took the compound in a series of long steps, and went swiftly forward. A haggard man on a foam-covered and weary horse drev rein close to him, and bent from the saddle, after he had saluted.

"All's well at Ragotte, sir."

The Colonel started.

"Muir, you must have gone mad! The thing's impossible!"

"No, Sir Frank. Is got to Del Pindi in time, and then rode on, because it was deserted, to Washmak. I caught up with Dalton in time, nine miles out, and he arrived at Ragotte five hours ahead of the enemy. I did not wait to hear the result, but I know by the outpost signs as I rode back that they had been beaten, and that probably the trouble is wholly over for the present."

The man spoke modestly, and his tired voice had a certain melodious sound. Also his face, though covered with the dust of the plains, seemed to leed.

The Colonel continued to stare. Relief and wonderment struggled for the mastery on his handsome face.

"Muir, by God, you're a hero; a hero,

I tell you. I'm dumb. I don't know how it's been done. Would you mind telling me how as we go back? It's not ten minutes since I told my daughter you'd been dead a fortnight. She was trusting to you."

Muir bent down under pretence of fastening a loose end of his puttees. They came to the bungalow at the moment: a servant took the horse, and the two men were alone together.

"I'm astounded, I tell you. When they hear in England it'll be the V.C., Muir, and Heaven knows what else. You take it very coolly. Personally, I owe you a debt which will never be repaid. You understand without my telling?"

"Yes, Sir Frank, I fully understand."

"You'll get recognition, don't fear. Chaps like you are only born once or twice in a while, and we generally know what to do with them. But you are so quiet with it all, just as Una says. You have a champion in her, Muir. You and she seem to understand each other."

The Colonel's keen eyes on Muir's face read his soul. It was a revelation to the old man, and for the moment a quenching of hope. For she was a very rare creature, concerning whom he had dreamed his dreams. But that unworthy moment passed, and he offered his hand.

"You have given me back all I prize in this world save her, and you have the right to speak. You will find her within."

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Three weeks later the story of the peril and the salvation of Ragotte was told in the home papers, and read at many breakfast tables. In a certain middle-class morning-room a Streatham Common, in the columns of the Daily Telegraph, William Muir, senior, now grown portly and bald, read the brief despatch which conferred distinction on his son.

"Mother, read that," he cried excitedly, and passed it over.

Someone leaned upon her shoulder and read with her the words with which all England was ringing.

It was Lucy. She burst into tears.

## THE CUCKOO CLOCK.

"I learned a lesson last night," announced the chattering girl, "As a few of us were spending the evening at Olive Brown's, and I was talking as usual. Somebody had mentioned cuckoo clocks, and I said that they belonged to the barbaric ages; that I thought they were in horrible taste, and I didn't see how any civilized family could tolerate them outside of the nursery. The words were no sooner out of my mouth than a clock on the wall behind me sang out 'Cuckoo!'"

"Bad enough, wasn't it?" she went on, as the laugh subsided. "But I wouldn't have minded it half so much if that Goldsmith girl hadn't been there. She enjoyed it in such a supercilious way! I can't bear her style, anyway—the strong-minded kind that isn't afraid to go out alone nights and all that!"

Just here the other girls glanced involuntarily at Bertha, who was one of the listening group. Every one of them—except the chattering girl—knew that Bertha had been son and daughter to her parents from babyhood. They knew her fondness for being called "Bert," and her independent habit of making evening calls without an escort.

"Well, that is, anyway," pursued the chattering girl, vaguely feeling that something was wrong, "I don't like it unless the woman is a nurse or a doctor, and obliged to go out that way. The kind of girl—that just glories in not being afraid, and goes out alone evenings when it isn't absolutely necessary—I think is odd!"

Again the others glanced at Bertha, and this time she spoke.

"Cuckoo!" was all she said.—Selected.