

The Rabbit

The House on the Moor.

She was called "The Rabbit." She was rather like that small animal. Her face was brown, her hair was brown, with bits of joyous sunshine caught in it; and her eyes were brown—the brownest eyes you can imagine.

She was eighteen years old, the tenderest-hearted, kindest, and quietest little soul in the world. Her real name was "Ena"—"Ena Lyall," but, as I said before, everyone called her "The Rabbit." I can't tell you why. The Rabbit herself couldn't, nor all the dozens of people who used the name. It just happened.

Her mother was very pretty and very sweet, very capable. A widow, a lady, and she took in paying guests at her wee, dainty little house up on the moors; but, there you are. In these days you find ladies doing all sorts of things, doing them well, and none the less ladies for that.

The Rabbit stayed at home, and helped her mother and their one adoring, willing, and clumsy little maidservant.

You see, she was always a shy, nervous little thing, and I doubt if she would have learnt much more had she continued at school. Besides, there was her brother Bob to be educated, thirteen years old, and going in the navy, like his father and grandfather before him. And there was Jim, two years younger, a lad with a keen eye and a keener tongue, destined for the merchant service.

Their training took money, so The Rabbit and her mother stayed at home and earned it, dreaming brave dreams of the days when the two lads would be great men.

And so one February, utterly worn out and weary, Mark Othol, the great violinist, came to them as a paying guest.

He was a tall, straight, clean-built young man. His hair was not long or greasy. It was short, black, and curly. He didn't spend half his time playing at being a genius. He was one, and he didn't know it! He seemed just an ordinary, extra pleasant, extra good-looking young man, until he drew his bow across the strings.

And at the sound of his music something snapped within you. No matter whether you thought yourself cold or warm-hearted. No matter whether you were old or young, you felt it snap; and old, familiar faces crowded around you; and things you had long forgotten, voices long silent, echoed in your ears.

No matter who or what you were, Mark Othol's music gave you youth and fine hopes again, and you loved him for his music.

He brought his violin with him, to Lyall Cottage.

He would never let anyone touch it. It was a genuine and almost priceless Stradivarius, and Mark Othol often said, with a laugh, that it was his best friend; it never failed him, and always responded to his overtures.

Being a very simple-hearted young man, and never remembering his own mother, he loved Mrs. Lyall for the kindly way she mothered him. Butter and milk, fresh air and early hours, and not a note of music for a fortnight, did wonders. At the end of that time he looked a different being—brown, eager, with fun and laughter, sympathy and understanding living again in his brown eyes.

Often in the evenings he would play to them, seated in the little drawing-room with its faded blue-and-white chintz, its white distempered walls, and the bowls of blue-and-white china.

Never the brilliant and flashy music, because they had only a little, soft-toned cottage piano, and Mrs. Lyall had to work too hard to be a brilliant or flashy accompanist on it. They used to play together just the simple, sweet old melodies that bring a train of memories, like a string of colored beads, dangling before your eyes.

The Rabbit was too young to have any of these colored beads of memory to play with, but she used to sit before the log fire, her eyes dreaming, her small, gentle face very sweet and serious. And

when Mark Othol shut his beloved violin in its case The Rabbit would always thank him, with a strange reverence and gladness in her soft little voice. And, curiously enough, The Rabbit's thanks brought home to the player, far more vividly than the shouts of a great audience, the magic of his gift.

He had played to kings and queens and emperors, cabmen and governesses, bank clerks and company promoters, yet he had never met anyone who understood his music and revelled in it quite so much as this small, elf-like little person they called "The Rabbit."

At first he had thought her painfully shy and timid, but gradually he began to see that it was just humility. A world of thought and quaint wisdom lay in the lovely brown eyes, and he learnt that her red tam-o'-shanter covered more than a mop of brown, sunny hair. It covered as capable, whimsical a little brain as you could wish.

His holiday was nearly over. February had given place to late March. Winds blustered and roared and raced over the moor. Two violets and a primrose appeared in the garden.

Down came Mark Othol's London manager to see how his famous violinist was, and also to remind him that he was to appear at a huge concert given at the Queen's hall. It was essential that

Only one house lay over the moors where the pink light lay—their own!

Her small face whitened, as her mother's had done, but there was no fear in her steady voice.

"Give me the other basket, too, mother, and we'll run." She could not believe what her common-sense told her was true!

No other house lay on the moors, only theirs!

The Fire.

Their home was heavily insured. But oh! to watch the things you have lived with, dusted, washed, used, loved—the things that are just so wrapped up in memories that they are like dear old friends—burn!

Every step they took showed them more clearly the cruel red tongues of flame leaping up to the dark sky.

And, when at last they stood, white-faced, panting, but quiet-eyes before their own gate, and felt the heat and heard the noise, they knew that the red tongues would lick everything they possessed to ashes.

Captain Lyall had over-insured; and his widow had scrupulously kept up the insurance, so that they would receive really more than they stood to lose; but oh, the pain of it!

Three or four neighbors had come, sympathy in their eyes, for Mrs. Lyall was a universally popular woman—but what could they do? The fire had it all its own way, and it flamed triumphant over the poor little dwelling.

There was no fear in her eyes. They shone like stars as she rushed up the tiny garden path toward the blazing house, the red light flaming on her.

Before it was too late!

"His violin must be saved!"

People had hastened from the village below to watch the fire; as The Rabbit vanished through the front door, a hoarse cry broke from them.

It was a cry of fear, of helpless panic.

It was that cry that Mark Othol and his friend, tearing madly up the hill, heard.

"Your violin!" the manager said hoarsely, and with a sob in his voice. "Good lor, man, your violin!" Up till that very moment Mark Othol had thought exclusively of his beloved violin. Now, the violin seemed nothing beside the safety of The Rabbit and her mother.

In that moment he knew that he cared for both of them with a tender, reverential love; but that The Rabbit had all that was best in him, and for always.

Then they heard another cry. One alone. Then utter silence.

They did not know that it was the cry Mrs. Lyall gave when she would have followed The Rabbit, and kindly, forceful hands restrained her.

Mark Othol and his manager reached the gate and the crowd, lit up by the lurid, sullen red.

There were fifty or sixty people gathered there, and only the roar of the fire broke the silence. The stillness was a tribute to the courage, and their love for the little maiden who had just vanished through the door of the burning house.

The flames were gaining, gaining stealthily. They must soon demolish the staircase entirely, and the other side of the house. Already they wreathed themselves, like weird, writhing ribbons, round the rails of the staircase.

"What is it?" Othol cried hoarsely.

A dozen voices answered him.

"The Rabbit, The Rabbit, sir! She's gone in after summat."

They tried to hold him back. He seemed to have the strength of fifty men. He pushed their hands aside like little children's and raced up the path.

The flames licked the staircase. The light of them showed crimson in his own room.

The Rabbit! The brave, absurdly wonderful Rabbit, he knew why she had gone!

The heat fanned his face, the smoke smarted unbearably in his eyes, and suddenly, just as he was going to rush in to find her, heeding nothing of his own danger, he saw her coming out swiftly down the staircase, avoiding the flames that leapt to meet her from the ignited rails of it.

She was white-faced, utterly fearless, her eyes shining and wonderful.

"I had to save it, Mark!" she whispered, and held it out to him.

His own violin!

He heard a cry of warning, and sprang back, one arm round the girl, who still held the violin.

With a roar the roof crashed in.

He heard a tumultuous, emotional cheer.

He knew it was for her, for himself he could have knelt to her for the bravery of the fine thing she had done.

He said so, white-faced.

"I could kneel to you for this, you marvellous, beloved Rabbit!"

And she answered him quite simply.

"I was a little afraid; I remembered it was for—you."

He could not answer her.

He married her. I guess you knew that long ago. He married her five years later, and people who knew said that it was then that Mark Othol attained the power and the tenderness that makes his name, even to-day, a thing for young violinists to sigh over.

Another thing I can tell you. Mrs. Lyall two years after the celebrated fire, married Mark Othol's charming manager, who proved himself as charming a husband as a business man, which is saying a lot.



In apple blossom time

he should be in good form, as he was the chief attraction, and they were making a special buzz about the concert—his photograph and his name, in red letters, with the date of his appearance, being plentifully plastered about London.

The manager, a charming person of fifty, arriving on the 23rd, and finding Lyall Cottage such a very pleasant place, decided to stay there for two days, and then go back with Othol.

The Rabbit was curiously silent after that. Her small brown face seemed rather pale, and her brown eyes very wistful.

On the night of the 24th, the day before Othol was to depart for London, the two men went for a long, long evening ramble over the moors. Mrs. Lyall, who was, like all wise housewives, a person who hated shopping on Saturday, and being forced to take what she didn't want, walked, as was her usual custom, to the village with The Rabbit to make her week's purchases.

It was coming back, towards seven o'clock, and talking of many things like the comrades they were, that The Rabbit and her mother saw a pale pink glow on the sky.

"How late the sun sets! No, it can't be the sun!" exclaimed The Rabbit.

"That's not the sun, childie; that's a fire."

The Rabbit glanced up, fear in her eyes.

A woman told her that she had seen the reflection of it first, and hurried up; but even then it had got a forceful grip. It first started in the dining-room, she felt sure.

Mrs. Lyall remembered that they had put a fresh log on before starting out, first enclosing the fire with a fairly high fire-guard. But the log must have cracked and a splinter of burning wood leapt above the guard and out on to the woolly rug before the fender.

Afterwards they found this to have been the case.

Tears stood in Mrs. Lyall's eyes, though her brave lips never quivered.

The fire was burning curiously, bearing out the theory of its origination in the dining-room. One side of the house only was alight, the dining-room, two spare rooms, and Mrs. Lyall's own bedroom, and the breakfast room.

The drawing-room, The Rabbit's room, the maid's room, and the box-room, and Mark Othol's room, the largest in the cottage, were apparently untouched, though the flames lay within a yard of the stairs leading to them, and the savage, greedy tongues of flame were rapidly licking up the intervening space.

Suddenly The Rabbit gave a stifled cry.

The Stradivarius violin! Mark Othol's priceless and beloved instrument, reposing in his bedroom at that moment!

Up till then she had seemed dazed with it all, and many were the pitying and kindly glances in her direction. Now she awoke to sudden life.