

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

COLIN'S WIFE.

By David Llal.

Elspeth Davidson took the letter from the postman's hand—and the light sparkled in her face. Jamie Farquhar smiled.

"That'll be frae Collin, Mistress Davidson. I houp a's weel wi' the lad? We a' liket him."

"All was well in the last letter, Jamie, and this will tell us when to expect him. He's comin' hame for Christmas, but I'll give ye the news the morn."

Jamie nodded and passed on. He had a great respect for the mistress of Cairntyte, albeit many called her a hard, proud woman. She came from further north than the parish of Balaig, and had a touch of the cold Highland pride. But her heart was warm and true; once make a friend of Elspeth Davidson, and she was yours for life. It was a cold, hard morning in early winter, but the sun had a cheerful gleam. It shone kindly in the bare stubble lands, the ploughed acres, and the green turnip fields of Cairntyte; it lay, too, with a warm gleam on the square whinstone house, and the red roofs of the comfortable steading. Elspeth had been watching for the postman at the white gate of the lower garden, which abutted on the farm road. In such haste was she to learn the contents of the thin square envelope bearing the Dominion postmark, that she stood still in the middle of the gravelled path, where the hoarfrost still sparkled, and broke it open. Her lips were smiling at the beginning, and a wonderful tenderness was in her eyes, but suddenly, it was as if something froze within her, the light died out of her face, and her eyes grew hard and cold. Also her tall, straight figure, carried with the grace and mien of the Highland woman, seemed suddenly to alter, as if some unseen force were at work.

She stood a few moments motionless, leaning for support against the gnarled trunk of an old beech-tree, and the expression on her face was that of a woman who beheld some sweet hope perish before her eyes.

It was now almost noon, her husband had driven in his gig to a farm about three miles distant, where he had some business concerning cattle. He would be back in about half an hour's time, expecting to eat his mid-day meal. She pushed the letter in her pocket, and began to move on, at the same time glancing listlessly at the rest of the missives held loosely in her hand. They were mostly addressed to John, business letters with which she had little concern. She thought, however, that they would not be likely to enchain his interest that day; the news from afar would suffice. And yet she knew that it would not shake the foundations of his life as it now shook hers; men are cast in a different mould. When she got back to the wide, pleasant living room of the farm, she found that Annie Chivas, the maid, had already laid the cloth, and the fragrance of a wholesome and well-cooked meal was in the house. Homely comfort was the predominant note in the farmhouse of Cairntyte; everything was for use, and not beauty, but the whole was harmonious, a warm, homely place, where a man's heart can be at peace. Elspeth Davidson wandered from the living room upstairs to the chamber which had been swept and garnished and kept for the boy who had occupied it from the day when he was old enough to be promoted to a room of his own until the day he had left it to seek his fortune across the seas. Since then it had been sacred to him; no stranger had been offered its hospitality; no alien head had pressed that pillow of

pure down. And now! Something choked in her throat, but presently she heard her husband's voice calling to her, the familiar and not inappropriate name which had been given to her with one accord, "Mistress!"

"Comin', John," she answered, and made haste down the stairs. She was a kind woman and a good wife; she would let him eat his fill before she showed him the letter of Collin. She found him standing by the fireside looking through his business letters; he looked up to smile at her, however, as she entered, and did not observe her strained look. He discussed the price of winter cattle while they ate, and he thoroughly enjoyed his meal. He drew in at the fireside for his after-dinner smoke and even then she waited till Annie Chivas had cleared the table. Then she closed the door.

"Nae word frae Collin, I suppose?" said her husband. "Is not this the mail day, or thereabouts?"

"Yes, there's a letter—it's—it's not good news, John. He'll be here next week by Thursday, he says."

"Weel, what's the matter in that news, Elspeth? It sounds very guid."

"He's—he's no comin' himsel', John. He's bringin' a wife."

The farmer laid down his pipe and stared.

"A wife! Certy! Wha is she?"

"That's it, John," she cried in a hush, that could be a good wife to him an' no shame us—but a savage Indian!"

"Mercy me, Elspeth, what are ye talkin' about? Let me see the letter instanter."

She drew it from her pocket and passed it over; also she watched him closely while he read it. And she observed that his strong face softened wonderfully, and that there was a moisture in his eyes.

"She saved his life, Elspeth, an'—an' she cares about him. She has a woman's heart, though she be an Indian. It might be waur."

"It couldna, John. I'll never laud up my held again. Sic a thing to touch the Davidsons. It's disgrace." Cairntyte rose heavily to his feet, and laid his untasted pipe on the mantelshelf. He saw what was working in the mind of his wife, and while he sympathised with her, he realized where their duty lay.

"An' to bring her here," she cried, with a hard flash of indignation. "He has a great presumption. I will telegraph to him at Liverpool that he is not to come. I will not be made the laughing stock of the whole parish. They shall not come here."

John Davidson laid his heavy hand on his wife's shoulder.

"My woman, ye speak as the foolish speak. Collin is our bairn. He has been a good son to us, an' that is the letter of a God-fearing, honest man. An' forbye he loves her. He shall come, they both shall come, if I have to go myself to Liverpool to fetch them. But wait at least till you see what like she is before ye condemn her. Ye ken what Collin is; there must be something in her or he would not have taken her to wife. I am as certain of that as I am that I stand here."

But Elspeth Davidson refused to be comforted, and her husband had a trying week with her, and he used all his powers of persuasion. When they appeared in vain, he relapsed into silence, which was not broken till one evening, just at the gloaming, when they did not expect it, a cab drove up to the door, and Collin brought his wife in! It was a picture a great painter would not have despaired. The cosy family room, with the warm fireglow upon it; the face of Elspeth Davidson, white and set with a nameless terror in her eyes; her husband nervous and appealing. Collin, so straight and fine, with

a yearning unspeakable in his browned handsome face, and the small shrieking figure of the Indian girl, with her shy, sweet, brown face, and her glorious eyes shining like stars under the fur brim of her cap.

"Mother, this is Shasta," said Collin, with a break in his voice. "She has no mother. I have given her mine."

There was a moment's tense silence; then Elspeth Davidson shrank into a chair. Shasta hesitated but a moment, then darted forward and fell upon her knees. She spoke quickly in her sweet broken English, her child-like appealing face uplifted. Presently Elspeth suffered her eyes to dwell on that sweet-speaking face; she seemed fascinated by its grace, by something that came from the Indian child, and tore at her heart. After a moment she stooped down and with her two hands drew Shasta up till she reached her breast, and her cheek touched hers.

Cairntyte, with an unuttered "Thank God" took Collin by the arm, and together they passed out, and closed the door.

WHO IS TO BLAME?

By Desta E. Brown Woods.

"Fire! Fire! Fire!"

Horses dash down the street at a mad gallop, and the people collect around the burning building. Soon every eye is focused on one man. He has climbed to the topmost pinnacle—this brave fireman. Surrounded by flames, he stands directing the stream of water from the hose. With an intensity of feeling too great for shouts, with an admiration too deep for words, the mob below watch their hero beat back the demon fire from one stronghold to another. Ah! What is wrong? He has failed. The fire gains on him, while he stands inactive. He is no good! "A failure!" "His time of usefulness is past!" "Let him make place for someone else!" But, look! Again he is at work. The flames are driven back farther and farther. Again he is the people's hero as he stands at last triumphant—his enemy destroyed.

But why those moments of inactivity while the fire gained ground, and the people lost faith in the fireman? Away beyond that long line of hose, beyond the crowd of people, even beyond the engine, standing at the hydrant is a man who failed in his duty. For a moment the hose had not been supplied with water, and the fireman at the top of the building had stood weaponless before the enemy. Then the man at the hydrant resumed his vigilance and the fire was conquered.

The new minister faces his congregation. He battles valiantly against sin, and the people are loud in their praise. "A powerful preacher!" "An eloquent man!" "A marvelous success!" But, ah, something goes wrong! The minister's voice has lost its old-time ring. His hands drop at his sides. His zeal slackens. His message fails. "He is no good!" "A failure!" "His time of usefulness is past!" "Let him make place for someone else!" But, listen! His voice rings forth again with more than its old-time fervor. One by one the strongholds of Satan are destroyed. His soul reaches out till it touches your soul bringing a message straight from the heart of God.

But why that period of apparent failure? Because you, my friend, ceased to pray. You allowed your minister to face his congregation, weaponless. He failed to make sure by your prayers that he was supplied with the "water of life." Then the change in your minister came when you—his people—started to pray for him. No wonder that his sermons now are freighted with power, for back of the man is God; and around him is a praying congregation.