

## The Inglenook.

### John Blake's Strategem.

BY ALICE ANDERSON.

It was a bitterly cold November afternoon. Outside everything looked dismal, and the few pedestrians to be seen were hurrying through the falling sleet. At the window of a mercantile warehouse, in a huge block of dreary looking buildings, John Blake stood looking absently down at the passers-by. Mary Lennox, the other occupant of the room, was seated at her desk, but, judging from her pre-occupied expression, she also was in an absent-minded mood.

The fire was burning brightly and casting shadows in the gathering dusk between the silent pair. At last, turning impatiently from the window, John crossed over to his companion.

He was a good looking young man, of average height, with blue eyes, a broad forehead, and a thick crop of black hair covering a well shaped head. Just then, looking down upon Mary, his expression moody, but earnest, he appeared to the best advantage. Until Mary had gone to the warehouse he had been in the habit of spending his evenings on his own amusement with other young men of his class, all more or less thoughtless, but since Mary's appearance amongst them had gradually broken away from his old associations, and the more staid men noted the fact approvingly and remarked to themselves that her coming had been a good thing for Blake.

There had been a marked difference, too, in his manner and appearance, a cultivated refinement, of late, which Mary had not failed to observe, and was secretly glad, for he was likeable in many ways, and, on the principle that a likeable man is a makeable man, she had enjoyed bantering him out of various little acts of thoughtlessness. For, as she said, it made her sorry to see a nice man making himself less nice than he could be; it was bad enough when the nasty ones did that. But now events had taken such an unexpected turn that she was quite bewildered, for John had startled her out of her ordinary self-possession by asking her to marry him, and she had refused him.

"Why can't you care?" he questioned abruptly. And as she made no answer, he continued bitterly, "Because I am not good enough, I suppose."

"No, no, it is not. You must not think that," she protested, falteringly.

"Why, then?" he persisted. "I know I am not half good enough for you, but I am better than I was before I met you. I have not been in a billiard room nor in a public bar for months, and all for your sake, all because I thought you cared."

Mary was silent. She wanted to tell him that it was for right's sake, and not for her's that he should avoid such places, but she did not know how without appearing to preach at him. And preaching at one she could not tolerate as it savoured too much of that most irritating, of individuals, the self-righteous, self-complacent, I-am-right and you-are-wrong sort of a person, and was more likely to do harm than good.

"And now there has been no use in it all," continued John gloomily, "I might just as well have continued as I was."

"Oh, no, no, do not say that," she said,

vehemently.

"Why not?" he demanded.

"Why not?" she echoed. "Surely one is the better for doing right? You have been the better. You know you have. You admitted just now that you were."

"Only because I thought you cared," he repeated, doggedly. "And I suppose you never even observed a difference, far less cared?"

"But I have observed. I could not help observing," replied Mary, incoherently.

John's eyelids drooped to hide the delight that flashed into his eyes at her words. She did care, he thought, more than she knew, and he would make her realise that she cared.

"Won't you tell me, then, why you don't care?" he repeated in a softer tone. "At least tell me if there is any other one for whom you care more."

"There is no other one."

"Then don't you think you could care for me just a little?"

"A little?" echoed Mary, opening her eyes with surprise, having by this time regained her self-possession. "Oh, but I could never marry a man for whom I cared only 'a little.' I'd have to care for him above all else in the world. Someone once said that marriage meant a life long comradeship or a life long antagonism, and the latter would be dreadful wouldn't it?"

"We could never be antagonists," was his reply.

"I do not see why we could not. We have often been, you know," she said, smilingly.

"Never seriously," was his gloomy response.

The fire was dying down in the grate and the room steadily growing darker but neither made any attempt to turn on the light. Outside the wind dashed the sleet against the window with terrific force, and the swift, gliding noise of the electric cars came up from the street below. John made one more attempt.

"Couldn't you care?"

And as Mary's eyes looked the negative her lips could not frame, he burst out savagely, "I may as well go to the dogs and have done with it, then." And he flung himself out of the room, leaving her in a great distress of mind, which would not have been so great had she known that he had no more intention of going to the dogs, as he had termed it, than she had, but considered this the best method of bringing her to her senses.

The following days dragged past somewhat drearily for Mary. John studiously avoided her room for weeks at a time, and when they did meet they never by any chance resumed their friendly intercourse. A constraint had sprung up between them, which John had stupidly strengthened by causing it to be carried to her ears that he was going down hill, thinking that this would rouse her sympathies and make her so sorry for what she had done that she would repent for her decision and recall him. But things never act with a woman as a man expects they will, and what acts beautifully with one acts quite differently with another. And Mary argued with herself that if he could so far forget himself, if he was so far lost to his own self-respect as to go to the dogs because he could not win her love, he would just as readily go

down hill after the novelty of winning her had worn off. And so the weeks slipped past and Christmas was approaching, and they were further from being friends than ever. John's strategem had failed to work as he thought it would, a fact which puzzled him much, until one day, passing through one of the rooms, he accidentally overheard a conversation between the manager and Mary which suddenly opened his eyes.

"I am sorry for Blake," the manager was saying. "It is a pity to see such a decent fellow going down hill."

"No man need go down hill unless he prefers to," Mary replied coldly. "A man generally finds his own level, and doubtless Mr. Blake has found his." "Ah, well, perhaps you are right," responded the manager lamely. "Still, I am sorry for him. He has the making of a good in him and would have turned out all right if some nice girl had taken him in hand."

"An enviable task for any girl, I must say," flashed Mary, hotly. "There is no girl worthy of the name but prefers to look up to a man, not down."

The rest of the conversation was lost to John, but he had heard enough to convince him that his strategem had failed to bring about the desired effect, and had only put her further from him. And feeling angry with himself and everyone in general he moved away wondering vaguely how he was to regain his friendly footing with her. At one moment he determined to write to her and make a clean breast of it, but ultimately abandoned that idea, and so Christmas Day found him still in a state of indecision. That day he had occasion to enter Mary's room for a paper which had been mislaid, and as he was bending over the table Mary watched him narrowly. He did not look as if he had been going to the dogs, she thought to herself. It could not be true. No man could go down hill and look like that, for nothing tells more quickly on a face than fast living. And her eyes were still fixed puzzlingly on him when he suddenly looked up and met her bewildered look. With a feeling of great relief as she met his clear, honest gaze, Mary held out her hand, and said, "A Merry Christmas, Mr. Blake."

And as John took her outstretched hand in his he plunged boldly into his confession.

"And you actually thought to rouse my pity by making me think you were going to the dogs? How little you know me," she said in bewilderment, when he had finished.

"Did you believe it?" he questioned.

"At first I did, and was greatly disappointed in you, that was all."

"Why?"

"Because I knew you had better things in you, and were deliberately going against your better nature."

"And now?"

"Now? Oh, well, I am glad, of course, that it was not true."

"Is that all?"

"Is not that enough?" she said, colouring and looking away from him in confusion.

"Not for me. Don't you think yet you could care just a little?"

"But I told you I could never marry a man on the strength of caring for him just a little," she replied.

"Ah, well, I suppose I am a fool to have hoped it," he said, drawing a deep breath.

"But is it not possible that I might care more than 'just a little'? she continued timidly, still looking away.

"Mary."

And a little later she said, "I think I must have always cared, although I did not know it."