

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

JOHN SELLARS.

By David Lyall.

John Sellars was a ploughman in the parish of Meikle Towie, somewhere in the north. I do not mention the actual county, because, John being still alive and his name well known, it might give said county a notoriety which would be displeasing to it. Meikle Towie made a mistake about John Sellars, the kind of mistake not uncommon, since the first days when the prophet had no honour in his own country.

John was the son of a ploughman, a terrible, quiet, dour man, whose words at kirk or market would never be difficult to count. His mother had some character, but was equally chary of speech. John was born in a quiet house, and nurtured, so to speak, in silence, which is no bad thing. For sheer lack of other occupation, the person so environed is obliged to think. John thought desperately. He began quite early, even before he went to the village school, and though the natural bent of his mind was to ask questions, there being nobody to answer them, he was forced back upon his own conclusions. But after he found his way into the world of books, the desire to ask questions passed away, because they taught him all he wished to know. He read omnivorously, though in a limited area, the works of Josephus, Bunyan's "Holy War," an old copy of Chaucer's Tales which he carried in his pocket till it fell to rags, and had to be mended surreptitiously with flour paste supplied by his mother when in an unusually amiable mood. At fourteen John went to work on the farm where his father was employed, and for two years seemed happy enough. His wages, six pounds in the half year, went chiefly in books, of which he began to accumulate a goodly store. When he was sixteen there was a wonderful upheaval in his life. One day he was at the plough making the long, fine, even furrow which proved him an expert ploughman as well as a student. The field was close to the woods of Fantowie, which was the big house of the parish. John had often walked in these woods of a Sunday afternoon with his book, and had once come quite close to the house and been amazed at its size and magnificence. At the same time, he had wondered what folk were like who lived in such a house, also—and this was the greatest problem of all—how many books were inside of it. John knew the Laird by sight only; a tall, bent figure of a man, with a sad, somewhat careworn face, and eyes which had a strange, deep look, as if they had long since looked into the heart of things and beheld only vanity.

He happened to be on the path at the bottom of the field when John Sellars with his team arrived at the turning point. He stood still to watch the lad skillfully guiding the willing horses, and, as it happened, he observed the books sticking out of his pocket, one on either side. John did not wait even to pull his forelock to the Laird; nobody had instructed him in that scanty courtesy, but his face reddened beneath the sun, and he wished himself a hundred miles away. For the Laird's look was one of intenceness, and John was mortally afraid lest he should speak.

"What's your name?" said the Laird gruffly. "And how old are you?"

"My name's Jock Sellars, and I'm sixteen," replied John, without a moment's hesitation, only hoping that all the questions would prove as easy to answer.

"Um," said the Laird, slowly; "you're well grown for your age. Whose

servant are you?"

"Fantowie's; Little Fantowie's, I mean. My father's the griever."

"And what are you?"

"I'm orra man."

"And what are these books you have in your pockets? The ploughboy's manual, eh?"

Then indeed did John look desperate, as if his last hour had come.

"They're, they're naething," he answered shamefacedly. "An' I'll hae to be gettin' on. Gee up, Jennet."

But Jennet, the shaggy old mare, refused to gee up at the required moment, probably being wiser than he who held the reins.

"Show me the books," said the Laird, with an air of quiet authority which was difficult to resist.

John dropped the reins, and shamefacedly drew them forth. One was the old Chaucer, on the back of which had been pasted a piece of brown holland to keep it together; the other, and this amazed the Laird more than the first, a Latin Grammar.

"Do you read them?" he asked, with a singular look of pity and interest at the thin, clear, sunbrowned face, and the big, defiant grey eyes.

"Aye, whiles," replied John guardedly.

"Who taught you?"

"Naeboddy."

"Have you ever been to school?"

"Aye, at Meikle Fantowie; but the mistress there disna ken Latin."

"And you want to learn it?"

"I am learnin' it."

"Without a teacher?"

John nodded, and the expression of pity and interest deepened in the Laird's kindly eyes.

"This interests me rather. See here, John Sellars, come up to the house this evening at eight o'clock. I want to talk to you."

"The big hoose?" said John, scratching his head amazedly.

"Fantowie; you don't know me, John, eh?"

"Oh, I ken ye fine; but I wad be feared to come in there."

"Never mind. As you go through life, John Sellars, you'll find you have to stand up to a good many things you are mortally afraid of. Eight o'clock sharp, and don't you forget it. If you make as good a bookman as you are a plough man, you'll go far."

He sauntered off, and John, with his heart all a-flutter, induced the leisurely Jennet to proceed. That evening, dressed in his best homespun and a clean shirt, John Sellars proceeded to the big house, and there was interviewed at great length by the Laird. Something about the sad, gentle, scholarly man opened the heart of the lad, and after some judicious questioning, he unburdened his soul of some of its aspirations. Next evening, about half-past six, as David Sellars was smoking a comfortable pipe at his cottage door after the labours of the day, the Laird rode up on horseback and alighted.

John was not far off, and at a signal from the Laird he took the bridle and walked the horse away.

"Evening, Sellars; I've come to speak to you about this lad of yours. I suppose he has told you I was coming to-night?"

"No; that he didna, sir. John has nae unnecessary speech."

"He said he would tell you; but it is of no consequence. I saw him last night at Fantowie."

"Oh, was that his air? Me and the mistress was wonderin'," said David quietly.

"I suppose you don't need me to tell you you have a very clever son, Sellars?"

"He's not that ill, an' he's a guid ploughman forby."

"Yes, he can draw a straight furrow, but there's more in him than that."

"It takes a mon to plow streecht, Laird. Look at some o' them! They saould be whuppet at a cairt's tail."

The Laird smiled.

"We'll leave them meanwhile. Something has got to be done for the lad. I will do it. He shall go to the University at Edinburgh in October."

"Meroy me!" was David's comment.

"That'll tak a heap o' siller."

"It will be paid back, every penny of it. That is the condition. Do you and his mother agree that he should be sent?"

"O ay, if there's onybody payin'. I've sometimes said to Leesbeth what a terrible chap he is for book lare, and steady wi' it. He might be a minister, eh? His mither wad like that."

"The niche will present itself in good time," answered the Laird, and though David did not rightly understand him, he supposed it was all right.

John remained for five years at the University of Edinburgh, and never in all the annals of its history had it a more distinguished student. Everything he touched seemed to spring to newness of life, and as for prizes, he simply hauled them in by the score. After the third year he took no more money from the Laird, and when he came out at last with his degree and half a dozen posts waiting for his acceptance, he journeyed out to Fantowie with a small package in his pocket. Before he visited his father's house he called upon the Laird. It was a July evening, one of the loveliest he had ever seen, and after the air of the city the benison of these pure latitudes was grateful to him. He had grown very tall and slim, and his face was beautiful, with the beauty of the upright life; of a soul that had all its communion with things lovely and of good report.

A kingly soul dwelt in the ploughman lad, and he was fit company for kings, because of his native modesty and worth.

When he drew near to the house, there was a party on the terrace, and he felt inclined to turn back, but when the Laird saw him he beckoned to him kindly, and came forward smiling, to greet him.

"You are busy, sir," said John, in his quiet, pleasant manner. "I can come again. I have only just arrived from the station, and have not been home yet."

"It was good of you to take Fantowie on the road, John; and I am pleased to see you. Well, and are your college days done?"

"Yes," said John, and gave a little sigh. "I have been offered an assistant professorship abroad, and I think I will go in October, if my father and mother are willing. I should like now to see something of the world."

The Laird's eyes smiled, though his lips were grave. Beholding his handiwork, his soul glowed within him.

"John, do you remember the day you and I met first in the plough furrows of Little Fantowie?" he asked.

"I have not forgotten. I never will," replied John, and then fumbled in his pocket and drew forth an envelope.

"What is this?" inquired the Laird, when he would have offered it to him.

"It is what I have earned. I have been teaching the most of the winter, and was well paid. The money part of the bargain is now paid off. Sir Robert; theither will be a debt to the day of my death."

His voice took a full note, and his fine eyes, clear mirrors of the soul, had