

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

JOHN BREWSTER'S "LEADING."

The room was full of a warm sweet stillness, broken only by the leisurely ticking of the tall clock and now and then the slight noise of a coal dropping on the hearth, at which the grizzled old dog, lying asleep with his head on his outstretched paws, half opened one eye and closed it with a sigh of content.

The master of the house, with his feet also stretched toward the fire, read his weekly paper, and on her straight-backed, flag-bottomed chair, the very center of all the warmth and peace and brightness, sat the mistress, Hannah Brewster, her fingers busy with her needle and her placid face fittingly framed in her Quaker cap.

Hannah married "out of meeting," but her gentle speech and ways were a birthright that would always set her apart from the world's people and with or without the "inner light" she read John Brewster's heart with unerring certainty.

She knew now that something was disturbing him, but she might have been the virtuous woman whom Solomon had in mind when he wrote, "She openeth her mouth in wisdom," for she asked no untimely questions. Her husband folded his paper, tossed it upon the table, and drew his chair to the old mahogany secretary where he kept his few papers as his father had done before him.

John Brewster had probably never read a line of Browning, but he would have understood you perfectly if you had said that he had—

"Two soul sides; one to face the world with,

One to show to a woman when he loved her."

His father had been a hard, grasping man, and whenever the son sat down at the old secretary and dropped the worn lid the spell of his father's presence seemed to come upon him. Unconsciously his mouth settled to sterner lines and there was a cold gleam in his eye, as if some hidden spark of avarice were kindling in his heart.

He untied a packet of papers and selected one, which he carefully opened. Yes, that was the mortgage on Daniel Strong's farm, given him in a sore emergency to secure a loan. He remembered that in his first generous impulse he had not wished for security, but Daniel had insisted. He had never been able to repay it, and now, for three years, the interest had not been met. He had been very easy with Daniel; nobody could deny that. Not many men would have let a note run on in that way. John Brewster knew he would never have done it if Hannah had not been at his elbow. She had an innocent way of letting her light shine upon his best-laid plans until they often took on quite a new aspect. It was inconvenient at times, but he never yet had taken any very serious step without talking it over with Hannah. He wheeled sharply from the secretary with a frown that softened a little as he faced the sunny room.

"I been studying about this note of Dan'l Strong's, Hannah. He hain't paid any interest for three years. Seems kind of shiftless letting things run on so. I hate to have my business at such loose ends—"

"Yes," said Hannah, gently, "tis trying, but thee knows how they've been dealt with. It seems a good providence that thee had the mortgage, and didn't need the money."

"I don't know about not needing it, Hannah. We ain't suffered for lack of it, but if I had that money I could put it where it would bring a hundred per cent. inside of a year. I been talking with Rufus Dow, down to the Corners. He's round buying up farm mortgages. I was most tempted to ask him to make a bid on this, just to get things squared up."

"Tis trying," said Hannah, again, "but I guess Dan'l does the best he can."

"Well, now I'll tell ye, Hannah, what sort of riled me up. You remember I told you about that big wax doll Farley had in the store, dressed like a live baby and looked like one—I declare for't I could have hugged it myself. Farley didn't count on selling it, but he thought it would draw the children. Well, while I set there waiting for the mail in come Dan'l Strong and bought that doll. Threw a ten-dollar bill on the counter grand as a lord. He was so took up with his bargain he never saw me nor anybody else; just hurried out as soon as it was wrapped up. I didn't call it honest for a man to buy an extravagant thing like that when he can't pay his debts. I've about made up my mind to let Rufus Dow have the note. Mebby he'll have better luck collecting than I seem to."

"I hope he won't foreclose too sudden. Folks call him a pretty hard man, and of course he couldn't feel for Dan'l as thee does, being boys together and always living neighbors."

Not a word of protest. John Brewster began to feel more comfortable and turned to close the desk, as the gentle voice added:

"Hain't thee better go over tonight and tell Dan'l? He ought to know, and if it must be done thee'll feel better to have it over."

"I suppose I ought to tell him, but I hate it the worst way. Don't seem as if it would help for him to have to worry over it before hand."

"I'll go with thee. I want to see Eunice. I've been making over some of Ruth's things for little Alice. When I was over the last time the child had no proper flannels, and it didn't seem right that our darling's clothes should be laid away in the closet when a motherless baby needed them. See, John does thee remember when thee burned that hole in the sleeve warming the little gown before the fire?"

Ah, yes—John Brewster remembered. Every trivial incident of the little life that had blessed the home for a few short years was written in his heart. He took the garment that his wife held up, smoothed it with a trembling hand and laid it down in her lap.

"I guess," he said, presently, "I'll go out and fodder. Seems to be getting dark early."

The proposed visit did not grow more attractive as the hours passed and John would have easily persuaded himself to stay at home, but Hannah promptly began her preparations, and he only ventured to say:

"You sure it isn't too far for ye, mother. The footing's pretty slippery."

"The fresh air will do me good and thee can hold me up, John," smiled Hannah, as she tied the comfortable satin hood under her chin. Their road lay through the woods; scattered trees at first, through whole leafless boughs the stars shone, then the denser shades of pines and firs. John's twinkling lantern made fitting mosaics of light on the sombre trunks between which the wood road wound away into darkness, coming out at length on a footbridge over a little stream, silent now in the grip of the frost, beyond which lay the snow-

covered pastures crossed by cattle tracks.

Then the sheds and ample barns, with comfortable stacks camped about them and under its spreading elms the substantial farm-house that had seen three generations of Strong's round out their sturdy lives, winning sometimes less than they desired from the ancestral acres, but on the whole, content with such things as they had, and enjoying them.

"They're pretty well lit up," commented John, snatching at every pretext for hardening his heart. "Don't 'pear to be saving on candles, if they be mortgaged."

"It's Christmas eve, thee knows, John," said Hannah, innocently.

"Shoh, so 'tis. Why didn't you remind me, Hannah? Don't seem just a reasonable time for business."

"I shall have a happier Christmas if I know the child is comfortably clothed. Eunice is much afflicted with her hands and finds it painful to sew. I don't know as I ought to tell thee, John, but last time I came over Dan'l was trying to mend the child's stockings—I saw him through the window—"

The house door rushed from the porch with a hoarse challenge that brought his master to the door, candle in hand, peering doubtfully at the approaching guests, but quickly recognizing them with a hearty greeting, in which John at least detected a tone of surprise. It was a good while since he had made a neighborly call on this old chum of his school days.

The room into which they were ushered was the great kitchen, the only room in the farm-house wholly unchanged through years since "the raising" when the massive timbers had been lifted into place by scores of friendly hands. The old fireplace had seen its honors transferred to a modern cook stove, but on special days the screen was drawn from its mighty front and the flames wrapped themselves again around the piled-up logs, leaping and wavering far up the black throat of the chimney and sending a rosy glow over the warm hearth, the brass candlesticks on the high mantle and the great beams across the ceiling till the room seemed full of memories of the vanished feasts and frolics of two centuries.

Tonight, besides the splendor of the fire, there were wreaths of ground pine, fir and scarlet alder berries, and in one corner, shaded by great evergreen branches that it seemed to stand in a wood, a child's crib, from which looked out the delicate, transparent face of little Alice, her cheeks flushed and her eyes shining with delight as she clasped the wonderful doll to her bosom. Her grandmother stood by the crib, her face radiant with the child's happiness, and Daniel Strong, having ushered the guests into the room, stood for a moment quite forgetful of them as he gazed over the scene. It was not so very long since he had planned Christmas surprises for the child's mother, the one daughter of their love, who had left this little one to comfort their loneliness when she went away to seek her heavenly kindred. Life had been hard for them since that day, and when the doctor had told them that the child was hopelessly crippled, even Eunice had given away and cried. "The Almighty hath dealt very bitterly with me." But with what a wonderful beauty her baby face shone, and how her beauty rang out as she held up the precious doll and demanded of John Brewster that he should "Kiss baby!" He did it without demur. Daniel Strong smiled at the sight and roused himself to make his neighbors welcome.