

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

"CRUEL ON THE GRAVE."

By Evelyn Orchard.

It was only a chance word carelessly spoken, but it went home piercing like a two-edged sword. "It's just what a man may expect when he marries a girl twenty years his junior, my dear, and flighty at that."

"But he is to blame too," said the woman, standing up for the culprit whatever her offence. "That's what men forget; he's had his day, she's never had hers. For my part, Jack, I don't blame her in the least. What does she care about politics except for any fun she may get out of it?"

"All the same, if she were my wife I shouldn't let her go round making herself conspicuous by canvassing for another man. It makes it all the worse, too, that he's Edgar's opponent. I can't think what he's about!"

"Oh, he's an old fossil; I've no patience with him," said the woman impatiently. "Once he was passably good-looking, but now— No pretty woman would ever canvass for him, anyhow, unless she happened to be a suffragette."

"Be quiet now, Kitten; they're going to begin."

The chairman rose and informed the audience in somewhat pompous tones that the proceedings of the evening would now commence. He was the Mayor of Tattenborough, and fully alive to the dignity of his office. But he was no speaker, and the meeting quickly wearied of his dreary platitudes, uttered in a guttural voice that did not penetrate far beyond the platform. They were eager to hear the candidate, who, clean-shaven and bland, sat on the chairman's right hand, a little dismayed that he should have to follow such a heavy weight as the excellent Mayor, and to endure his long-winded perorations throughout the campaign.

At last, when the patience of the gallery was exhausted, a series of cat-calls and other familiar obstructive sounds interrupted and diverted attention from the Mayor's speech-making. In the middle of the melee some went out, among them a middle-aged man who had been located directly behind the woman who had thus drastically criticized Horace Edgar. The man was Edgar himself. Her companion glancing round casually recognized him with a secret dismay.

"Kitten! there's Edgar sitting just behind us. He must have heard what you were saying!"

"I don't mind, if it does him any good and wakes him up. Do look at the poor old Mayor, he's getting frightfully red in the face! If something doesn't restore order, he'll certainly have a fit. Ah, now Kenwood is going to pacify them, what fun!"

But the man had lost his taste for the fun of the fair, his thoughts following Edgar while he tried to recollect the exact words that had passed. He felt very uncomfortable, and as cross as was possible with the fluffy-haired little girl who was his affianced wife.

The night was serene outside, with bright stars gleaming in a clear benignant sky. Edgar felt the relief from the close atmosphere of the crowded hall, and involuntarily took off his hat. It was very quiet in the little town, the usual loafers about the narrow streets having been whipped into the election meetings, both candidates addressing the constituents in one evening. Kenwood representing for the moment the political views of the Corporation, had secured the Town Hall. Hartley, however, had hired the Corn Exchange,

which, if less dignified, was a better place to speak in. Edgar walked across the market-place and up the side street to the Exchange doors, which were guarded by a policeman who looked surprised to see him at the door.

"Evening, Mr. Edgar; thought you was to speak over the way?"

"So I was later on, I believe. Any harm in having a look at the rival camp?" He tried to speak easily and jocularly so that no suspicion might be aroused.

"No 'arm, sir; it's only a gime any-ways," replied the policeman philosophically. "But 'e'es a rare good speaker, and some'ow seems to git at the people's 'earts. He called at my place today, an' my missus reglar fell in love w' him."

Edgar smiled and stepped aside.

"Mrs. Edgar's inside, sir," volunteered the policeman then; "she came up in 'Artley's motor-car, an' went in at the platform door."

"I believe so," said Edgar, but his voice thickened.

"Try the platform door. It ain't crowded in there, the strongest platform's gone to the Town 'All, followin' the Mayor like sheep."

"Oh, no, thank you. I only want to hear what Hartley's got to say. I'll slip in at the back for a few minutes."

He pushed open the red baize door, and slipped in to the packed hall. There was no seat available, but several were standing about at the pillars which supported the small gallery at the end, from which point Edgar could very well see without being seen.

Hartley was standing well to the front of the somewhat narrow platform, his hand resting lightly on the corner of the table, his head thrown back, his clear voice penetrating easily through every corner of the hall. He was a man about Edgar's own age, but there was all the difference between the fastidious appearance of the town-bred man accustomed to rivalry in these matters, and fully aware of the intrinsic value of good clothes and a pleasing exterior in the campaign, a great difference indeed between him and the shabby country attorney, who cared very little how he looked, but whose position, though obscure, was assured.

Edgar was not interested in the small-est degree in what the speaker was saying, he was intensely, almost painfully interested in the man. There were several ladies on the platform, conspicuous among them his own wife, a young and extremely attractive woman, whose eyes under the coquettish brim of her hat seemed to be fascinated by Hartley's flow of eloquence.

Edgar saw the little, eager parting of her lips, the flush on her cheek, and wondered dully why he had never been able to bring it there, at least since the long-ago time when they had been first engaged, and she had been grateful to him for taking her from a life of bondage in a country boarding school, where as a somewhat inefficient governess she had eaten the bread of bitterness. The long-ago time, why it was only five years ago! Hartley thundered on, threshing out the burning question of tariff reform the audience cheering him to the echo, for the sentiments they fully approved. Edgar listened without the smallest desire to combat the statements which he believed to be false, his mind for the time being lifted clean above the din of party politics into the acuter air of personal suffering. It was a successful electioneering speech, and at the close, the usual votes of confidence were passed. Then the platform broke up, Edgar saw Hartley turn, as if seeking appreciation from his wife's lips, and quite evidently not in vain.

He turned about with set lips and darkling eyes, and left the building by the main entrance only to step round the lane to the platform door, where two motor-cars were drawn up ready to convey the speakers away. He stood well forward, in no way ashamed of his errand, and presently the whole party came out, nine or ten of them, talking and laughing, Hartley and Mrs. Edgar together.

"Now, Mrs. Edgar," he said, as the chauffeur opened the door and let down the step. Then Edgar stepped forward.

"I am ready to take you home, Minna," he said quite pleasantly.

Her face hotly flushed with anger.

"But I am not ready to go. Mr. Hartley has asked us all to supper at the 'George.' Oh, excuse me, Mr. Hartley, this is my husband. Of course he is not very well pleased, because he's working for the opposition."

Hartley, a gentleman at heart, and favorably impressed by Edgar's appearance, raised his hat and extended a frank hand. Mrs. Edgar had been useful to him as a canvasser, but he had not admired her much as a woman, her flippancy and ignorance of any of the questions at issue had wearied a man very much in earnest.

"I am very happy to meet you, Mr. Edgar," he said, with a heartiness which astonished Minna very much. "I hope you will join us at the 'George.' All's fair in love and war. Do get in, there's ample room for five."

Edgar hesitated only a moment.

"Thank you, I will," he said then, and the next moment they were gliding across the Market-square and down the High street to the "George Hotel." Mrs. Edgar could scarcely hide the chagrin and dismay she felt. Edgar himself, however, was perfectly at ease, and the two men seemed to be drawn by mutual attraction to one another. At the supper table Minna was amazed at her husband, at the vivacity of his speech, the quickness of his repartee, his grip of every question that came under discussion. She saw Hartley growing more and more amazed, and she could only wonder whence his unusual brilliance came. She found herself eclipsed, and the odd thing was that a feeling of pride in her husband, unlike anything she had felt before, swelled in her heart.

The supper was a most successful occasion, and when Edgar rose and said they must be going, Hartley held out a very frank appreciative hand.

"Mr. Edgar, I must always bless the happy chance which brought us together this evening, but I cannot help adding that I grudge you to the opposition camp, for which reason you must not be in haste to deprive us of your wife's help."

Edgar made a laughing retort, offered his arm to Minna, and they left the hotel. He wrapped her up with great care, and took her hand on his arm as they descended the steps of the private stair. When they reached the open she drew her hand away and looked at him steadily.

"Now, Harold," she said, with a little tremor, "whatever is the meaning of this?"

"I'm like Hartley, Minna," he answered pleasantly; "I grudge you to the opposition, and after this I mean that you shall work for us."

"Mr. Hartley must have thought it very strange, at first at least. Whatever made you turn up so unexpectedly, a behave just—just as you did?"

"How did I behave, Minna? Would you mind explaining?"

"Well, it was all right, of course, but you talked so brilliantly and looked so—so nice. I felt quite proud. How is it you never behaved like that before, and left me to think about the good qualities of other people so much?"