

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## THE OLD SCHOOLMASTER.

By David Lyall.

No one would have thought, looking at his benign face, or listening to the calm and measured tones of his voice, that the wind of tragedy had once swept across the old schoolmaster's life.

Being himself the oldest inhabitant of the little hamlet huddled so cozily in the cleft of the hills, he had sympathised with all its joy and sorrow from the beginning.

When the beginning actually was, nobody seemed exactly to know. The place without the old schoolmaster would have been inadequate, incomplete; in fact, altogether inconceivable.

Those who had been his contemporaries had died one by one, and the only one who remembered the coming of the schoolmaster in the far back days was Captain Drew, of the White House, where he had lived for seven and fifty years.

The schoolmaster had arrived in winter, dropping down suddenly from nowhere, a tall, slender, dark-eyed man, with youth in his step, but experience and sadness on his face. It was long before the advent of the School Board, in the days when education was for the few, and not for the many. The Loaning was glad to welcome the pale-faced stranger, when it was discovered that he had store of knowledge—classical knowledge, too, which he was willing to impart at a modest fee.

These were the days when great men were cradled in village homes, and trained in unpretentious schools by men who loved learning for its own sake, and imparted that love to others with thoroughness and care.

There was no standard then save love alone, and the few for whom books had the immortal message went out when the time came to deliver that message to the world with all the power that was in them.

Of such men, whose names are now upon the roll of history and of fame, the old schoolmaster had trained not a few.

His pride in the gallant boys who passed through his hands was only equalled by their affection for him. Indeed, he had a singular power of winning hearts, and many wondered how it was that one so gentle and yet so strong, so fitted in every way for the making of a home, should have elected to walk solitary through life.

The school was a broad, low building of the black whinstone peculiar to the neighbourhood. It stood in an ample playground, which a few sparse trees that had survived the hard usage of many generations of Loaning boys made some slight shade in summer, and broke the force of the moorland gale in winter.

The schoolhouse was hard by, a small, low, picturesque, though highly inconvenient dwelling, embowered among green, its outside a picture at which many paused to look.

Here the old schoolmaster had lived for nearly forty years, ministered unto for three-parts of that time by one Christina Fellows, a capable serving woman of the better sort, who alternately mothered and ruled him, and hoped to close his eyes in death.

Christina had a hard face, and did not wear her heart on her sleeve; but she had had her tragedy too, and had veritably been a brand plucked from the burning by the schoolmaster's beneficent hand.

Accused of theft in her previous place, she had been set adrift and might have gone under had not the schoolmaster taken her, without a character, when the hand of every man and every woman in the parish was against her, and she had literally not a place wherein to lay her head.

She had repaid that Christ-like act with a life-long devotion, but even Christina knew very little of her master's inner life.

"Gie him bulks," she would say; "he's a terrible man for bulks. If it wasna for me, he wad read hissel' intil his grave."

The School Board, and all its new-fangled ways, which in fulness of time robbed the old schoolmaster of his official position and placed him on the retired list, was the main object of Christina's hatred and contempt. It was noticeable that from the day when the schoolmaster gave up his active duties to another and a younger man, he perceptibly declined both in health and in spirits. Happily for him, they suffered him to remain in the little house, which did not meet modern requirements or satisfy the aspirations of the new schoolmaster, who wished everything up-to-date. This was a very happy thing for the old man. Dig up the old tree, root and branch, and there is small chance of its safe or successful transplantation. The old schoolmaster and Christina dwelt together in their green bower with a perfect understanding, though in all these years the veil was never once lifted from the old man's heart and life.

At the very last, it seemed as if fate had relented and determined to make late amends. It happened on a bleak day in winter when the lowering sky seemed to breathe out threatenings, while the scudding mowflakes preaged the coming storm.

The Loaning moorland was very bleak on such a day, and the few passengers in the village omnibus, which plied from the station in the afternoon, were glad of the shelter of the old leather cover, kept for hard weather. There were three passengers only, one an elderly lady, richly though very quietly dressed, and wearing a thick veil over her face.

When she lifted it at the inn door to put a question to the landlord there was a haunting sweetness in her expression, and a dignity in her bearing which instantly commanded attention and respect.

She asked for a room, and for some light refreshments, and gave her name as Mrs. Grantley. About an hour later, she walked through the falling snow along the village street in the direction of the school, and turned in at the gateway of the old schoolmaster's house. The daylight was fading as she lifted the latch of the wicket gate, and at the very moment Christina Fellows happened to be at the sitting-room window, for the purpose of drawing the blind after having lit the cheerful lamp.

"There's somebody at the yett," she said curiously. "A leddy, an' I dinna ken her! She must hae made a mistake."

The schoolmaster, deep in his book, returned an absent answer, and Christina hastened to the door to interview the stranger, and, if need be, put her in the right way.

"Yes, Maister Thornton lives here, an' he is at home," she said, in no little surprise. "Will ye step in?"

The invitation was not very graciously given, but was instantly accepted. Christina preceded the visitor, to the sitting-room door, which she flung open.

"Somebody to see ye, sir," she said excitedly; then, her curiosity getting the better of her good manners, she stood still to watch the effect, and, if possible, get a clue to the stranger's business.

The schoolmaster rose quickly to his feet, and came forward smiling benignly, blinking a little as the lamp-light shone full on the eyes from which he had removed the reading glasses. Then Christina Fellows beheld a strange thing, from which she shrank with the secret shame of a strong, reserved nature incapable of any emotional display.

The strange lady, with her veil thrown back, and her sweet face all aglow, spoke the schoolmaster's name in accents of tenderness, and laid her two hands on his shoulders.

"I've come at the long last, Tom," she said. "Thank God, it is not too late."

Then Christina, in a mortal panic, not even sure that she had heard or seen aright, closed the door in haste, and retired, wringing her hands, to her own domain. "Mercy me, sic ongauns! I wonder wha she is! It's hardly decent, but I maun wait or I see."

She felt, however, as if the end of all things had come.

The schoolmaster's face flushed, and he took the hands from his shoulders and held them close, then stooped to kiss them, and she drew herself a little away.

"I know everything, Tom," she said, nodding and smiling too, though her voice had an unsteady note. "I have known it only three days. In that time I have travelled seven hundred miles, praying God that when I came to the journey's end I should find you able to hear me speak."

"It is wonderful, Mary, wonderful," he said, speaking like a man in a dream. "I never thought that you and I should meet in this world, though I have long been certain about the next."

She made a gesture of fine scorn. "I know of the lies that parted us, and of the noble part you played to save the good name of a man whom you thought I loved. He won me by these lies, Tom, and you bore the brunt. He was not even honest in his death," she said, and her voice took a tense note of scorn. "If he had been I should have found you long ago, and so we might have had a few more years together. It was a Christlike act. You practically laid down your life, not for your friend, but for your enemy."

"Nay, my dear," said the old schoolmaster quickly. "It was done for you."

"Well, but it was not wise nor well done for any of us, for I have had a hard life. But, please God, we shall have a few days of happiness and peace together; for since I find you alone in this little house, I will never go away again."

She spoke like a woman who had counted the whole cost, and whose quest was ended absolutely. She laid her gloves on the table untied her bonnet strings, and pushed it with a little trill of laughter to the floor, and the lamplight on her bright hair revealed not a trace of grey.

"You have kept your youth, Mary," he said, tremblingly, for in a moment the gulf of the years was not only bridged, but utterly swept away.

"Look at me, a broken old man! Yet, if it pleases God to give me the sweet of your friendship for the few years that are left, I will give Him thanks."

She only smiled again with a deep, mysterious sweetness in her eyes, and sat down by the hearth as if she had found the place that was her very own.

Later in the evening an interview took place between the stranger lady and Christina Fellows; an interview which not only appeased the ire of that somewhat hard-visaged spinster, but spread out a new vista before her bewildered eyes. A message was sent to the Hawes Inn, and the lady's belongings were forthwith brought to the schoolhouse, and the new era began. It made a great talk in the Loaning, it being freely rumored that a mysterious rich relation had suddenly swooped down upon the old schoolmaster and was desirous of carrying him off to her castle in the south. Christina, for her own amusement, and to add to the dignity of the occasion, assiduously fanned the flame of village