

Under His Roof by Elizabeth Robins
Good Housekeeping May 1913

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A Story of Two Women Who Had Loved One Man

By Elizabeth Robins

Author of "My Little Sister," "Come and Find Me," etc.

A version
not seen by Sue Thomas for her bibliography entry Number 73
See last page for details

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Under HIS ROOF

A Story of Two Women Who Had Loved One Man

By Elizabeth Robins

Author of "My Little Sister," "Come and Find Me," etc.

Illustrated with a painting by Robert Reid and an end-piece by Dalton Stevens

No short story in late years has attracted more attention than that remarkable piece of realism, "My Little Sister" by Elizabeth Robins. In this story by the same author the suffrage question is handled in an equally impressive manner, and a new aspect is given to the old theory regarding the safety for the woman who is sheltered in her home and the danger for the woman who faces mobs in behalf of her cause.

THE two women had never supposed they would meet again. They had not only that bitter quarrel like a drawn sword between them. They had a memory of baseness each had evoked in each—a memory which neither was base enough to be able to recall without wincing.

September had come round again. The thing had happened in September. The memory of it came alive each year, borne on that influence—less depressant than stimulus—the high fine melancholy of the first days of autumn.

The old pain, overlaid by so much happiness, thrust its pale face above the surface of existence, much as the autumn crocus surprises one in some forgotten corner of the smooth immaculate lawn. The long-ended conflict had not for years been so fresh in Esther Bonham's mind as in this hour. Her own victory. Miranda's defeat.

She stood in the after-sunset light, herself and the long white room steeped in the changing radiance. As she put last touches to a bowl of flowers, her inveterate romanticism saw herself as fulfilling the terms of a gracious picture. In her creamy country clothes, shining in that transient brightness, she looked for the moment almost as young as when she had come to Shipbroads, a bride, ten years before.

But Miranda—

She kept glancing through the window toward the drive, as she gathered up the petals of the late-flowering roses—so exquisite and with so little vigor of bloom. They droop, they drop in an hour. They fall at a touch. At this last moment, when the guest was due, Esther had found ravages she must repair. There must be nothing that was not perfect about this perfect house, the first time Miranda should sleep under

Shipbroads' roof. For Miranda must be made to stay. Esther had made up her mind about that, as she bent over the roses, warmed, like them, by a belated generosity.

She contrasted her fate with Miranda's. Miranda for twelve years had always, at every crisis, "got the worst of it." Life had bruised and battered her and flung her aside. She had failed everywhere. Her very advantages had helped in her undoing. She had been too pretty and too well-loved at home to be allowed to go away and paint. At twenty-four, she had lost the father who adored her. Upon Sir James's death, his daughter had dropped from a brilliant luxurious life to one of petty poverty. Almost in the same hour, she had heard that Esther was engaged to the man both women loved.

Miranda was thirty-six now. No older after all than the mistress of Shipbroads herself, who had her days of looking twenty-five. But to be thirty-six, in the country, is to be young still. To be thirty-six in London, in ill-health and low spirits, is to be middle-aged.

Miranda had never been strong—not even in her shielded youth. These twelve years since the quarrel, no wonder they had left her what her cousin's letter said, "A frail ghost of a woman battling with a mortal malady." What need for her to go out of her way to seek another enemy in the rough places of the world? Above all why, now that her half-brother had died and she was a woman of means, why should she (as the unnerving rumor whispered) be planning to throw away her last chance of happiness! Perhaps throw away her life.

How Miranda's desperate resolution had been reached, Esther could see clearer, on this golden and scented evening. Miranda

had no such haven as Shipbroads. A woman of fastidious tastes needed a proper setting. Few could hope for a Shipbroads. But, half-a-mile across the meadow, was a more ambitious, if less romantic house, with terraced gardens. Life in the country!—oh, Esther had her scheme for the rescue of that old enemy, old friend, from the horror that hung over her.

She walked up and down the room. How strange that they should meet here. Here where she had lived. Where he had read and written. Where he had smoked in front of winter fires. Where he had praised the roses for the last time, two summers ago; where, so calmly, one evening, he had died. His chair. She bent over it. The place had always been full of him. But never since his going had the sense of his presence been so insistent as it was tonight. To this house of his that he had loved as though it had been alive and human, under this roof where Miranda had hoped to live beside him, she was coming on what was like to be the last night she would need a roof, or any human friending.

Unless Esther's plan should succeed!

It must succeed. Esther had written her: "I have a great wish to see you. Could you bear to come?" And Miranda had written back: "I will come gladly. All that old misery was long, long ago burned out of me and even the ashes scattered."

That was the kind of thing a person of any pride would say. The encounter would not be easy for either of them. Better to go out and meet her at the gate. Esther had noticed, in the way of the sensitive, how, in the open, passions are calmed and manners simpler. As pettiness attitudinizes and ill-will thrives indoors, so embarrassments fall away in fields and gardens. That old quarrel between the two women had about it something large and elemental. Its very ghost would walk with a less furtive mien with only the roof of heaven above.

The barking of dogs. There she was!—coming across the meadow. So she had sent the carriage away. She was stopping now to speak to the dogs. Esther's first thought—"She keeps her little school-girl figure. She's not altered as I expected"—turned, on coming nearer, to: "She's changed beyond anything I ever dreamed." This pale slip of a woman had never walked with so sure a step in the days of her cherished youth. The edge of Esther's sympathy dulled before that advance.

The look in the face, too. Was that brightness a blind? Or an effect of sheer excitement in view of the double ordeal?—finding herself at Hugh's gate at last and remembering—tomorrow.

Yet there was nothing fevered in the small face. The pointed chin lifted a little. Quiet eyes fixed on the steep-pitched roof—the famous roof of slabs of Horsham stone. Where it wasn't mossed and lichen-grown, it showed gray and rippled like sea sand, salt-encrusted.

"What a roof! I never saw a roof like that," she said—just like any other visitor, seeing, for the first time the great feature of the house.

That they met so without embarrassment was another kindness Esther owed those sheltering stones.

"You lie so hidden in your hollow, the wonder is I found you."

"Yes," Esther answered, "coming across the fields one sees nothing but the roof."

And Miranda agreed: "It seems to sit on the ground like a group of gray stone tents." She stood there looking up. "The roof was too massive for the walls," she said. (Tact had never been poor Miranda's forte). "It dwarfs the house."

Was she trying to show Esther that she had no more envy of all that was implied in the privilege of calling that roof one's own?

In any case, a blessed refuge in the difficult first moments, this idle talk on some safe theme. And what so safe as Shipbroads' roof! It was the very type and sign of safety. No such roof, Miranda was told, could cover any house less than centuries old. There were no more such slabs of glorious rippled stone. And even if more were found, no builder of these days could lavish oak on the Shipbroads' scale, to bear the tons on tons weight of a roof like this. Miranda need only look at the older wing where the timbers showed—framing panels of weathered brick—and the great corner joists, grooved and gullied by action of frost and sun, yet more enduring than iron, which would rust; tougher than steel which might corrode; outlasting stone which scaled and crumbled. The two walked round the house. Did Miranda see the roses and the cypresses? She said "Yes" and "Yes," but her eyes seemed intent on some other, far-off beauty. Esther stopped her by the outer wall of the stone ingle that bore on its shoulders the tall chimney. Everyone admired that chimney. Miranda's

face was lifted too, obedient, absent. She seemed to feel something was expected of her. Her eyes explored the fissure that zig-zagged like a streak of harmless lightning down the pink and orange of lichen brick. "Is that crack old?" she asked inconsequently.

"Yes," Esther answered, "very old. This part is Elizabethan," she said with pride.

In some curious way, an Elizabethan chimney seemed suddenly a less satisfying thing. On the hostess fell that old sense of vague, undefined disadvantage that she had so often felt in Miranda's presence. Miranda who had lost at every point. Miranda who was so broken and spent that she was ready to fling away what was left of life.

How calm she was! No one who didn't know would ever suspect.

She was made to notice the depth of the eaves. The walls were really higher than they looked—

Miranda shook her head in the old willful way. "Your roof makes one think of a little man swaggering in a big man's hat. It comes down over his ears. It fairly extinguishes him."

"It doesn't extinguish Shipbroads!" Esther said. "Come in and see." It was less an invitation than a challenge.

They went through stone passages white-walled, and crossed by oak beams, proudly bared now. "All plastered over, when—" on the brink of utterance of that name Esther stopped herself, like a runner checked at the edge of a cliff.

"When Hugh first came?" Miranda said. "Yes, I remember hearing that."

That the nervousness and shrinking seemed to be all Esther's, did not quiet her nerves. The first rush of protecting gentleness that had gone out in welcome to her guest, moment by moment gave way to the old sense of rivalry. Never otherwise could Esther have yielded to the temptation to vaunt her prize, Shipbroads—outward and visible sign of that old conquest. Surely Miranda must see for herself the greater beauties.

In the Candle's Gleam

But, as Miranda went from room to room, she gave no sign of fastening hungrily on the quaintness and the beauty that one might think (considering all) would mean more to her than to any other. The unseeing brightness of her eyes seemed to rest

on these things without reporting them to her brain. Still she followed her guide with tranquil, unmoved face. Wait till they should reach that upper chamber—but not yet. That should come last when the light was grayer. When they couldn't see each other's eyes too clearly.

Up and down, from room to room, on different levels. In a dim passage, Miranda tripped at an inequality.

"Oh, I ought to have warned you. These floors are full of pitfalls." Esther said it, fatuously, as in contempt for the spirit level and the stranger foot.

"How quickly the light goes here," the visitor said.

She was told, "It is always dark up here long before it's dark downstairs. The overhanging eaves shut out the light."

When they came to what Esther called the "captain's cabin," they stood in dusk under the heavy transverse beam of a raft-ered ceiling, dark with age. A maid went by with candles. Esther took one, saying some people were so barbaric as to tell her she ought to put in electric light. "Imagine electric light at Shipbroads!" She lifted the candle high. "You see that wainscot with the little paneled door and the linen pattern above. Well," a thrill came into her voice, "I've found out something lately about all this oak—"

Miranda wasn't listening. She stood, half turned away, staring down at the corner. "What's this?" she said.

A heap of something brown flung against the corner joist that came up from the foundation, through the floor and through the ceiling to the roof. The dark-colored hillock showed on the white matting with that something unpleasant in any unverified thing that gets into a well-kept house. Was it merely earth? And if so how had it come there? Something the dogs had brought indoors? Esther sniffed the air, arriving at no better knowledge.

"Dust," Miranda said. Then leaning down: "It's like a heap of grated chocolate." She put her hand out.

"Don't touch it!" Esther drew her away. "I'll send a servant." Hastily, she opened the next door. "You haven't been in here yet."

The light of the single candle seemed lost in this room. A ceiling as high as that in the captain's cabin was low—and showing an open-timbered roof.

An effect of amplitude and peace.

They stood there saying nothing.

In the silence, a little noise—like a fairy saw.

"This used to be the lowest room in the house."

"I remember," Miranda said, as though she had lived here in old days. In a sense she had.

Esther remembered too: Miranda convalescent in a long chair on the lawn at Ardingly Manor. Her girl friend beside her. Not obtrusively more devoted after Hugh's appearance on the scene, yet showing an uncanny skill in hitting on the times when he was there—a casual-seeming, unfailing presence. The silent duel between the two girls. Hugh, all-unconscious—absorbed in Miranda. His nearest approach to realizing the pretty friend from the Rectory had been that day he invoked Esther's aid to get Sir James away—to help the lover to an hour alone with Miranda. Esther's anguish of acquiescence. The return of those two radiant ones.

That was the first day Esther heard of Shipbroads—all its merits summed in being the house Miranda would love. Hugh beside her. His bright head bent over her drawing book. "This is the gate . . . You come up the path. This is how it looks." He exaggerated the roof. Yet Miranda never found a fault in it then. He made diagrams of each floor. No room but Miranda knew. They discussed changes, for the most part reversions to an older order, as in this room where two windows had been bricked up from the times of the window tax. He had opened them east and south. And still he was afraid—Miranda had been so spoilt. "Spoilt?" Yes by sleeping in the garden. She had got the better of her illness so. Her room at Shipbroads might seem too low for eyes that had looked all summer on the stars. But in every other way that room was the room, he said, for Miranda's dreams.

Then the day he cut across the fields and came running up the garden. Esther could see that look of his shining still—his hat in his hand, his head held high. The tall figure borne along with a resilient lightness, more boy than man, in the moment of action and of gladness at nearing the goal. The goal, a smiling welcome in the sun—smiling at the vigorous on-coming beauty that was hers—smiling, till she caught Esther's eye. Esther drew her breath against that edge of pain again—

the agony of self-betrayal. She had not suffered herself to leave them instantly. Too much like being shown the door and meekly going. She had stayed while Hugh, flushed, bright-eyed, triumphed over the low ceiling. More space above it than in the room below! "I'm having the whole blessed thing out!" Through a trap-door he had climbed into the attic. The dust of ages. "Cobwebs in festoons like Spanish moss. A roof magnificently timbered. I am throwing all that upper space into your room, Miranda." His laughing parody of the builder: "'Couldn't be done, sir! The tons on tons weight of stone couldn't be sustained, sir, if those cross timbers, flooring the attic, sir, were lifted.'" Modern builders, men of no imagination. Hugh dismissed them gleefully. "They merely don't know how solidly the old fellow's built." More diagrams. "Like this at present." When Miranda came, she would find it so, and so. Oh, very clearly Miranda had seen this room with her mind's eye and known it for the bridal chamber. So it had been. For another bride.

"What is that?" Miranda asked.

"What?"

"That sound."

"I don't hear anything. Some people don't like this room," Esther went on. "They'd as soon sleep in a college hall, they say. I don't mind it." So she masked a pride of possession scarcely decent. But great as the space was, those presences filled it . . . they were crowding Esther out. Again that sense of having to assert herself against Miranda. The need seized her to emphasize her place here; to show that she had set her mark on this particular room.

"I've improved it, I think, just lately." She lifted the candle to the central beam. "You see those two deep notches? And here, at the end, the auger-holes and mortices? They tell a wonderful story." Esther's sailor brother had read these marks as though they had been chapters out of one of his naval histories. "This oak has been in strange places! It's gone about the world, ploughing its way through salt water. It's been warped in hotter suns than any England knows. That long split—perhaps that came of charging into icebergs in the dark. It has seen the great storms. Perhaps battles, too. That stain . . . who knows. . . ? It's all *old ship's wood*."





painting by ROBERT REID, R. A.

thing in it and about it that was dear to him I have tended and cherished everything"

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Miranda's eyes shone. "So far inland?"
 "Far enough now. But not so far in old days. The estuary of our little river was a navigable channel once. The Roman galleys used to come as far up as the castle." Esther pointed to the central support. "That battered old king post may have gone out to meet the Armada! And then one of these modern builders comes and overlays all that history with his pettifogging blocks and braces!"

Everyone of those queer-shaped holes had been filled in when Esther came here—filled with new oak-stained dark to match the old. An outrage. Worse than a Russian censor's blacking out the finest pages of a contraband book.

"There it is again!" Miranda said. They listened.

The Little People

"Oh, you mean the rats. I'm so used to them I don't hear them any more. The builder, who raised the ceiling, stuck in a great new beam—a smooth, machine-made thing—the whole length of the room under that old cross-beam. An intolerable eyesore. It couldn't help being so staring new, poor thing! You can't get hand-hewn oak any more. But the new beam wasn't even chamfered. Edges sharp as a hatchet. I had it out two years ago. No pompous big-wig builders meddling! Our little local people got that and all the other new bits, out. The relief when they'd finished."

A faint filing filled the pause.

"Your 'little people' don't seem quite to have finished yet."

"You mean—the rats?" She laughed. "In all old houses—." Her eyes swept her handiwork. "Not an inch of oak in the place now less than centuries old."

"Wrecked ships!" Miranda said.

"Ships come home." Characteristically Esther evaded the grimmer implication.

"Ships are not like men and women," persisted the other. "A ship that's seaworthy goes again to sea."

She was jealous! She must pick flaws! "Experts say: 'A perfect piece of old England!'"

They had stood for that instant in a silence unbroken by any human accent. But sound there was. Slight, surreptitious. The mean scratching and gnawing of vermin. The mistress of Shipbroads blew the final

blast of triumph. "There's not a false note in the whole house now."

Again that slow insistent grate, grate—gnawing, filing. Following hard on the woman's boast, there was a hint of obscure insult in the small insolence of vermin. Their very pettiness penetrated Esther's inflated satisfaction like a pointed tooth. She dropped her eyes to the little schoolgirl figure going to and fro under the banded shadow. A wave of pity broke over Esther. Poor storm-tossed Miranda—facing that tornado in Parliament Square tomorrow. No. No. On a flood of shame at her own meanness, Esther was lifted out of "the shallows and the miseries" of rivalry. She set the candle down and drew Miranda to the window. They looked out at the tall cypress spreading voluminous Victorian skirts, untarnished by the autumn. Yet all the air was full of the scent of fallen leaves. Pungent, tonic, penetrating—the quintessence of the fall came flooding through the window.

Miranda breathed it in. "How good!" she said. She leaned out till she caught the glitter of silver. The moon had risen as high as the upper reaches of the cypress—caught there like a crescent in a woman's loosened hair.

Miranda called to mind "that dear inconsequent saying of Mrs. Browning's, 'The best place in the house is the leaning out of the window. Not but what the house is beautiful,'" she said, quick to recall a possible slight. "Beautiful beyond saying."

"You feel that?" Esther asked eagerly.

"I feel it is part of the fields and part of the woods. That shows it's a nice house," she answered in her unemotional way.

They leaned together over the low sill.

"Miranda, I didn't ask you to come for nothing. I wanted you to see and feel this beauty. I wanted so much to show you how good it is to live away from cities, in a house you can love. It's such a waste of the beauty there is in the world, for people like you not to . . . not to cherish it. One mustn't wait till one is too old. A house has to grow as well as a garden. Three hundred years weren't enough here. I was ten years making it fit"—(she saved herself from "us")—"making it fit me. And, Miranda, I've found a house for *you*!"

"For *me*!" A house would seem to be as little needed by this creature as a cavern or a mountain peak.

"Yes, I want you to stay to-night, and let me drive you there to-morrow."

"I mustn't do that," she said.

"Why not?"

"I have to be in London tomorrow."

Esther couldn't face the issue yet. She talked on, with a feverish enthusiasm, about the possibilities of this other old house she'd found; about the need of every woman for a house of her own. Without it, a woman was like a picture without a frame—without a wall to hang upon. She sang the joy of gardens. The need to make some corner of earth smile—to make some spot perfect before you die.

"That's my ambition, too," said the other. "Only I am less modest than you. I want, not only here and there a corner. I want all the beautiful earth to smile."

"We can't re-make the world."

"We must. We can." In the pause again with pygmy saw and file—that ghostly carpentering. Miranda turned to listen. Then suddenly, "Let us go back, into the room where that strange stuff lies in the corner."

"Why? We . . . don't know what it is—"

"That's a reason for finding out," Miranda laughed. "I believe you're afraid of it."

Of course Esther wasn't afraid. "Only it looks—horrid."

They took the candle in. Miranda stooped, thrust down her hand and the sifted stuff rained out between her fingers. "I thought so. It's sawdust. Your 'little, local people' have gnawed a new passage."

"But all that! Where in the world does it come from?" While they looked, the dressing-bell rang.

The slight chill in the air since sunset was not enough to account for the wood fire burning in the ingle of the dining-room, Esther acknowledged that as they sat down. "Pure vanity," she said, smiling. "The old fireplace looks so nice lit up."

The rather silent meal was nearly finished, and Esther had told the servant he might go. The door closed behind him, and the two women looked down a little self-consciously into their plates. Suddenly they were facing each other with wide scared eyes. A report had rung out like a gun-shot in a cavern. Then, among the troop of secondary concussions—plunging, colliding echoes—came a full-throated roar out of the great chimney. The thunder of it seemed to make its progress down a stair, rattling, crashing, uttering fresh explosions, step

by step, till it met the final shock of impact with the earth. Not to end there. It wrestled as with an enemy. It escaped. It burrowed—running along under the house. It kept muttering a subterranean anger down there. Over the ingle end of the room had fallen a rain of broken brick, pieces of mortar, dust and soot and grit. Where the sparks of a fire had risen, the evening air was blowing in. The back of the ingle showed a mouth of blackness gaping on the night.

The old chimney had fallen.

.

Outside, dogs were barking and servants were running about unmindful of usual duties, usual deferences. Men shouted excitedly as they came running up from the stables with a lantern and a carriage lamp. The moonlight showed clearly enough the amorphous ruin of what had stood and served so long. But the sight of the wrecked chimney had no such power to set nerves jangling as the long thunder of the fall.

The effect of some sharp physical jar is often to shatter hesitations and to break through barriers that seemed built to out-face death. Through the fierce cudgeling of the senses, instead of shrinking and submission, comes a strange and alien freedom. Locked doors open silently and for one memorable hour the most trammelled soul stands free.

As the two stood there they took hands. Who made the motion first, neither knew. They leaned close. They talked in whispers.

"Come away," Miranda said. "Nothing can be done until tomorrow."

Tomorrow! The word made a breach in Esther's thought wider than the gaping blackness that had been the ingle nook.

"Miranda, I've *heard*."

"Heard—?"

"What you want to do tomorrow. Listen," she crushed the thin hand. "I've waked each morning since I knew, with a sense of disaster. What I've thought—what is it, dreadful, that's hanging over me? Then, when I was fully awake, I knew. You—*won't* do it. You'll stay here tonight and tomorrow."

"No," Miranda said, "I have to go."

Esther caught her breath in a sob. "Your father—you used to care for your father. What would he have thought?"

"I hope he would have understood."

"You *know* he would have gone mad at

the idea. He would have done anything rather than see you. . . . He would have shut you up—Miranda, he would rather have seen you dead."

"War has divided many families."

"War! A sickening struggle in the streets. You, pushed and dragged. Bruised, flung about. Oh, I've read about these raids."

"And you haven't minded before? You've sat here safe and happy?"

"What could I do? What can *you* do?" Esther held the thin hand tighter. "A little slight creature, a wind would blow away."

She used to be delicate, she admitted. Not now. That was one of the many miracles. The new need for strength had cured her of her ills.

"Has it cured *all* the old pain?" the other woman cried. "Has it cured remembering?"

"Cured or set aside," Miranda answered. "I have better things to think of now." Then she told what. How the Vision Splendid (a world lifted out of the mire of ages) had shone through all the gloom and mists and saved her from despair.

A beautiful dream! Esther could understand that. But the hideous reality! "Oh, I've been hearing—in these sickening encounters more than one, you know it's true, more than one has been horribly injured. *Kicked*—" Esther shuddered.

"Two women have died," Miranda said.

"And for what!" the other burst out. "If it's coming, this change—it will come."

"Do you know why it will come? Because those two were ready to show the way. And because others are ready to follow."

"Not you—not you! Oh, my dear, I think of you when you were little." Esther was crying. "All that care and worship. To end like this. You. You of all women on the earth." When, before, she had spoken of Sir James, her heart kept saying Hugh. And now her tongue was shaping the name that had divided them. "Hugh," she whispered, "what would Hugh have said?"

Miranda put out her hand to ward the question off. And then: "He was the most chivalrous man I ever knew." She seemed to think the question answered.

The other drew a quick breath. "Miranda, it seems you've got to know."

Something in Esther's face made the other woman drop her eyes. "Believe me—it doesn't matter. Not now."

"Oh, that shows!"

"Hush! It's all done with."

"Only because it hurt you beyond bearing."

"No. Because I see life is a finer thing than anyone ever told me."

"That's the sort of empty generality people fly to when the particular good has failed them. I never thought I'd find myself telling you. But I *can't* let you go through with this ghastly plan of yours. Her voice went down. "You won't dare to take into that kind of struggle the woman Hugh loved."

Again that motion setting aside, soothing.

"Oh, you've got to know. He never cared for me as he cared for you. That was my punishment. For not playing fair. I made him think—oh, Miranda. I lied and lied and lied."

The small figure shrank for the first time. "My hands weren't clean either. I don't like remembering how badly we behaved to each other."

"We must remember this once."

"Why? After all women used to think all was fair in love and war."

"Love! You call it love! Well, you've got to know. Love *did* come. But after. I'd have married anybody."

"*Don't!*"

"You despise me for that?"

"It's so much worse," Miranda said, "than anything that can happen to us tomorrow."

Esther winced sharply. The speech had cut her like a whip lash. "Oh, it's all very well for you!—*You* weren't a poor parson's daughter, one of six scrambling after husbands! *You* hadn't been made to feel, since you were twelve, that the only refuge from the misery of governessing was to get some man to marry you. You weren't afraid of hardships, afraid of poverty, afraid of loneliness—afraid of life. Deathly, deathly afraid." Her voice broke. "If you'd been looking out all your youth for shelter—" she fell into a passion of weeping. "No. You had everything. That was how I made it seem right. And my wickedness prospered so!" She hung for a moment to her first realization of the strangeness of the years behind. "I don't know what I'm made of. For I've been happy here."

"No one," said Miranda gently, "could be with Hugh and not be happy."

The other struggled to regain a footing on some coign of justification. "After all, what was a good marriage for me, would have been a come down for you."

Miranda shook her head: "We were both right so far. To have his love was to have the best that love can bring."

How she said that! "So . . . they haven't made you forget him, then?"

"Forget?"

Never till she died should Esther, in her turn, forget the accent of that word. "I'd like you to believe," she said, "I didn't realize how much you cared, till—"

"Till I turned against you so venomously. Oh, that was a muddy bit of road!"

"But now"—Esther looked at her with miserable eyes. "Now, I've found shelter. And you are out in the storm." But it wasn't Miranda who shivered. "Let us get our cloaks," said Esther. They put them on in the hall. "You don't need your hat." But Miranda kept it in her hand. They walked in silence round the house. A group of men still stood about the heap of ruin. Esther felt herself drawn away. The two went silently out at the gate and across the field. The moonlight lay white on the close-cropped grass.

Safety

Near the far gate, Esther stopped and looked round at Shipbroads. "We'll go back now."

Miranda seemed to hesitate. But there was no yielding in her face. Only a new tenderness. "I wouldn't leave you to-night," she said, "for anything but this." She rode over Esther's protest of "Too late to order the carriage—" "The people of the Inn will have one waiting at the end of the lane." Miranda opened the gate with Esther following hard—"I shall catch the 10.15." "I can't let you go!" Esther clung to her. "Listen. The woman he loved *must not* go out to meet that horror!"

"Some of us must meet it. We shall drive it before us tomorrow!" The sharp face shone like a sword.

"—You'll drag in the dust the dignity that was dear to Hugh!"

"Try to understand. I never knew what dignity was till I learned it in this service."

"—To stand in the street and be hooted at! The struggle. The fighting—"

The low voice breaking in was stern to hardness. "You and I, Esther, didn't shrink from a struggle of a meaner sort."

"Say what you like about me. *He* played fair. For his sake, stay awhile, under his roof. You belong here," Esther said brokenly. "The old house is a shrine. Everything in it and about it that was dear to him—I've tended and cherished them, everyone. But I know he meant them all

for you. Be generous. Come back. Think it's Hugh who's asking you."

"You live too much in the past, here," said the other gently. "You don't see there's a glorious present waiting a little way down the road."

"*Don't* look down the road." She turned to go back. One hand held the gate open. "Think that just over the meadow Hugh is waiting."

"I didn't find him there." She turned suddenly. "Shall I tell you where I found him? Out in the thick of the strife."

"*Hugh!*" The heavy gate slipped out of Esther's hold. It clanged between them. "Hugh!"

"I can only tell you he has never been so near me since—we parted, as he has been these last two years. Whenever my weakness needs him I feel him at my side. I hope you are not hurt to have me say that?"

The other woman stood in tears. "I seem to see you," she whispered, "as you'll be tomorrow. A bit of human drift in the storm: the police striking you down."

"I don't think I shall be struck down."

"You imagine you can prevent it!"

"The horses are good creatures. I understand horses."

"What good is that when angry men are riding them?"

"I shall take the horses by their bridles."

"You don't think *that* will stop the *men*?"

"The men are human."

"I've heard that even good men, in crowds, aren't quite human. Besides—there are the loafers—the hooligans."

"Even they are men. It is partly for their sake we go. Besides it wouldn't matter, now, if they were wild beasts. We must go out to meet—whatever comes."

"Good-bye then. I shall never see you again. Oh I was so sure if you knew he loved you, *that* would save you! I was ready—I *am* ready if, for Hugh's sake, you'll do what I ask for, I'll do anything, *anything* for you."

The white face leaned over the gate. "Why not come with me?" Miranda said.

"With you!"

"If we stood side by side tomorrow, we should wipe out that old dishonor."

Esther had fallen back. A good yard lay between her and the dividing gate. "You know," she said, with forced quietness, "it isn't in me. You might as well ask that rabbit scuttling to its burrow. Oh, yes, I'm very like the rabbit." Her eyes turned home. The gate had swung open again. Close to Esther's

shrinking, Miranda's face was shining with a light greater than the moon can give.

"Yes, why not? Come with Hugh and me." She stood there, with that terrible brightness in her face, holding out her hand and saying, "Come."

For one instant the other stood staring, fascinated. Dizziness made her seem to waver. The faint forward motion was checked and turned. The dilated eyes scoured the field of vision. Shipbroads swam in view. In its shadow-filled hollow the steep-pitched roof showed in the moonlight paler than by day. A flood of gratitude for the safety waiting there broke over the woman. She heard the carriage in the lane. She never so much as looked back. She ran across the meadow with hands outstretched like a fugitive praying shelter.

In bed that night, with curtains back and windows wide as always, she stared up at the rafters.

"Kind, kind," she said. And: "*Keep me safe.*"

The little carpenters were busily sawing and filing when she finally fell asleep.

No dreams, but in the middle of the night she woke again to that sense of imminent disaster. What was it? It had come with a vague unnerving noise . . . a noise that echoed still. Oh, yes, the chimney had fallen. Miranda had fallen. Trampled under iron hoofs. Would to God Miranda had stayed here in safety, under the roof Hugh meant should shelter her.

But what was the matter with the roof? The woman lying under the rafters, caught her breath. Was it some trick of moonlight that made the timbers look askew? The ceiling sagged like the ceiling of one's cabin in a gale. Again that mysterious noise. A grating, a harsh sliding. The woman lay as still as the mice and rats. She had no illusion of being the victim of a nightmare. She knew herself awake in every sense and quick in every nerve. She saw the king-post sway like a drunken man. An oaken buttress shot out. It fell crashing to the floor.

The tons on tons weight settled slowly down.

A glimpse of stars—a blow—a blackness.



"I seem to see you," Esther whispered, "as you will be tomorrow: a bit of human drift in the storm, the police striking you down"

Under His Roof by Elizabeth Robins

Good Housekeeping May 1913

Hypertext at Robins Web of "Under His Roof" (from which this page is linked) is based upon the reprinted version in *The Mills of the Gods and Other Stories* (Sue Thomas Bibliography No. 89). That anthologized version does not have sub headings as does this version, but breaks in the text are represented by a series of spaced dots. Only one section break in the *Good Housekeeping* version is so indicated (after "the old chimney had fallen"). This edition includes three subheadings to break up the text: *In the Candle's Gleam*, *The Little People*, *Safety*.

Sue Thomas' main entry for this story in her Bibliography is Item Number 72, catalogued with the Novels and Novellas, as it was privately printed as separately bound.

ER used the private printing to raise funds for suffrage. Thomas notes that this *Good Housekeeping* serialized version was "Not seen" and that her information for this item is my dissertation (Item 73 cross-references item 1540, "Sometimes Suppressed").

I have located the digitized version of the 1913 *Good Housekeeping*, and below I provide a link to the beginning of the story. *Hathi Trust* holds the copy, digitized by Google and held at University of Chicago:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=chi.24127277&view=image&seq=576&q1=Robins>

Pages 592-602

With illustrations by Robert Reid on 596-7 and Dalton Stevens (illustration at end of story, at the bottom of the last unnumbered page 602). Stevens is not credited there but is in the Table of Contents and the first page of the text.

Contents for the volume with both illustrators credited are on image page 560, or page 2:

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=chi.24127277&view=image&seq=560&q1=Robins>

Above images are from the *Good Housekeeping* May 1913 printing.

Cornell University also has the single issue,

https://digital.library.cornell.edu/catalog/hearth6417403_1342_005