

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVELTHE WISE WOMAN BUILDETH
HER HOUSE.

By David Lyall.

Two men who had just arrived at Liverpool on a Saturday afternoon by one of the Atlantic steamers, by an accident missed the boat train.

Out of this small incident arose a great issue in the life of a woman whom neither of them had ever seen. Finding they had two hours to wait for the next London train at Exchange Station, they took a stroll up Lord Street, which was so dull on a Saturday afternoon that they were glad to turn into a tea-shop to spend half-an-hour. It was very crowded; they found two seats, however, at a table where two ladies were already sitting. One of them was middle-aged and very kindly looking; the other young, and extremely pretty. Both men glanced at her with interest, a little heightened, perhaps, by the fact that in the pursuit of their calling in a very remote part of the Empire they had been cut off from the privilege of companionship with women of their own kind and class. They ordered tea, and while they waited, talked inconsequently precisely as if nobody were within hearing. It is astonishing what things people will discuss in a public place, and how apt they are to forget that the world is very small, after all, and that the birds of the air carry all sorts of undreamed of messages from point to point. The two ladies were rather silent, and both men gathered the same impression that the younger was not particularly happy.

"I wish you wouldn't go home to night, Gladys," said the elder woman, "I particularly want you to stop till Monday."

"I feel I must go to-day, dear Aunt Georgie; don't say any more about it. Why, I've been here quite three weeks."

"And when will you come back?"

"I don't know, perhaps never."

"Nonsense, child; don't speak so recklessly. You've enjoyed it, haven't you?"

"Oh, yes," she answered listlessly. "As much as I enjoy anything nowadays. I tell you what, Aunt Georgie, girls are fools ever to part with their liberty. They think it will be the same afterwards, but it never is."

Both the men simultaneously observed, for the first time, that she wore a wedding ring.

The elder lady made no reply, and the two men went on with their talk. One of them presently, when the waitress set the tray before them, made a very definite observation:

"Gillespie's wife must be an awful fool, of course, and somebody ought to tell her."

"Who could? It would be beastly. Besides, he hasn't done anything wrong, he never would, of course; he's too good a chap to go a hair's breadth off the straight. And even if he did, the fault would be entirely hers. If I had a wife, which the fates forbid, I should take jolly good care that she shared the fortunes of war with me. Of course, nobody pretends the Isthmus is a particularly salubrious place of abode. I dreamed of it last night—that ghastly stretch of arid sand, and the pitiless sky, and the scanty natives—it was a nightmare. All the same, Gillespie has got hold of a good thing, and he's a wise man to stick to it. But if Mrs. G. doesn't take a sudden thought she'll find it a pretty difficult to-to—well, make up her innings, as it were. You see, the other girl has everything on her side, and she happens to be his own

nationality, too, which, believe me, with the Scotch counts a lot. They stick like limpets to one another."

There was a sudden movement at the end of the table, and a cup of tea was spilled, which caused the elder lady to make a profuse apology as the brown steam rolled towards the end of the table where the two men sat. Then she laid her hand rather heavily on the younger woman's shoulder.

"Come, Gladys."

Her voice was at once commanding and entreating, but the girl shook her head quite decidedly.

"No Aunt Georgie, sit down at once, if you please, I want some more tea."

There was something so compelling in the girl's voice, a note so strained and sharp, that, though she blamed her own weakness, the aunt obeyed. The incident over, the men continued their talk concerning the affairs of their acquaintances at the Isthmus.

"Awfully good chap is Muirhead, and Mrs. Muirhead is very nice too, and, of course, they see quite well what's going on. Belle Muirhead is such a jolly, straight, commonsense sort of girl, who makes the best of everything, don't you know, making a joke even of the mosquitoes and the sand storms, a fellow can't help liking her, and there's no doubt she likes Gillespie, and that they're a lot together, more than is good for either of them, considering he has a wife at home."

"I quite agree. I just hinted as much to David the last night we were there. He took it very well, but he didn't give a chap any satisfaction."

"Didn't he? Well, I can't blame him, hanged if I can. What is a chap to do if his wife deserts him, and her refusal to live where his work is was desertion, whatever she or her people may call it. Hang it all, he must get a little consolation somewhere."

"It's a pity someone wouldn't drop a hint, though. Don't happen to know anybody who know's David's people-in-law, do you?"

"No; they're brewers south of London, somewhere—might as well look for a needle in a haystack. Besides, it's no business of ours, the third party never gets any thanks. But when I saw how the wind was blowing out there, I couldn't help recalling an old Bible sentence my dad used to read out to us from the Proverbs on a Sunday afternoon; 'The wise woman buildeth her house.' That's what Mrs. G. has neglected to do."

He shoved back his chair as he spoke, and rose, beckoning to the waitress to bring the bill. His eyes fell on the pretty face opposite, and it did strike him that she had grown rather pale. Her eyes were downcast on the marble table, however, and she did not lift them. He looked back as he waited a moment at the pay-deck opposite, and met her eyes. He imagined he read defiance in them.

"Jack, I believe that little party knows Gillespie. Oh, I say, it couldn't possibly be Mrs. G., could it? Did you ever see a photograph of her in David's room?"

"Never; you're dreaming, Tom; the nightmare of the Isthmus hasn't left you yet. It's unwise, though, to mention names in a public place. I must remember that in future. But, anyhow, it was only the truth, and if it did happen to be Mrs. G., why, she might live to thank us for it yet."

They passed out together from the place, then the older woman leaned across the table, and her hand closed over the slim, white fingers where the wedding ring hung rather loosely.

"Come, dear, we ought to have gone before. It was very unwise to listen. But I think you should not lay too much stress on what these young men said. Men talk lightly, and they are really fonder of gossip than any of us."

"They spoke the truth, Auntie, the absolute truth. I've known it for some time."

She was very quiet; unnaturally so, it seemed to her aunt, who felt herself at a loss.

She herself was not greatly surprised; she had, indeed, as delicately as she could, suggested what disaster might arise from her niece's continued reluctance to join her husband at his post.

"In the last six letters I've had from David, he has never so much as mentioned that I might come out. At first he used to keep on in every letter. Now I understand he doesn't want me; he has consoled himself."

"No, no, darling; David is a good man; he will be true to you. Don't let this idea strike root."

"It has been there some time, Auntie. Well, are you ready? No, I am not going to the station, nor back to London at all. I shall stop here and go to New York next week by the very first boat I can get. Perhaps," she added a little hurriedly, as she drew on her long, soft gloves, "it'll be too late."

"No, no, God forbid! It will not be too late, darling. Shall we go out and cable to David?"

"No, Aunt Georgie; if you do that I shall never forgive you. It would spoil everything. I must take my chance; and if—and if it should be too late, then I have nobody on earth but myself to blame."

Gladys thought of the description she had heard in a Liverpool restaurant of her husband's surroundings when she reached them about three weeks later. It was a very hot day, and the pitiless sky of a penetrating steely blue color seemed to promise no hope of welcome for her.

She arrived at the temporary port by the river steamer; and there was a little crowd upon the quay. She saw a white frock and a green parasol, the only Englishwoman's dress beside a handful of natives and one or two Englishmen. She went below when the boat drew to the landing-stage, gathered her few things together, took her dressing-bag in her hand, and ascended to the deck with a very strange expression on her face.

Her last act as she left the cabin was to look in the glass, and the vision there seemed to mock at her. Gone the pink-and-white bloom, the soft baby outline that had first won Gillespie's heart; it was the face of a hard woman, a woman who had suffered and who was now in desperate straits. The moment she reached the deck she saw him. He was standing with his back to her, speaking to one of the men who had travelled on the boat with her, and whom evidently he had come to meet. The girl in white was by his side. It was at her Gladys looked, her eager, almost despairing eyes devouring her features. There was no particular beauty, but merely a frank, open, pleasant face, a slim, well-modelled figure, some grace of carriage; but Gladys was in the mood to exaggerate everything, and to belittle herself. She stepped forward; the man to whom Gillespie was speaking said something which made his companion visibly start. He turned his head quickly and saw his wife. Then his face went quite white, as hers did, and she remembered nothing more. When she came to herself she was in—