

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVELIN QUEST OF THE VULTURE.
Complete Story of Child-life.

The children in a narrow court opening into a London street were playing noisily: their voices rose shrill and clear above the din of wheels, the call of omnibus conductors, and the cries of floursellers:

"Sally, Sally Waters, leave your Aching paus.

Rise up Sally, for a nice young man." Then the words changed to another ditty:

"Here we are on Tom Tiddle's ground; Picking up gold and silver."

Yet certainly they had little to do with gold and silver, seeing that their clothes were ragged, and could never, at their best of times, have cost much. But they were young; the sky above was blue, and the sun shone, and life was pleasanter than it had been in the winter. It is better to be hungry and warm than hungry and shivering with cold.

So each little grimy hand was outstretched to clasp another in a joyous circle, and, for the time, at least, childhood reigned triumphant. Harsh words and harsher blows were forgotten, and little feet, some bare, others poorly shod, danced around an imaginary mulberry bush to the odd crooning chant neither musical nor harmonious, but not without a charm of its own. There were children enough and to spare in Garden Court, and they were all at play—all save one.

"Come on, Polly; have a game with us!" they cried.

But she shook her head, which was covered with brown curls, and turned her face away. It was a pale little face, with large, thoughtful, hazel eyes. The child had, without doubt, something on her mind.

The game went on merrily, interrupted by occasional rough speech or quarrelsome words that caused the little watcher to shrink as from a blow. It was only at such times that she seemed conscious of her surroundings, for the most part she remained unmoved, wrapped in her own thoughts.

"Bed-time, Polly!" A head appeared at the window above, and its owner called to her softly.

"Coming, Mother!" The child's voice scarcely rose above a whisper; but she needed no second bidding. She was glad of the summons, glad to go indoors out of the noise; and, with the sudden revulsion of feeling so common to the young, a hope sprang up within her.

Perhaps there would be good news for her! Perhaps father was better! Only yesterday mother had said that when things were at their worst there came a turning-point. Had it come now—all at once, while she stood on the threshold and waited for she knew not what?

The invalid had been worse that afternoon—so bad, that Polly had crept away terrified, and the idea that he would never recover had come into her mind. It was so terrible a thought that it turned her sick—until she reasoned with herself, and became convinced that it was but the outcome of her own foolishness.

She had known so many persons who were ill, and they had all got better except —. And her memory went back to the funerals she had seen in the court, some of them so grand and imposing that the children had collected in a crowd and admired the nodding plumes. Others were humble enough, but—oh, so sad and dreary in Polly's eyes!

There was Mrs. Jones, the washerwoman; but, then, she was ever so old—and so was Matthew Sparks! He had gone

on crutches for many a year past. Of course, old persons had to die; but father was only thirty years old!

Yet, how about William Smith, father of Mary Jane—the noisiest child in the court? He was only twenty-eight years old, and yet he had been carried out of his house one day in December, when the marks of the bearers' feet lay black and distinct upon the soft carpet of newly-fallen snow!

Polly's heart ached, and her lips trembled. Two years younger than father, yet he had gone! After all, then, some people die when they are young. Must he die, too?

She went slowly upstairs, her feet dragging heavily, and entered the sick-room on tiptoe.

There he lay, perfectly still, his face white and drawn, as it had been so very long, his eyes big and shining. But he was not faint now, for he had strength to speak to her, although his voice was low and feeble. Noiselessly the child drew her chair to the bare table, and, because hunger impelled her, took a crust of bread from her mother's hand and ate it slowly.

The sick man watched her, sighing at times, and shifting uneasily from side to side. At last she felt his hand upon her head.

"Time was," he said, "when we had enough to eat and drink and need not feed you on crusts, my little girl! Time was when your mother and I sat down in a cosy room to a nice hot supper, and I counted myself a gentleman—only a clerk, but a gentleman, for all that. The happy, peaceful times, the friendly faces, the sympathetic words, are gone with the money that brought them—eh, lass?"

He turned to his wife with an access of bitter regret that rendered his voice strong for the moment.

She shook her head, but made no answer, except in the tender touch of her hand and a comprehensive glance round the bare room, which took in every poor detail.

"Gone," he repeated—"gone! And it is time that I went, too, my dear! Things will be better for you when I lie underground!"

"No, no!" cried his wife, wringing her hands as though in physical pain. "Not better, but a thousand times worse!"

"Better, I tell you; for you will have nothing to do but to go to the Vulture and claim your money! You and Polly will not be beggars any longer. You will be able to put on a bit of decent black and the neighbours will see how you look when you are dressed somewhat as you used to be when we were first married! How pretty you were, Mary; how fresh and happy! I can see you now standing at the parlour window, watching for me when I came home from the City at night—a lady, every inch of you! In your next black gown you'll be a lady again, by-and-by. Please God, dear lass, by-and-by!"

He repeated the words very softly, as though they were the refrain of some half-forgotten song; and she sobbed as she listened.

"It is not 'by-and-by' that I care for; we want the money now!" she answered. "Polly and I are strong. We can live on bread and water and be thankful; but you need nourishing food. Did not the doctor say that if you could have it you would get better?"

"Yes; and I believe I should!" he answered quietly. His eyes had a hungry look as they glanced round in search, as it seemed of unattainable luxuries.

Then his wife burst into tears; and Polly, who longed to cry as well, but refrained, lest she should add to her mother's distress, crept into her little bed, which

was placed in a corner of the same room, and only separated from it by a curtain, and lay quite still, crying. No wonder she was puzzled. She was only eight years old.

"Who is the Vulture?" she asked herself. "And why won't he give father the money now—while he is alive? Perhaps he would if he knew about his illness and how very, very poor we are."

She slipped out of bed, and stood at the sick man's side.

"Father," she questioned softly, "where does the Vulture live?"

He turned and looked at the little figure, smiling as he answered:

"The Vulture lives in the City—in Threadneedle Street. A long way from here."

"Too far to walk?" she asked again.

"Oh dear no! Not too far for grown-up folks!"

"Must, child; go to bed! Sick persons should not be disturbed!" interrupted her mother.

Polly ran back, but she could not go to sleep. A grand thought had come to her. To-morrow she would go herself, see the Vulture, and tell him all about father, and how very ill he was. She would not let her mother know she was going, because it would disappoint her if she came home without money—not an unlikely thing, for the Vulture might be out, and, in that case, she must try again.

"Please, God," she said, clasping her slender hands together, "I am going to see the Vulture to-morrow. Please, God, help me to find the way, and make him listen to me."

Her voice sank into a drowsy whisper; her tired eyelids drooped and closed. Then, because it was very late—long past her usual hour—Polly fell asleep.

All the next morning she repeated to herself, over and over again, "The Vulture, Threadneedle Street, City," she was so much afraid she might forget the words.

It was a suffocating day. The sick man lay panting on his pillows. No breeze was stirring. Away in the country the wind swept, soft and fresh, over hills and valleys and golden cornfields; but here, in the close court, the atmosphere was dull and heavy, smoke-laden and weighted with the breath of men, women, and children huddled together and jostling one another as they passed.

"I shall not get over this, wife," said Polly's father. "The heat is stifling."

His child's face was flushed with heat as she bent over him.

"If only you could have beef-tea and grapes and nice things!" she whispered.

"Don't!" he said peevishly. "It makes me feel worse than ever to hear them spoken of."

Polly was silent, but her face wore an odd sort of smile. The father wondered what happy, childlike fancy had come to her, at this time of all others, and would have been greatly surprised if he had known that her thoughts were wandering in the same direction as his own. For the mind of the sick man was fixed on the great insurance office in the City, where years ago he had gone, full of strength and vigour, to "make things square," as he put it, for wife and child if they outlived him. That had been his one wise step. Those who followed were foolish enough; and, lying there, he knew it, and reproached himself bitterly.

And amidst all his self-criticism there remained one subject for congratulation. He had managed, no one knew with what great difficulty, to keep up his payments; and those he loved would receive five hundred pounds at his death.