

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

THE COUNTRY POSTMAN.

By David Lyall.

His name was Andrew Howden, familiarly "Andra" in Leerielaw, where he had carried the bag for over thirty years.

"What Andra doesna ken about folk," Lisbeth Gow, of the Craw's Inn, would say, "that same's no worth kenin'."

He was a small, weary-faced person, with a slight hitch of the left shoulder and an impediment in his speech, which, when he was excited, was apt to render him almost unintelligible.

But usually he was of a placid temperament; and the neighbors, to do them justice, knowing his weakness, refrained from working upon it.

He had so many good qualities, and was so faithful a servant of the public, that he was highly respected. He stood much upon his official dignity, with which he permitted no liberties to be taken.

The bag and its contents were sacred to him, and he would not deliver letters out of their due course, or to any "orra" person, no matter who the applicant might be.

"Na, na, Laird," he observed pawkily one day, meeting that important personage driving towards the station; "I'm due to leave Drumcleugh letters at Drumcleugh this side o' eleven o'clock an' they sall be there then. My orders frae the Department are explicit. I canna misregard them, even for you."

The Laird, being a good-natured man and quick to grasp a point of humor, merely guffawed and drove on.

But others, less tolerant and more fiery, would fall upon Andrew with unparliamentary language, and threaten him with all sorts of dire usage.

Andrew, however, secure in the knowledge that he was backed by the "Department," pursued the even tenor of his way, as if his persecutors were so many insects to be swept from his path. He was inordinately curious himself, and made no secret of the fact that he perused all the postcards before he passed them on to their rightful owners. This he doubtless regarded as one of the perquisites or privileges of his position. He would forestall family happenings in this wise.

"You'll ha'e Jennet on Saterdag by the fower o'clock train, Mrs. Anton. I daursay she comes toddling hame frae the toon gey an' often." Or, "Your guld sister's laid by wi' the jaundice, Alec. It's your brither Tam that has written himself." He has a better hand o' write than you, Alec, but a guld smith should never be a penman."

Leerielaw took all this in good part, because they knew right well that Andrew would never betray any of their innocent secrets or family tit-bits to the general public. He was not given to clashes, but was as secret as the grave. Postcards Andrew despised and abhorred. He thought them hardly decent, and openly declared that they cheated the "Department" out of its just dues. They had added considerably to his labors, of course, which partly explained his abhorrence—sometimes he would have to walk an extra mile to deliver one that had but a few words upon it, or even no message at all, but merely an address on the back of a "silly picter," which nobody could be the better of seeing. For letters Andrew had the deepest respect. He handled them reverently, and was as careful of the poorest and most obscure as of the crested envelopes addressed to the Laird. That Andrew could ever tamper with a letter was unthinkable; nevertheless, great men have their unguarded moments, and there was one episode in Andrew's otherwise irreproachable career as a servant of the public which would not have borne strict investigation. Also, once committed, it sorely troubled his con-

science until he laid it on the shoulders of someone else.

It happened in the autumn of the year in which Ann Carfrae died, after a long illness, brought on through fretting about an absent and ne'er-do-weel son. Leerielaw missed Ann consummately when she died; she was what they called "everybody's body," that is to say, she was at the service of all who needed her sympathy, her help, or her care. Her own sorrows, which had been many and bitter, had not soured her. Now, though Andrew Howden was elderly and ill-favored, and had never had his name coupled with any woman body's in his life, he was not incapable of romance. The whole romance of his life had circled round Ann Carfrae. She, poor soul, never guessed it either, as maid, wife, or widow, but was kind and womanly gentle to the postman, as she was to gentle and simple alike.

Many a crack they had over the garden gate, where she would wait for him morning after morning, expecting the letter that never came.

"Beg the luck next time, Andra," she would say, after he had laboriously sorted out the contents of his bag for her inspection, precisely as if he had not been aware that it contained no letter for her.

After she passed away to the land where there are no more tears, Andrew seemed unlike himself. He became very grumpy in his manners, and was "off his meat," so that he became thinner and more weary-looking than ever. Many noticed the change, and even spoke of it to him; but they got very little more than a grunt out of Andrew.

One evening the minister was surprised by a visit from him, and when he entered the study, thought how ill he looked.

"Come in, Andrew. I am very glad to see you," he said kindly. "I hope there isn't anything wrong. Mrs. Fleming was only saying to me yesterday that you did not look like yourself."

"I'm weel enough in my body," replied Andrew darkly. "It's my mind that's no weel."

"Not a very uncommon occurrence, my man," observed the minister cheerfully. "The best of us have to suffer our ill days."

"Aye, ill days," repeated Andrew with dour emphasis. "Days when the deevil winna let us alone, but harasses us like a roarin' lion, seekin' whom he may devour."

Struck by the ferocity of the postman's words, the minister regarded him with a mild astonishment. Had he not been perfectly certain that Andrew was a teetotaler, he might have had his doubts.

"But I'm to get the better o' him this verra night," pursued Andrew grimly. "Him an' me's to come to grips, an' I'll begin by makin' a clean breast o'd, and syne daur him to dae his worst."

"Won't you sit down?" inquired the minister with a perplexed note in his pleasant voice. "You look desperately uncomfortable."

"As a man wi' a load o' guilt on his soul should look, Maister Fleemin'! I pit it to ye, has a black sinner any right to be comfortable?"

"What is the meaning of all this, Andrew? Have you been getting into any kind of trouble? I should never believe it unless I heard it from your own lips."

"Weel, I'm tellin' ye, if you'll only gie me a chance, I'm a rogue an' a valgarband, an' I've laid myself open to the handcuffs an' the jail. I'm a forger, Maister Fleemin'."

"A forger, Andrew! Why, bless my soul!"

"Ay, a forger," repeated Andrew firmly. "Let me tell ye, an' dinna you speak a word or I'm through. D'ye mind hoo Ann Carfrae was set on a letter frae Tam in Austreely a long while afore she deed?"

"Yes, of course. The joy it gave her when it came at last was one of the most touching things I have met with

in my experience. They buried it with her, poor soul—laid against her heart. Lisbeth Gow told me that. It was a very touching thing; and when the lad hears of it, it should surely make a better man of him."

Andrew groaned as if in anguish. "It was me that wrote that letter, Maister Fleemin'. Tam never put pen to paper on it. I wrote every word o' it myself, an' I got a stamp off an auld Austreelian letter at Meggot's post office. I clipped it oot, and pasted it on the letter for Ann. She never kent, an' I only did it," he added doggedly, "after the doctor told me she couldna live mair nor two or three days."

The minister was silent a moment, regarding in wonder Andrew's unlovely visage, all working with the torrent of his emotions.

"What was the reason, Andrew?" he inquired, and his pleasant voice had a very gentle note.

"I was driven to it, I tell ye I was!" Andrew cried fiercely. "If ye had been me, and had had to pass that yett every mornin' for seevin year, an' see her face an' the hunger in her een, ye might have done it yourself. I'm gied I did it! I wad dae it again if I had the chance! They tell me she slept a'night for the first time for weeks, an' that she deed happy. It was worth it. But noo I canna rest. I'm wullin' to gie myself up. Will you write to the Department, an' I'll set my name till the story. Of course, they'll pee me af; an' if it be the jail forby, weel, I'm ready."

The minister smiled a trifle unsteadily.

"Andrew, it was a Christian act! It made a poor dying woman happy. We can safely leave judgment with Him who trieth the reins and searcheth the hearts of the children of men. Make your peace with Him. This thing need never be known. We'll bury it deep to-day for ever."

It was a long time before Andrew's heart could be comforted or his conscience appeased. But at last he departed, a better and a happier man. It was his first and last obsession from the pathway of righteousness, and his secret was safe with the two kind hearts that held it. For the minister told the story to his wife, and as she listened her gentle eyes filled with tears.

THE TIRED BEE.

There was once a very busy bee.

He worked hard all day, flying from flower to flower, sipping the sweet nectar, and then flying back to his hive and depositing it in the honey-comb.

One evening he was very, very tired. He looked around and found he had flown a long way from home. It would be after dark before he could get back, for he was so tired he could not fly fast. He knew that by the time he reached home the doors would be locked and the other bees gone to bed. He decided to fly to a nearby hive and ask for shelter for the night.

The bees of this hive said, "No, we have no room for tramp bees."

The poor tired bee felt very sad. He flew to a tulip and told his sad story.

The tulip felt sorry for him and said, "You may stay here in my house all night and rest." She then closed her doors.

The tired bee found a nice, soft bed inside and protection from the wet dew that night.

In the morning, as soon as the sun awoke, the tulip opened her door. The tired bee was rested now. He thanked her kindly and flew quickly to his own hive.

When the tulips are in bloom, watch some night when the sun is setting and see how they close their doors.