

The Inglenook.

A VILLAGE BLACKSMITH.

BY DAVID LVALL.

I did not come across Andrew Whitehead so often or so easily as I expected, and a few days after my arrival in Amphray I made my way, early in the afternoon, into the village to hunt him up. The Doctor had gone to Edinburgh on some professional business, leaving me free to amuse or interest myself. I knew that Andrew's father was a blacksmith; more about his family he had not told me. Country lads attending town colleges are not usually garrulous regarding their folks or affairs. When they are you may be certain they have in reality little to boast about. I would always trust the reticent man further and quicker than the man of abundant speech. The Lowland Scot is cautious in this as in most other things. The University of a great city is a very levelling place. In my day class distinctions were not recognized—brain was the thing. And the cotter's son from Wester Ross, who bore all before him, was honored far and above the Earl's son who did no credit to his Alma Mater. Andrew Whitehead had done only moderately well that year and had lost the medal and the scholarship which ought to have been his. For he could as easily master an examination paper as a sixpenny novelette, and with as much pleasure. He was not lazy, but he trusted too much to his brilliant parts, and I had seen him depart from Edinburgh a fortnight before with a glum look on his face, and I guessed he feared the righteous ire of his father the blacksmith at Amphray. It was a long straggling village, not compact in any part. I found the smithy at the upper end, standing back well from the road, with a big tree and a draw well before the door. I wondered casually whether Longfellow had seen Amphray in his dreams when he wrote his eulogy of the Village blacksmith. James Whitehead, Andrew's father, might well have sat for the portrait. He was shoeing a big, solemn looking farm horse at the moment of my arrival, and I sat down on the stone parapet of the drawwell to watch him. So long as he was busy and the clang of the hammer mingled with the blast of the big bellows I thought it better not to disturb him. I looked at him, but I was not at any time conscious that he returned the look. He seemed intent body and soul, on the task in hand. And he did it well, handling his tools with the master hand, delivering the blows of the hammer true every time, and without so much as opening his mouth. The halfin' lad who had brought the beast stood in the doorway, with his hands in the pockets of his moleskin trousers, his face the picture of vacuous ignorance. The blacksmith I imagine, disdained him mightily. He never so much as cast a glance in his direction, nor did he speak when the beast was turned out with four new shoes ready for the road. He stood a moment with his brawny arms akimbo in the wide door of the smithy facing me, so that I got a good look at him. He was a big man, and had no look of Andrew about him. His face was grim, and even sad; there was something about him which made me wonder. He looked like one who had been long at war with forces he could not control. I got up, and ap-

proached the door, gave him good-day. He replied civilly, but without cordiality, at the same time looking me up and down with his keen far-set eyes, as if seeking not only to learn my business, but to gauge my spirit.

"My name is Lyall," I said quite humbly. "I am a friend of your son Andrew. Is he at home?"

"No, my man, he's no. So ye're a friend o' his, eh?"

"We have been very friendly in the last session," I assured him, "and I promised when I came to Amphray to look him up."

"So ye're bidin' in Amphray; wha wi'?"

"Doctor Howden."

"Oh, ish sib to ye?"

"He's a second cousin of my father," I answered. "Is Andrew in?"

"No, Andrew's no in; he's no at hame ava. I thought it best for him an' me, but especially for me, that he should gang awa for a time."

"But he was looking forward to his holiday, and he needed it," I said boldly, recalling Andrew's pale, worried face the day we had parted at Waverly Station. "And he was looking forward to spending the summer in Amphray."

"Imphm, well he's been disappointed, that's a."

The grimness with which he spoke cannot be produced in words. It had to be seen in order to be felt. In spite of these discouraging signs I was determined to be at the bottom of Andrew's mysterious disappearance, which I rightly attributed to the fact that he had disappointed his father's hopes.

"Is he far away?" I ventured to ask, "I'm stopping a week at the doctor's, and if it is in driving distance, I'd like to look him up."

"So ye would, would ye? To be at your old pranks, eh—the pranks that hae disgraced him in his class, an' put an end to his college days?"

"Oh, I say, Mr. Whitehead, you don't mean to say you won't let Andrew back. Why, it would be no end of a shame."

"It'll be the end o' shame, ye mean, lad, for him an' me. He's had his chance, an' it's by; noo he'll taste honest hard work, an' plenty o' it."

"But where is he? I'd like to write to him," I said desperately, feeling I could not let go of Andrew so lightly.

The smith took another large, long look at me, and his mouth relaxed a little.

"He's in Liddlesdale, wi' his uncle, Alex Whitehead. He's weel up in the breakin' o' young colts. He'll teach him that a man's life is no intended by his Maker to be a play."

"It can't be done," I said involuntarily.

"What canna?"

"You'll never break in Andrew to the plow, smith; he's a scholar and a poet."

"A what?" roared the smith, in a voice of thunder. "I'll hae no son o' mine sic a useless object on God's airth. Whaur in the Bible div ye read about poetry an' sic abominations? tell me that."

"The Psalms of David," I put in boldly, "and the prophecies of Isaiah are nothing but poetry from beginning to end."

The smith glared at me but less fiercely, and when he spoke his voice had fallen

again to its ordinary quiet, but rather harsh cadence.

"I see ye'll stand up for the lad tooth and nail, an' perhaps it's but natural in them that are young." Suddenly his voice changed and took a wistful note. "Ye seem a decent, ceevil-spoken lad. Maybe ye'll tell me the truth about Andra. Was he ill-daein' in the toon?"

I know my eyes flashed the indignation I felt.

"No, indeed; whoever told you that lied, Mr. Whitehead."

"Naeboddy tell me, but what for has he dune so little, an' lost a' the prizes? I'm a puir man, and I hae made sacrifices to gie him his college lare. He has disappointed me, an' I was angert, justly as I thoct."

Then I stood still sorely troubled in my mind how to explain Andrew to his father. I could not conscientiously say he had worked honestly and steadily through the session; he had simply dawdled, meaning and doing no evil, but with the same disastrous results. There are men who cannot brook failure, either in themselves or any belonging to them. James Whitehead was one. He was only a blacksmith, but he was a good blacksmith, the best in his own countryside. And that fact represented and embodied his idea and outlook upon life. He had but one son, and the fear that he would become a failure was sore upon him, and he found it altogether intolerable.

"He's very young," I said, but stammeringly, "and everybody likes him. The man who has a lot of friends at any college has to fight for a place. They're always around him, stealing away his time."

"That's nae excuse; he kent he was sent there to work, and because he has the brains it was the mair sinfu'."

"You'll change your mind and send him back to Edinburgh in October, or there will be a general mourning," I said boldly.

"Better a general mourning than a singe funeral," he said shortly, "it's easier tholed. I say, lad, tell me honestly if it be that you hae lived thick wi' my son? Hae ye ever noticed anything queer here?"

He gave his lined forehead a significant tap, and I started back.

"Good gracious no!" I cried hastily. "He's as sound as you or me. Whatever makes you ask such a thing?"

At that moment I had the answer to my question put unexpectedly before me. The sweet, plaintive notes of a woman's voice singing an old ballad drew nearer, and presently a girl appeared through the garden gate. She wore a pink cotton frock and sunbonnet and she was knitting a stocking. She looked about twenty, and had the sweetest face I thought I had ever seen. But there was something lacking. I could see that as she looked at me with wondering eyes.

"Run to your mother, Annie," said the smith, and a surpassing tenderness, which amazed me mightily, chased all the stern lines from his face.

"Is Andrew comin' back?" she asked plaintively. "He's a long time awa'."

"He'll be back sune; run in an' see if the tea's ready, lassie," her father said, and she slipped away obediently crooning as she went.

"That's my dochter, I've three like her," he said, as he wiped his brow with the back of his hand. "For some reason or another the Almichty has laid His hand heavily on me an' mine. I built my hopes on Andra maybe over high, but I dinna ken what I hae dune to be so sair hauden doon. Nae