

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

AN ANSWERED PRAYER.

By Evelyn Orchard.

She alighted from a hired carriage at the end of a squalid street, and directing the man to await her return, took her skirts in her hand and began to pick her way along the uneven cobble stones. She was an object of much interest to sundry ill-kempt, slatternly women lounging about dirty doorsteps, while the children, more shameless, danced before her in the gutters, demanding reward in the shape of copper coin.

It was Christmas week, but there were no signs of Christmas in the regions down the river, Greenwich way, in that particular and salubrious region known as Shadwell Green. If it had ever been a green, no one knew or remembered it; the only green visible now was the refuse of cabbages on the dust heaps, or the vegetables on the costers' barrows. The smell of the street rose up in the woman's nostrils, as a perfume of a finer kind might have arisen in one exiled from some country home. Its squalor was a mighty offence in her eyes; she told herself as she picked her way with disgust upon her face that it could never have been as bad in her time, when she had been a gutter child, as eager, pert, and hungry-eyed as these. She was dressed with extreme simplicity, but not cheaply, and carried herself with certain air of distinction. Evidently she belonged to another world than that confined within the area of Shadwell Green.

It was a long street, from which many narrow ones converged. Turning down one of these, rather by instinct than actual memory, she came to a little shop with vegetables and firewood spread out on the boards at the open window, and an adjoining coal-shed, where the needful fuel was served to the poor for copper payment. A dear way to buy for certain, yet one which did not seem to enrich the vendor. At least the shop was poor and mean, and the youth who sat upon the heavy scales smoking a farthing cigarette and devouring the contents of a sporting paper, looked ill-nourished and weedy, the red kerchief knotted about his neck seeming to add the last touch of sordidness to an unlovely object. The lady who stopped in front of him regarded him with disgust, in which apprehension mingled. If by any chance he should bear the name she had once borne, she must get her back the way she had come. She was more completely cut off from Shadwell Green than she knew.

"Well, missis?" he said, glancing up, but not offering to rise or otherwise to pay the smallest respect.

"Don't you know to get up when a lady speaks to you?" she said severely.

"We don't git lydes down 'ere. Whatcher want?"

He got up, but without alacrity, and eyed her sullenly.

"Can you tell me whether there are any people of the name of Larcomb in these parts? They were country people once, came from Devon."

"Yus, missis, there's 'er hupstairs, wot used to be the boss of this show. I'm the boss now, fer 'er see! an' a pretty good boss I mikes too, she'll tell yer. Bless yer, they earn't kid me."

"What's she doing upstairs? Is she ill?"

"Bin ill two year. She fell downstairs. Bin in 'ospital. Yus, earn't do nuthin' fer 'er. She lies there. I runs the show. We gits along."

"Who are you?"

"Ted Bingham. Used to run 'er errands, and weigh hup the coal. I ain't got any folks. Miss Larcomb,

she's wot they call adopted me."

"I'll go up and see her," said the woman, stepping inside the shop with the air of one who needed no direction, but was on perfectly familiar ground.

"Through the little door; mind the step behind! The stairs ain't hup ter much; bin 'oles in 'em sinst hever I remembers. 'E's a skinflint, our landlord; won't do nuffin' for nobody."

She lost the last words, closing the glass door at the back of the shop behind her. It was so close there, she had difficulty in breathing, and the air seemed to grow more stifling with every step she took. She came quickly to the narrow landing, and opened the first door she could discern in the dim light. A little glow came out from the fire to meet her, and revealed to her the whole aspect of the interior. It was a little room, about twelve feet square, a bare floor with a strip of rag carpet before the fire place, a deal table with some plants on it in the narrow window, an old leather-covered arm chair, and a small round table with a tea tray, and the bed, where sat a small figure, propped up by two pillows, knitting busily. It was the figure of a woman of middle age, with a sweet, white, almost emaciated face, and quite white hair lying softly in little curls round it—a face so refined and spirituelle that one wondered to find it there in such bleak surroundings. But the woman who came in by the door with a little cry upon her lips was not surprised. She was only broken down by a great pity, and remorse and thankfulness.

"Lucy! Lucy!" she cried, as she staggered forward and fell upon her knees. "I've come back, darling, as you said I would. Oh, I thank God! He has left you, and let me find you again."

The knitting fell from the invalid's pale hands, her face glowed with a heavenly light, and her meek eyes shone.

"I always knew you'd come, Beth," Then a little wandering smile flitted across her lips.

"Did you come, as you said you would, in a carriage and pair?"

"Don't Lucy, don't ever say that to me again! Oh, I've been a wicked woman to stop away so long, but I couldn't come back, I couldn't, thinking of them all. If I'd been sure of finding only you, I'd been here long ago."

"They're all gone, Beth—dad, mother, Uncle Tim, Tony Badger, and Jess—dead, every one of them. We'd got the fever one year down 'ere in Shadwell, and it swep' the street from end to end. It took off dad and Uncle Tim in one day. Then mother pined away. Jess married Tony, and they sailed to New Zealand, and the ship was lost. He married Jess, but he never forgot you, Beth, and now there's only me. Tell me about yourself."

"There's nothing to tell. I tried everything, but there was no money in anything, at least not so much money as I wanted. But I kept straight, Lucy, so you needn't look at me with those eyes. Then I went to another country, to South Africa. I was down on my luck pretty bad then. I went out as a stewardess, intending to stop when I got there. I took a situation as a housekeeper out near the mines, and after a bit I married a German."

"Did you, Beth, and did he make you happy?"

"He was a kind man to me, and I had no fault to him, but I only married him to make a way for myself and get rid of the others. I had a little baby, but she died. I called her Lucy, after you."

"Did you, dear?"

The sick woman's eyes grew very soft and sunshiny, and she patted

the soft, plump, white hand lying so near her own.

"I didn't care much for anything after we lost her, and my husband promised to take me back to England to try and make me forget. That's how men think about these things, Lucy, but he was fond of the child too. But just when we were getting ready he took a stroke and died. He was much older than me, you see, and grown very stout. After he died, I found what a rich man he had been, though he never told me. We lived very plainly, and I never had a penny I could send home. It's the way the Germans are out there, at least a lot of them. They hoard up their money against the day they can get back to their own country. And now I'm such a rich woman, Lucy, I shall never be able to spend all I've got, and I've come to take you away to help me."

"If only you had written once in all the years, Beth; we all thought you had died!"

"There wasn't anything more to write about, for, you see, I had no money to send, and thought I had done badly for myself. But it isn't too late yet. And we'll go down into Devon to the old place, and buy ourselves a pretty home there, and be as happy as the day's long."

A far-away look seemed to gather in the depths of Lucy's soft eyes.

"It's just a little bit too late, Beth dear. Yesterday the doctor came. He's one of the big doctors from the hospital, and he says I can't live more than a month or two. And I was glad when he told me, for it's very weary lying here, and Ted'll get the little business. He's been a good boy to me. Thank you very much, dear Beth, but I think I'd like to die just right here. I've known nothing else. It's been my home, and here I've learned to love Jesus. Maybe I'd have to seek Him again in a fresh place, and that would be hard on an old woman, grown so very tired."

The kneeling woman burst into a passion of tears, which seemed to shake her to the foundations.

"If you leave me like that, I'll go to the bad, Lucy. There isn't anything in the world to prevent me."

Lucy looked at her perplexedly. For the first time in the long years of her lying still some yearning for restored health came to her. It was an alluring vision that spread out before her, a new home, her sister's home, and, above all, the chance to win her for Christ. That was now the passion of Lucy's soul. Her lips moved.

"I'm asking Jesus to give me a little longer," she whispered with a sweet inflection in her voice, "Just long enough to tell you about Him, and I think He will."

The elder woman, with the wealth of radiant hair and the beautiful face, bowed her head. She had been beaten and buffeted on the sea of life. Here she seemed to have come to a holy place, where her soul might find rest. There fell upon them as they knelt in spirit together the deep, incomparable benediction of answered prayer.—British Weekly.

Once, at breakfast at a friend's, Phillips Brooks noticed the diminutive but amusingly-dignified daughter of the house having constant trouble with the large fork that she was vainly trying to handle properly with her tiny fingers. In a spirit of kindness, mingled with mischief, the Bishop said:

"Why don't you give up the fork, my dear, and use your fingers? You know, fingers were made before forks."

Quick as a flash came the crushing retort: "Mine weren't."