

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

A HOUSE OF DEFENCE.

(By David Lyall.)

The Bournemouth evening express ran punctually into its platform at Waterloo and disgorged a full complement of passengers, among them a small, quiet country girl, who had been in a third-class compartment in the Weybridge portion of the train. But she had actually only travelled from a hamlet on the other side of Poole. She carried a small wicker portmanteau and looked round a little vaguely, as if expecting someone to meet her. And presently the someone turned up—a pale, anaemic-looking girl, dressed in shabby black, with an enormous hat perched on hair much puffed out at the sides, which had the effect of making her look top heavy.

The eyes of the country girl brightened as she caught sight of her, and they kissed one another affectionately.

"There you are, Emmy! I thought I wasn't going to get away in time; but you'd ha' known what to do, wouldn't you now?"

"Oh, yes; I was to take a four-wheeler and drive to Tamworth-street. I was just thinking of getting a porter, when I saw you."

"Have you a big box?"

"No; everything I have is in this portmanteau, and in the paper parcel."

"I wish you'd had a box; but there, it doesn't matter. Can it run to a four-wheeler, Emmy? I mean, can you afford it? because if that's all you have we really ought to go on the 'bus, it would only cost four-pence."

"And how much for a cab?"

"Half-a-crown."

"I've got that; let's have the cab," said the country girl; "I kept it for that—Ted gave it me when he came to see me off."

"All right, I'll be glad enough; been on my feet behind that plessee counter since ten minutes to eight this morning; fit to drop now, I am. Oh, Emmy, I've been sorry lots of times I asked you to come to London. It's an awful life, really, and now the sales are on at our place, we're simply driven to death."

"I wanted to come, Joyce, and I'd got to come to be near you, so don't say any more about it."

Joyce Rainham, who had been eighteen months in London and knew her way about, signalled to the driver of a four-wheeler, and the two girls were quickly stowed within, after a hard and fast bargain had been made, and explicit direction had been given by the shrewd Joyce.

"Yes, I'd got to come, and you don't look well, Joyce; no, nor happy. I'll look after you a bit, see if I don't."

"You may want to, but you won't get much chance; we're simply slave-driven in the house. She gets worse and worse."

"Who does?"

"Oh, Miss Martin, the superintendent; and she doesn't like me because I've been too clever for her once or twice about the fines. She hasn't been able to get me into trouble yet. Say, are you hungry, Emmy? because supper will be over when we get there, and there won't be anything to eat."

"I'd like a cup of tea and a bit of something to it, I do believe."

"Well, you won't get it. Let's stop the cab; he's a decent Johnnie, he'll wait five minutes for us outside one of the Lockharts till we get a cup of tea and a sausage roll, and if Martin cuts up rough we can say the train was late."

"But it wasn't Joyce."

"What matter? You'll find, Emmy,

that you've got to draw the long bow pretty often at Pridham's, both shop and house, if you want to get along at all. It isn't a picnic, nor the least little bit like Padelford. How is the dear old sleepy hollow? Sometimes I lie awake at nights thinking how it looks in summer with all the gorse out on the downs."

"It's just the same. I do believe you're sorry, after all, that you left us, Joyce."

"I may be, but I'll never, never go back, that's certain. That's what you'll find after you've been in London for a bit, Emmy; you may hate it like poison and be as miserable as you please, but you'll never leave it. It's got you hard and fast, like that frightful sea-monster we used to read about in the school books, only I've forgotten its name."

"The octopus?"

"Yes, that's it. Here's a Lockhart. I'll get him to stop. Cabmen are all right, you know, if you take a little trouble with them. I" give him a penny to get himself a cigarette with."

They stopped at a corner of the busy Strand, and the man agreed pleasantly enough to give them five or ten minutes without charging them anything extra.

Ten was ringing from a dozen church clocks when they turned into the small, quiet street where Pridham's Home for their shop assistants was situated. It was large, tall, melancholy-looking house, by no means cheerfully lighted. Joyce paid the cabman with a business-like air, and before she rang the bell turned nervously to her friend.

"It's a rum show, you know, Emmy, and the sort of thing you've been used to at Padelford won't go down—prayers and all that, I mean. They'll simply shout at you, and make your life a burden. If you want to say prayers, you'd better say them tight under the bed-clothes."

"But why?"

"Why? because—well, wait and you'll see."

The door was opened by the elderly cook, who grumbled at having to come up the long stair from the basement.

"Has B. M. gone to bed, Sally?"

"No, Miss Joyce; I believe she's gone to spend an hour round the corner with a friend."

"For these and all other mercies! This is my cousin Emmy, from Padelford. Look at her nice rosy cheeks; she won't keep them long here, will she, Sally?"

The cook shook her head, and retired muttering to her own domain.

The two girls proceeded up two long flights of stairs to the dormitory, where five or six girls were already in various stages of undress, getting ready for bed. It was a long, low, narrow room, with small beds arranged against the walls, but there was no attempt at privacy by means of curtains or screens.

They all stopped short in their talk, and stared with honest curiosity at the newcomer.

"My cousin Emmy, girls; and you've got to be decent to her; she's a new chum," said Joyce, a little defiantly.

Emmy nodded pleasantly to them all, and Joyce, having pointed out her bed and her locker, and pegs for her clothes, she began quietly to remove her things. The lack of fresh air, the close, hot feeling of the place, made her feel a little faint.

"Can't we have a window open, Joyce?" she whispered, but Joyce shook her head.

"Against the rules; there have been so many sneezing colde in the shop

lately, dormitory windows have been hermetically closed, by order," she answered grimly.

"Never mind, we'll leave the door open after B. M.'s been round, and you'll get all the air you want, sweeping up from the basement, especially if the landing window's open."

Then all the tongues were loosed again, and for the next quarter of an hour Emmy listened to a perfect babel of talk. Some of it was directed towards her, and consisted chiefly of warnings against the house to which she had come.

"The drapery ain't no catch nowadays," said a tall, raw-boned girl with red hair and a high colour. "I've a mind to join the Suffragettes; they do say there's a good livin', if you know how to work it."

"Why don't you say something, Emmy, when you hear all that? You aren't bound to stop, you know; you can give notice end of tomorrow, after you've had one day's shot at the shop, and go back to Padelford. It won't be a day too soon."

"I'll try and make the best of it," replied Emmy, in a small, quiet, cheerful voice. "And there's always the house of defence."

"What does she mean, the Union or what?" inquired the red-haired girl, who rejoiced in the picturesque name of Camilla.

Joyce shook her head and began to let down her hair with a somewhat disconsolate air.

"Emmy's always been like that, a little queer; you mustn't mind her, girls. She's a ripping good little sort, only a bit queer. She's come here to look after me, you know, and I won't have her badgered."

"She's got her job cut out then, Joyce," snapped the red-haired girl. "I say, we'll all need to hurry up; I declare to you solemnly, I can't brush out my hair properly for thinking I hear the B. M."

By this time Emmy had undressed, and, putting a shawl about the nightgown the sweet airs of the Hampshire downs had whitened, opened the little book she had taken from her hand-bag. They stared at one another when they saw that it was a Bible, the only Bible in the dormitory, probably the only one in the house.

"I told you she was like that," murmured Joyce warningly, and then added a little fiercely, "You let her alone, every one of you. She belongs to me."

There was an odd, strained silence, and surreptitious glances were cast on the little figure, huddled on the narrow, hard pallet, with her head low over the book. She laid it down presently, and slid upon her knees by the bedside. A moment later, and the door was opened from without with no gentle hand. It was ten minutes after the time for lights out, and dire wrath had gathered in the hard eyes of the taskmistress. But when she took in the little scene, and saw the kneeling figure by the bed, something smote her, perhaps some sharp chord from out the forgotten past. Her eyes softened, the hard words of rebuke and threats of punishment died upon her lips, and she softly closed the door.

Emmy was safe in her house of defence.—British Weekly.

"Why should we desire to be masters of others when, confessedly, we are not masters of ourselves?"