

STORIES  
POETRY

## The Inglenook

SKETCHES  
TRAVEL

## A VINE OUT OF EGYPT.

(By David Lyall.)

The grey old couple looked at one another across the narrow table in sheer dismay. Grey and old seemed the natural words to apply to them, yet neither Barclay Fraser, nor Phemie his wife, were very old and certainly they ought not to have been grey. They had an uncareful for look, such as people acquire when they have lost pride in themselves. Barclay was a tall, narrow man, with a curious pointed face, not in any way enhanced by a straggling beard of a reddish-brown hue, which had no particular object in life. It was certainly neither ornamental nor useful.

He wore a shabby, and it must be added a dirty suit of shepherd's tartan plaid, a woollen shirt, with a turned-down collar, and a tie which had once been sky-blue, but now soiled and nondescript, meandered under the straggling beard. His eyes were light blue, and had glasses over them, and his thin hair was brushed straight back from his high forehead, and worn rather long. Looking at him it would have been decidedly difficult to have guessed his occupation, for his hands were slender, and rather white. He was merely the custodian of what the bairns call the "a'thing shop" in the village of Mains of Lethney, a remote parish in what the Southerner with a fine vagueness designates the wilds of Scotland.

The spouse of Barclay Fraser was a short, thick person, with no particular figure-line, which perhaps was one of the reasons why she was so conspicuously careless regarding the shape and fit of her gown. It began at the neck, was tied in somewhere about the middle, and ended at her feet; no other description fits the exigencies of Phemie Fraser's attire. But somehow, looking at her face, you forgot her weird accoutrement; it was such a blithe face, with a smile that for real sunshine would be hard to beat. Only a few times had that smile been known to fail, and this was one. After the one instant of blank dismay, occasioned by the laboured perusal of a letter that had come by the evening's post, it reasserted itself triumphantly. "It'll make an awfu' difference in the hoose, Barclay. Jist think of a lasie gaun oot and in. It'll mak' us young again."

"We canna afford to be young, Phemie. It's her bite and sup I'm thinkin' on, and her class. Ye ken quite weel we havena had a balance on the right side for a year or twa."

"It'll never be missed, and maybe she'll be clever and guid," she answered stoutly. "And, anyway, whatever she be, she's your ain brother's bairn, and we canna shut the door on her that's an orphan. Ye wouldna suggest that, surely, Barclay?" she added, in a voice which seemed to challenge him with all the mild fierceness of which her heart was capable.

"Not to shut the door exactly, Phemie," he said cautiously. "But it maun be understood that she gets her ain livin'. She can go oot to service. I'll speak to Mrs. Forbes the very next time she comes in frae Lethney Castle."

"We'd better wait till Rosie comes. It's a bonnie name. Eh, I'll be blithe to see her the morn's night; my, I'll hae to be hard at it a' day gettin' my room ready for her. Nae shop for me the morn, Barclay; country orders or nae country orders, you'll hae to warstle through yoursel'."

"It wadna be so bad if she hadna had an English mother, Phemie. I misdoot she'll be extravagant, and—and venturesome. I've heard that the English are terrible venturesome."

"Weel, naebody could say your brither Bob was venturesome, Barclay. I hope she'll be a little main steerin' than him. An' maybe the mother was a fine woman. We've heard naething to the contrary."

"She was English, an' the Word says ye canna gather a grape frae a thorn," said Barclay firmly.

"It likewis says that a vine can come out of Egypt," replied Phemie whose gift of repartee was one of the most winning things about her.

This small discussion regarding what was really a tremendous upheaval in the lives of these two simple folks had the effect of settling their minds. What is familiar ceases to appal, and they even began to look forward, Phemie openly and joyously, and Barclay furtively and cautiously, to the great event. The last train from Port of Lethney, which was to bring the expected traveller, was due at the little station at a quarter to nine. There was no particular hour for closing the "a'thing shop;" people had grown accustomed to regard it as an ever-open door, and it was no uncommon thing for the unthrifty housewife to run in at bedtime for the ounce of tea that would be required for the morning meal, or the soap for the wash that was supposed to be inaugurated with the break of day. Barclay Fraser and his wife suffered in every department of their lives from lack of system.

On this particular evening (it was the fifteenth of February, and promising well for the incoming spring), the door of the shop was closed at eight o'clock precisely, and Barclay Fraser retired upstairs to "clean hisel'," as he was wont to allude to the performance of his toilet. He did not, however, change his clothes, because he had nothing between the old shepherd's plaid and the broadcloth of his Sunday best. He washed his face, and put on a clean collar and a black tie, and sallied forth to the station about twenty minutes before the time while Phemie busied herself with getting the kippers on for the late meal, for which the traveller might be supposed to be ready. Phemie was frankly excited. A dozen times did she run to the little back bedroom that had been swept and garnished for the reception of "the vine out of Egypt." The bed turned neatly down with its coarse but clean linen sheet in evidence, the new strip of bright green Brussels carpet before the dressing-chest, all filled the heart of Phemie Fraser with a pardonable pride. She had done her best and now was ready with a heart full of love and tenderness to welcome the orphan child from London. It must be said at once that the first sight of Rosie filled her aunt with a slight dismay, not unmixed with awe. Bob Fraser had been a large soft person with an apple-checked face; his daughter was a small slim woman with pale, sharp features and big melancholy eyes; very neatly and quietly dressed in a long black cloth, a neat toque of folded cloth, with a wing at the side, that had been put together by her own clever fingers.

It was her neatness that appalled Phemie Fraser; she looked, as she expressed it afterwards, as if she had stepped out of a bandbox instead of from off a thirteen hours' journey in the train. Her face was very sad, but when her new aunt, new in the sense that she had never seen her before, smiled upon her, Rosie Barclay smiled too, and then her

face suddenly became alive. She had put the fear of death on her Uncle Barclay from the moment of her arrival, and he had never opened his mouth during their ten minutes walk from the station, but Aunt Phemie, after her first capacious smile and her hearty welcome, never ceased from speech, except in the intervals when she was putting food into her mouth. She had no idea what a relief it was to the girl, who had felt on first sight of her Uncle Barclay that the train which could convey her as quickly and as far as possible from his vicinity would be her best friend. Their dismay over the announcement of her coming was as nothing to the dismay in her soul when she contemplated the menage to which she had come. She was out of health, and had had to leave her post in a large business house, where the methods were of the most modern kind. Clever and thrifty though she had always been, her small wage had never permitted a saving margin, and her far-off relatives in Scotland of whom her father had often spoken, had been her last refuge. Now she was with them, she did not know whether to laugh or cry. She sat down in her own little room, and looked round with a small, half-hysterical laugh. She was a lady by instinct and partly by rearing, and everything except Aunt Phemie's smile seemed impossible. But after she had had a good night's rest and awoke to see the sun dancing on Lethney Bay, her outlook changed.

"I'll wake them up," she said to herself with a little mischievous smile. "If I'm to stop here, I'll justify my existence and their kindness."

It was the common-sense view, and when she stepped downstairs looking like "a picter," as Aunt Phemie expressed it, in her short black skirt and neat flannel shirt, her uncle suddenly wished he had been less saving and had put on the collar which had honoured the reception at the station.

"Now dears," she said, much as she might have spoken to two overgrown children, "I want to say something before we begin breakfast. I think it's most awfully good of you to have me here at all, and I'm not going to be a burden. I just want to say that while I'm here, I'm going to work. What I should like best to do would be to help in the shop, for of course that's what I've been used to. And though I'm not very strong just at present, I'm tough. And I'll do as much as ever I can."

Aunt Phemie nodded delightedly, and put her bonnie head on one side, saying to the solemn-faced Barclay plainly, though not in words, "Wha's richt?"

"The first thing is to get ye strong, my lass," she said aloud and briskly. "Wha d'ye think she's like, Barclay, a wee thing o' Bob about the nose, eh?"

Barclay did not commit himself. He was thinking of the ordeal in front of him to have his smart London niece at his elbow downstairs in the "a'thing shop," upsetting, not its fair order, which was non-existent, but its comfortable routine.

It must be said that Rosie had a most trying day. When she saw the place, and the stock, which was considerable, if only it could be sorted out from its hopeless state of debris, in which ham and beef and butter, and winey, and Alloa wool, and kippered herrings dwelt amiably, cheek by jowl, to the detriment of all, her one impulse was to flee. But she saw the possibilities, and she occupied herself the whole morning in the background clearing one little corner.