

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

"BY THE MEREST ACCIDENT."

By Henry Frith.

"Mr. Witney?"

"Sir?" replied the individual address-

ed. "I want you to cross to France this evening."

"Very well, sir," said Mr. Witney quietly.

"Or to-morrow morning will do. Here are your instructions. Read these papers carefully; make the best arrangements you can. I may want the house—you will see all about it in these documents."

"Am I to purchase the premises, sir?"

"No, no; they have come to me—to the firm—in consequence of an advance made by my old partner, who, you know, died the other day. Take possession; see what the place is like; whether it will do for a summer residence. You know the kind of thing I want to take the children to, and I can depend on you."

Mr. Witney bowed, and said he thought Mr. Barnstone might depend on him. He took the deeds, made his arrangements at the office, tied and tied up his papers on his desk, and then strolled homewards at three o'clock to pack his portmanteau. He was a man of about forty—good-natured, trustful, and trustworthy—a man of whom little children always stopped to inquire "the time," and were satisfied even if he did not drag out his watch—a man who piloted old ladies and blind men over dangerous London crossings—a man beloved by animals and children, and who cherished an affection for a cat, which followed him as faithfully as a dog in and about his house at Brixton.

Such was Peter Witney—a somewhat impulsive man, like his great namesake—a person deserving of every confidence in the legal employment which he pursued, but not likely to make a very large fortune in anything—he was too easy-going as well as too good-natured.

Mr. Peter Witney strolled homewards, first to Ludgate Hill Station to take a train to Brixton, where in bachelor apartments he passed his quiet evenings. He was crossing Chancery Lane, by the post office, when a young and decidedly pretty girl, a French girl, stopped him, and said in broken English—

"Sare, would you be so kind?—you look very kind—Could you tell me where I can find the Lincoln's Inn Fields?"

"Lincoln's Inn, mademoiselle; mais certainment; je—"

"Ah! monsieur parle francais," she exclaimed, interrupting him with a pleased expression.

Then Witney, who was a French scholar, addressed her in her native tongue, and walked with her a few paces in order to put her in the right direction. So they went through Lincoln's Inn, chatting, and he found her destination was none other than Mr. Barnstone's office.

Having parted with his young companion at the office, he hurried away to Ludgate again. He had learnt from a slip of paper she gave him that the fair foreigner's name was Pulcherie Malais, but he did not inquire her business in Lincoln's Inn Fields after he had announced her arrival to the clerk in charge.

"A very pretty girl, indeed," murmured this middle-aged bachelor; "a charming face; and what a pretty name! Pulcherie; quite fitting too, for a wonder. Malais is not so nice, but it may one day be changed. Ah me!"

Thinking of Pulcherie, Peter Witney entered the train; still thinking of her, he went home, and packed "Pulcherie" in his portmanteau. But somehow that young person escaped, for she was with him all the evening in the train to

Newhaven; she crossed the Channel with him in the "Normandy," and reached Dieppe with him in the warm autumn daylight, as bright and fresh a memory as ever! Oh, Peter, Peter! truly thou art in love!

The premises which Peter Witney had to investigate and arrange for were situated some little distance up the coast, at or near a village which boasted a small river and a fishing population of amphibious habits. The place shall not be more particularly described, but the river flowed through the valley of the Ange, and the stream and the increasing village bear the same name.

Fishermen, dealers in cattle—for the valley is pastoral—lacemakers, these are the inhabitants, and they follow their peaceful occupations contentedly. It was a very fine morning when Mr. Witney reached the village; he had walked over from Dieppe the day after his arrival in that town, and found the people en fete in the village.

It was a holiday—a holy-day, apparently, for the inhabitants had just come from the church, and the girls were dressed in holiday garb, walking in picturesque groups; laughing, chattering, and while avoiding, yet lingering saucily at the young men, who standing or seated, also in pairs or threes, would discuss the weather and the fishing and the cattle, while always keeping the young ladies in sight. A happy, pleasant picture; and Peter Witney looked on at the scene with great delight.

He determined to give himself a holiday, too. He could not do business amid such a scene. So he made friends directly, and inquiries indirectly concerning the premises he had come to take over and have transferred. He learned that the house lay away from the village; it was a mere farm-house amid trees, enclosed by a wall and paling. It had been untenanted some time. The family had sold everything, and quitted the village some weeks before.

"They were poor?" suggested the Englishman.

The man addressed shrugged his shoulders as he replied—

"Well, not entirely. The good man and his wife had died. His sister and their daughter lived in the house until the last harvest. The son was away in the army of Africa. Young M. Desmoulin, the miller's son, had paid much attention to the young lady, and had been repulsed by her. So, being the owner of the property, he had taken his revenge, and managed to frighten them away. Poor girl! He was a mauvais sujet!"

"But he had no right to do so," said Witney. "The house was mortgaged to an Englishman; he is dead now. It was handed over as security for advances to the young soldier's father."

"That is as may be. The house is closed up, the affiches of the sale are on the doors. It is desolate—empty."

"Is it far from here?"

"Well, no. A walk of perhaps half an hour, or so, will bring you there—amongst the trees yonder. You see those tall poplars, those to the eastward?"

Peter Witney nodded assent.

"Up there you will find the place; it stands above the road on your right hand; a little path leads up to the house. You cannot mistake it."

"Thank you, monsieur," replied Witney. "I think I will go and see it."

Peter Witney made his way towards the poplars, and passed them. He then plunged into a more wooded country and the road tended south-east. Then he came to a gate and a path on the right, as indicated. He entered and ascended the path, passing in the direction whence he had come. But in a moment he recoiled in astonishment.

Seated on a ruined portion of the wall was a young soldier, apparently on furlough. A small bundle lay beside him in the rank grass; a short stick was still hooked within it. The man's attitude exhibited the deepest dejection. His head rested, hatless, on his arm; his attitude, the limp and hanging right arm, the hidden face, the whole pose of the poor fellow, told a sad tale of disappointment. He had returned full of life and ardour to the place, perhaps his home, and found it deserted; the torn bills of sale still flapping idly in the autumn wind which stirred his tangled locks.

Peter Witney, notwithstanding his very unromantic name and calling, was eminently sympathetic. Of course he had no business to be so, but Nature, though she may fit us for certain callings, does not deprive us of our better feelings. We may harden ourselves, and pride ourselves upon our sternness. But Peter didn't. Lawyer though he was, he was tender-hearted.

"Poor chap!" he mentally remarked; "he has found his home deserted. Our house, by the way. Ah! I shall gain some information here."

It was rather a contrast with the cheerful scene which the Englishman had just left by the shore. Here the solitude tended to sorrow and to love; to the pity which is born of sorrow, and akin to love. The setting sun threw its glory upon the tree-tops in the south-west, and the poor young soldier lay despairing, travel-stained, and overcome with grief, as the shadows crept slowly along the ground in sympathy.

The spectator after awhile advanced, and then paused. Again he advanced, and touched the young man, who arose with suddenness, angry at being disturbed.

He glanced at the Englishman, and turned round again without speaking.

"My friend," said Mr. Witney kindly, "can I assist you? You are ill, sorrowful; I may help you. Do you know this place?"

Know the place indeed! Was he not a native of it? Had he not lived there until the conscription came, and when he was paid to take the place of another young man? The money was welcome.

So much the stranger managed to gather from the half-indignant remarks of the soldier, who at length yielded to the kindly influence the Englishman generally exercised. He sat up, this young Frenchman, and, after a few minutes, recovered his vivacity. He told how he had been treated.

"You went as a substitute, then?"

"Yes, my relatives were poor; the man had held out threats. I loved my sister—oh! where is she? Monsieur, we were not always poor; we held up our heads once. The Republicans brought our family down. We were for the old regime, we others, but I went. My poor sister promised for marriage by her enemy and mine. Oh, Pulcherie! ma belle sœur, ma pauvre petite!"

"Pulcherie your sister! Not Pulcherie Malais?"

"The same, monsieur. How could you know? You are English," said the astonished Frenchman.

"Yes, but I am also interested in this house and in her. An English firm owns the property; the rent has not been paid; the former owner, the Englishman, is dead; all is chaos; but your sister—"

"Yes, yes; tell me of her."

"She is in London—was in London a few days ago."

Then Peter Witney told the young man of his meeting with the young lady, and of his having escorted her to Lincoln's Inn Fields.