

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

A BEACH IDYLL.

David Lyall in British Weekly.

Slade was not sure whether he cared. They had only met three weeks ago on the sands at Lisbeach, the acquaintance rising out of a trifling incident. Slade was thirty-five, and occupied a position of trust with an old-established hardware firm in Birmingham. He knew that in the course of a year or two he would get a small partnership, and that his future, humanly speaking, was assured. He was a man of quiet tastes and sober habits, fond of nature, and able to study her intelligently. He was likewise fond of foreign travel, of which he had availed himself a good deal. This particular summer, however, he had come to Lisbeach with his mother, who was out of health, and needing more of his care and attention than he was usually able to give her. He had not found any hardship in this; nay, he had enjoyed himself more than he had expected. He had been favoured with extraordinarily fine weather, and had made many excursions both inland and seawards. But he had spent a great deal of time on the beach, beside the invalid chair of his mother. Lisbeach was not a large place, but it was getting known. Its wonderful sands were being exploited on the children's behalf, and certainly they were the happiest denizens of the place. A new golf course was being laid out on the broad sand dunes that stretched half a mile in width back from the level beach; but Slade, who was not a golfer, felt sorry about that, because it would disturb the merry picnic parties who on fine afternoons were to be found in almost every hollow.

Slade had not known the girl's name for at least six days, after they had first spoken, when he had rescued one of her small charges from temporary peril; but he knew it now. It was Stella, and he thought how well it became her, and how often her dusky grey eyes looked like stars. She was quite young, but the childlike, wistful face had often a look which seemed to crave pity, to proclaim the melancholy years. He had learned that she was an orphan, and that she was taking care of the children of a relative who had herself gone for a yachting cruise. They were pretty children, but horribly spoiled, and Stella had much ado to keep them in anything like order. Slade often watched them, and sometimes when his mother went in for her afternoon nap he would join the little group on the beach, and help to maintain law and order.

"I suppose you find it easier to keep them good at home; there's a lot of scope here," he said lamely one day when she came back exhausted after a tussle with the eldest boy who would venture on forbidden ground at a spot marked "dangerous current" by the authorities.

"I'm thankful to say I don't have them at home," she said frankly. "I tried it, but it wasn't successful, and Mrs. Lorraine got someone else. She has a German governess, who is quite stern with them. She has gone home to Alsace for her holidays."

"And where are you to be found when this holiday engagement is over?" he asked casually, out of a sort of polite curiosity, out of a any deeper interest. He wondered why her face flushed, but supposed it was out of sensitiveness because she had a poor home.

"I had a post in a flower-shop before the end of July. But they shut up for three months, because everybody is away. Perhaps they may reopen again in October."

"Where was that?"

"In one of the London suburbs," she said evasively.

"Which suburb?"

He wondered at his own persistence, and why it should make her cheeks redden more and more. He felt sorry if she was ashamed of the flower-shop. To him all work was honorable, and he held views about social matters which in certain directions were considered quite wild and unusual. But there was something about Slade's quiet placid personality which allways commanded respect, and he had quite a reputation in the little circle on the outskirts of Birmingham where he lived.

"I live at Balham," she said at last. "My father was a doctor there. He has been dead five years."

"I think it was very brave of you to essay the flower-shop in the place where you lived. It required a certain sort of courage."

"I did it for spite," replied the girl calmly. "Because people dropped me and were horrid. And I simply loved serving them, and giving them the skimpest value for their money. However friendly they want to be, I shrewdly glare at them, and am a frightful shop-assistant."

Slade laughed first, and then pity gathered in his eyes. She looked so like a child, and the bitterness with which she spoke revealed to him what was in its way quite a tragedy.

"You poor child!" he said in a voice which was very tender, too tender, though he did not know it.

"I am not poor at all," she replied defiantly. "I am quite well off. I can earn my own living, if not at one thing, then at another. I don't want anybody's pity."

"How long are you going to be here, yet?"

"Till next Friday, then Mrs. Lorraine comes back."

"And after that?"

"Balham; but I have nearly made up my mind to go out as a parlour-maid. I think I should like it, and it is very easy to get a place like that. I know a girl like me who did it, and she was quite happy. There's Eric again. Do you think I shall be able to present that boy alive to his mother? I very much doubt it, and except for the grief it would be to her. I don't think it would very much matter."

She darted away, and at the same moment Slade saw his mother's chair being wheeled down to its accustomed place. He rose slowly, and walked away. His mind was full of new thoughts and feelings, and he knew perfectly well that he wished to ask this girl to give up her struggle and her loneliness and come to him. But she was not at all the sort of woman he had aspired to marry, on the rare occasions when he had thought about it. This was a hot-hearted, undisciplined girl, at war with a hard fate; there was not an atom of repose about her anywhere. And she was so ridiculously young. No, he must banish Stella from his mind. He was at liberty to marry any day so far as his mother was concerned; indeed, she had frequently begged him to give her a daughter; he had a good income, and money in consols, and a home ready. Many people had reproached him for his selfish bachelorhood, and one match-making mamma had even been so bold as to tell him he had failed in his duty to the State.

Should it be Stella?

Slade left Lisbeach next day, partly because he had promised another visit before resuming work, and partly because he wished to remove himself from what had become a danger zone, and to arrive at some just estimate of his real attitude towards Stella. He did not forget her, and then he blamed himself horribly for not having taken some measures which would make it possible for him to find her if he wished.

He took a pilgrimage to Balham, and for a shy man did wonders. He actually entered three flower shops to make enquiries regarding Miss Stella Clisby, but met with no success. Then he went home to Birmingham to work, and put her out of his mind. But he did not find it such an easy task: in fact, he was disgusted to find that the sweet flower-like face and the starry eyes with their slightly appealing glance continued to haunt him to his own decided discomfort. He had no doubt now that he cared, and he cursed the caution, the careful calculating spirit that had deprived him of what he was not now ashamed to call his happiness. So seven months passed away. He had quite decided that summer should see him again at Lisbeach; he remembered that Stella had said it was a favorite summer place with the Lorraines, and what more likely than that she should be there again either on holiday or on duty? He even had thought of putting an advertisement in the personal column of a London newspaper, but shrank from it with some fine instinct he could not have expressed in words. In the month of March in the following year Slade happened to be in London, and was asked to dine at the house of one of the partners with whom he had been doing business in the day. He accompanied him to his home at Thornorton Heath, where he had built himself a lordly dwelling-place. Slade found it necessary to apologise for his lack of evening dress, when he found the style in which his business acquaintance lived; but he found his wife a very pleasant person with a kindly face and a true woman's heart. They had about half an hour's talk before dinner, then Slade went to his room to wash, and presently when the gong sounded, went down to the dining-room. Two maids stood demurely in the hall waiting for the diners to pass in. Slade glanced casually at them as he passed, and stood stock still, with a slight gasp. One of them was Stella. He advanced with outstretched hand, but she, rather pale and with a haughty little head rather high in the air, motioned him to pass on. Realizing that she was perfectly right, Slade took the hint, and presently was in his place by the side of his hostess. He did not know how he got through the meal. Women caught by an emergency can generally comport themselves better than men. Stella made no sign as she deftly served the meal, showing herself an excellent waitress, anticipating as well as fulfilling the wishes of those at the table. Slade drew a long breath of relief when the door closed upon the two daintily-uniformed figures, and presently when his host was called to see someone in the morning room, he looked straight into his hostess's kind eyes.

"Will you tell me, Mrs. Ledbury, where you got that servant of yours with the fair hair and the dark eyes?"

"You think her pretty too?" said Mrs. Ledbury with a smile. "I got her through the registry office in the usual way, and she is certainly the best servant I have ever had in this house. I don't mind what I pay her. She is worth twice as much as the other one."

"Of course, she is a lady," said Slade deliberately. "And even in a parlourmaid breeding tells."

Mrs. Ledbury looked perplexed.

"A lady! I don't quite understand. No, I have never asked any questions. I never do about their private affairs. I find they don't like it. I started with ideals on that head, you know; but a short experience of the average servant destroyed them. I have got along much better since. Do you know about her then?"