

A Victorian girl's diary

This diary extract is taken from *My Story: Workhouse* by Pamela Oldfield.

Thursday 19 January, 1871,

Stoneleigh, Kent

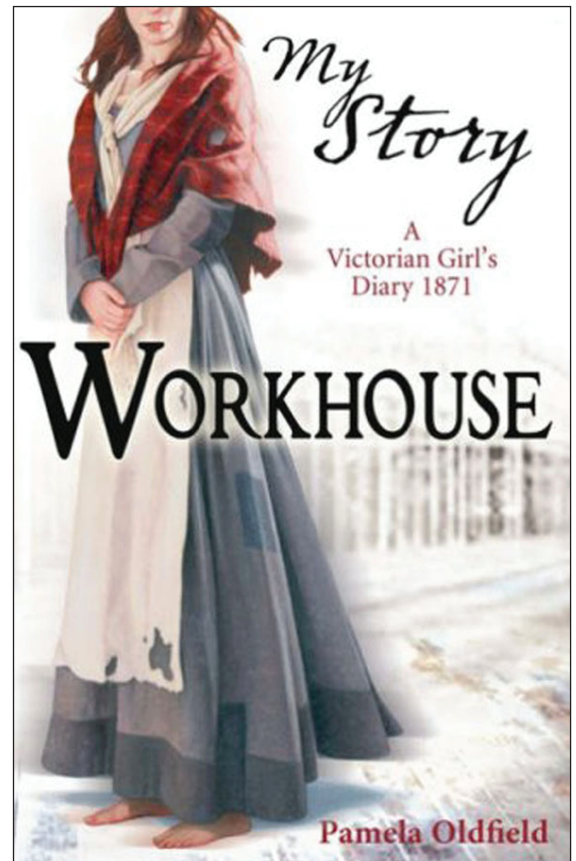
What a terrible, never-to-be-forgotten day – my first ever visit to the workhouse. I have come early to bed with a headache and it is all thanks to Mama and a girl named Rosie Chubb (a cosy name for such a wild creature!). Mama was determined that today I should attend a meeting at Stoneleigh Workhouse. She insists that helping the poor is a charitable duty, but for her it is different. She has a passion for waifs and strays and for the past year has been a member of the Board of Guardians at the workhouse.

I am Edith Lorrimer, aged fifteen (sixteen next month) and, inspired by Florence Nightingale's example, hope I might train to be a nurse, but Mama says it is hardly suitable work for a respectable young woman.

She summed it up briskly. "Long hours, Edith, hard work, suffering, death and grief!"

Instead she suggested that I learn something of the work she undertakes and I reluctantly agreed. Now that I have met Rosie Chubb, I can understand Mama's interest in it. But to start at the beginning...

Stoneleigh Workhouse is a dreadful place. "Hellish" may be a better word. I confess I was deeply shocked. From the outside it is a grim-looking building with rows of uncurtained windows, and the way in is through a large oak door that creaks and groans like a banshee when it swings open on its huge hinges.



My spirits plummeted further the moment I stepped inside. To my way of thinking it is more like a prison than a place where destitute people are saved from ruin. It was bleak in the extreme and the occasional hissing gaslights did little to dispel the gloom. High, echoing corridors, dark-green paint and not a single ornament or decoration to lighten the depressing effect. The smell of stale food was terrible (stewed boots, I shouldn't wonder), plus there was a strong hint of old clothes, sickness and damp. One breath of it and my insides curdled. I complained to Mama but she told me not to fuss. "The residents have to live with the smell," she said. "It will do you no harm."

It is January but there seemed to be little in the way of heating, though somewhere there must have been a fire because ghostly wisps of bitter-smelling smoke drifted in the cold air of the gloomy corridor. An old woman approached us on shuffling feet, head bent, hands clasped as though in prayer. As she drew nearer I saw that her lips moved in silent speech and her gaze was fixed on the ground. A frayed sacking apron covered her skirt. She wore no bonnet and her grey hair straggled like rats' tails. I tried to find a word of greeting but my throat was dry and none came. Mama smiled. "Good morning, Mrs Lynch." The old woman walked straight past as though we didn't exist. Mama said, "Poor soul. She's very deaf."

We waited for the meeting in a dingy office full of files and ledgers. There was a rug on the floor and a comfortable chair for the workhouse Master. His name is Alfred Frumley and I took against him instantly. He is big and burly with a flat nose and dark, gimlet eyes. His mouth has a cruel twist to it and he gives the impression that he doesn't know what love means. Why, I wondered, was he appointed to such a position? Does he rule with an iron will? If he had power over me I would tremble.