

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

A MODERN ENGAGEMENT.

By JAMES DONALD.

CHAPTER I.

"Really, it's the most annoying thing I ever came across in all my life! Why should men be so utterly absurd?"

Miss Dora Stansfield, with a letter in her hand and a frown on her face, rested one elbow on the mantelpiece and addressed this somewhat petulant remark to the very pretty countenance she saw reflected in the over-mantel.

"I wonder what the man thinks!" she continued in expostulatory tones, still addressing her own reflection. "My goodness, does he actually consider, because he happened to get engaged to a girl five years ago, he has the right to come home and expect her to marry him? It is perfectly ridiculous! Why, I have known some girls who have been engaged over and over again in that time! But then Alexander always was a silly! Always so dreadfully in earnest about everything! Heigh ho! It's a queer world. I wonder what I shall do! Certainly before I'll marry him I'll see him—further first. I must think of some way out of it. First of all I'll read his letter over again."

With a sigh of resignation she raised the sheet to her eyes and carefully read the contents, interposing little interjections as she proceeded.

"My own darling Dora—own darling Dora, indeed! The impertinence!—I cannot describe the joy with which I take up my pen to write you. I have such good news—such glorious news—that I feel I must shout it to the winds and bid them speed over the seas, carrying it to the ears of my dearest. What an exhibition he would make of himself if he did! 'Since we parted five years ago—to me it has seemed like five centuries; banished as I have been from your gracious presence—day and night you have been constantly in my thoughts. The sweet promise you made me when we parted—all the sweeter because it has remained a secret between our two selves—has been an ever present solace and delight during the long weary years of exile. The thought of beholding you once again has been a beacon star lighting my path in the arduous toils which fall to the lot of a missionary in the foreign field!' Alexander is quite poetical. I never suspected he had any gifts in that direction."

"But all this time I have not told you the good news. I will not keep you in suspense any longer. In a word I have been granted six months' furlough, and ere this letter reaches you I will be halfway across the sea, speeding towards Britain, home, and—you."

"I wonder if I am too bold in hoping that when I return—alas! six months pass all too quickly—it shall not be alone. I know life here is very different from what you have been accustomed, but at one time—don't you remember?—you fancied you would enjoy it. Oh, that you are still of that mind! It will be—oh, bother, I am not going to read any more! The very idea gives me the horrors!" and with a gesture of impatience she dropped the impassioned love letter into the fire.

"Fancy all this rigmarole just because we got engaged five years ago! I'm sure I don't know what possessed me to do it! Alexander was quite a nice enough fellow, of course, and he seemed so very much in love, that I couldn't bear to disappoint him. Besides, he was going away as missionary to the South Sea Islands, and it never for a moment struck me he would come back and want me to marry him! I thought all missionaries who went out there got eaten by savages or married black wives, or

something of that sort, and never came back. It's awfully mean of Alexander to prove the rule by being the exception. Fancy his cheek expecting me to go out as a missionary's wife! To go to a place where I don't suppose there is a theatre or a concert hall within a thousand miles, and the greatest relaxation in the course of the year is to go to a Sunday School treat and hear a dirty little black-faced, half-clothed wretch howl 'There is a happy land,' in a heathenish language! No, thank you, Alexander; this child is not having any! Besides, I have as good as promised Dick, and I certainly cannot marry them both. I suppose I must be a horrid flirt, but I'm sure I always thought first engagements did not count!"

"The question is, what am I to do? Alexander takes everything so seriously that if I were to tell him straight out to consider our engagement at an end he might do something dreadful! He might even shoot himself on our doorstep! I've heard of rejected lovers doing such things. If he did I am quite certain Bridget would give warning on the spot! She is dreadfully particular about the steps!"

"It is strange what a mess Providence makes of things of this sort," she continued musingly. "Now, there's my cousin Dorry. She is just the very girl for Alexander. Her head is simply stuffed full of weird notions about duty and horrid things of that sort! I am sure she would just revel in going among the little black wretches, helping to wash their faces—as if they needed washing—and listening to them saying Catechism and all that rot! Before Alexander went away she thought a lot of him too, and would have been quite pleased to marry him. Instead of asking her as he ought the nunny went and proposed to an empty-headed, conceited, wicked little nix like me! Ugh! It's positively beastly!"

With a pettish exclamation the girl threw herself on a couch and gazed thoughtfully at the fire. By and bye her face brightened.

"I wonder if I cannot manage to straighten this tangle out some way," she muttered. "There is no doubt Alexander and cousin Dorry were just made for each other; it would be a positive shame if they did not get married. And I don't see why they shouldn't. I'm quite sure Dorry would have him if he asked her; and as for Alexander, he would be a very great deal happier with her than with a wretch like me! He hasn't seen me for five years. I wonder if he will recognize me when we meet. People say cousin Dorry is not unlike me—not quite so good-looking, they say; but, of course, that is just their flattery. Still, in a dim light he might mistake us quite easily. Crikey! that gives me an idea. I begin to see a possible way of escape. I'll write Dorry this very day, asking her to come and spend a few days with me. And then—then I'll do all I can, and leave the rest in the hands of Providence."

And with this philosophical resolution she dismissed the subject from her mind, and went upstairs to dress in readiness for the advent of a young man named Dick, who was coming to take her to the theatre.

CHAPTER II.

About a fortnight later Dora Stansfield and her cousin Dora Heathcoat—famously known as Dorry, to distinguish her from her cousin—sat in the drawing-room. Miss Heathcoat had accepted her cousin's invitation, and had come on a few days' visit to the Stansfields.

"By the way, Dorry," remarked Miss Stansfield, casually, "I suppose you are aware Alexander Fraser is due home?"

Her cousin uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Is that so? I was not aware of it!"

"You astonish me. I thought you, of all people, were sure to know."

"Why should I have any knowledge of his movements?"

"Come now, don't try to throw dust in my eyes. Before he went away everybody could see how fond he was of you; indeed, it wouldn't have been the least surprising to hear that you were engaged. There, dear, you are blushing! Confess I am not far from the truth."

"Don't be so ridiculous, Dora," retorted her cousin, with heightened colour. "I am sure he never thought of me at all! Why, he was far oftener in your company than in mine!"

"Oh, that was because I was a forward young nix in those days, and flirted outrageously with every male person I met! And you were so shy and demure and proper, he was actually afraid of you. But, though he was perhaps oftener in my company, I know who was most in his thoughts. Remember, I am not easily deceived. You can't hide these things from me."

"Dora, you are positively—positively disgustingly silly!"

Dolly smiled mischievously, and shook her finger knowingly at her cousin. Then, with a sudden assumption of seriousness, she sat down beside her and put an arm around her waist.

"Look here, Dorry," she whispered softly, "I want to have a nice little confidential chat with you. I have a presentiment that He—you know who I mean—has come home for a wife! Now don't blush. I know you will deny it, but in your own mind you know as well as I do who he wants that wife to be."

"Really, Dora, this is getting beyond the bounds of patience. I won't listen to you a moment longer!" and the girl sprang indignantly to her feet, but Dora promptly pulled her down again.

"There, there, Dorry, don't run away," she said soothingly. "As my young brother would say, please keep your hair on. I didn't mean to annoy you."

"I am not annoyed; but I don't like to hear you speak in that flippant way on—on serious subjects."

"All right, dear, I won't offend you again. But, seriously, supposing—just supposing, mind you—He wanted you to go out to the Cannibal Islands or wherever the place is; you wouldn't go, would you? Why, it would be as bad as burying oneself alive!"

"If I felt that duty called me I would have no hesitation in going. I consider labour in the foreign mission fields one of the highest callings in which a woman can engage, and I would regard it as a privilege to be permitted to lend my poor aid."

"Good gracious, Dorry! That sounds like a bit of a sermon—or a copybook maxim. If these are your sentiments I'll bet my boots—again I quote the small brother aforesaid—you will be on your way to the South Sea Islands before the year is out. What kind of dresses will you take with you? I suppose you will be expected to wear something—"

"Dora, I won't listen to your nonsense a moment longer. I'm going upstairs. I hope when I see you again you will be in a more sensible frame of mind!"—and with an indignant shake the girl sprang to her feet and flounced out of the room.

As the door closed behind her, Dora broke into a merry laugh.

"The plot is thickening," she murmured.

"I am quite sure if Alexander asks her she will be willing to accept him. And he must be made to ask her. The question is—how? There's the rub."