

STORIES
POETRY

The Inglenook

SKETCHES
TRAVEL

APPLES OF GOLD.

By H. M. R.

"A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in pictures of silver."—(Prov. xxv. 11.)

"I ask you once again, sir—will you alter your decision, and give your consent to our marriage? Your daughter loves me. Will you ruin her happiness for life simply because I'm not so rich in this world's goods as my rival, Lord Langton?"

Mr. Fairleigh looked up angrily from his writing-table, and his dark eyes flashed dangerously.

"I have given you my answer once, Mr. Dashwood," he replied, "and that is enough. When you were your uncle's heir, and had every reason to expect you would succeed to his title, it was quite a different matter; but as Sir Geoffrey is now married, and has a son to succeed him, it is hardly likely he will provide for you in the future. I can say no more in the matter, so please drop the subject."

"He has promised to leave me something," said the younger man hastily. "He is too generous to cut me out of the will altogether."

"Pshaw! A paltry thousand or so! That is all you will get! And meanwhile, what have you to live upon? You cannot propose to live in a cottage?"

"I have something certain, at any rate. The Duke of Gazely has offered me the land-agency of Wenford Park, which means three hundred a year, two horses, and a good house. If Mona is content with that, why should you stand out against us? We love each other."

Mr. Fairleigh tossed his head with contempt. Love to him meant an alliance of affection and capital.

"And you expect my daughter, who has lived in luxury all her life, who has only needed to express a wish to have it fulfilled, to live upon three hundred a year in a small house and be happy? You must be mad to speak of such a thing. Love in a cottage is quite an exploded idea nowadays. It goes not even outlive the honeymoon. No!"—as the younger man attempted to speak—"I wish to hear no more about the matter. I have already given my consent to Mona's marriage with Lord Langton, and the wedding will take place within the month."

"And you will marry her to a man she does not love—a man who is renowned for his mode of life?"

"Blackening another will not do your cause any good, Mr. Dashwood."

"It is not my cause so much as Mona's," he replied, moving a few steps nearer.

Mr. Fairleigh rose from his chair. "My time is very valuable," he said stiffly, "and I have already wasted an hour or more over a fruitless subject. I shall be much obliged if you will consider the matter settled, and leave me."

Piers Dashwood turned to quit the room, but paused for a moment on the threshold.

"You will not change your mind?" he asked. "For your child's sake I give you one more chance. God have mercy on her if you marry her to Lord Langton."

Mr. Fairleigh's stern features stiffened visibly, and his hand turned the brass knob of the door impatiently. Piers waited just a moment for a word on his part, but as no sound came from the thin lips he turned away, and, with an aggressive slam, the sturdy door swung to and shut behind him.

He listened for a moment as he stood in the hall, taking a stealthy glance up the staircase meanwhile, and suddenly a golden head appeared above the ban-

sters, and a pair of grey blue eyes looked pathetically down upon him.

"Is it all right?" asked Mona, in a whisper.

He shook his head.

"All wrong!" he answered back. "And then, as if the temptation proved too much for him, he mounted the staircase and joined her on the landing."

"Mona—sweetheart!" he whispered, clasping her two hands closely. "I must speak to you. Where can we talk without being interrupted?"

She drew him towards the big drawing-room and closed the door.

"No one comes in here during the morning," she said. "But, oh, Piers, what did he say to you?"

The young man looked away from her winsome face.

"He says you shall marry Lord Langton within the month."

"I shall never do that!" replied the girl gravely, though her face paled at his words. "I—I hate him, with his hard, cruel eyes."

He moved restlessly as she drew nearer to him with her arms outstretched.

"Do not tempt me, Mona!" he cried. "God only knows how weak I am where you are concerned! Oh, my darling, it would be wrong! It would indeed!"

Her hands dropped to her sides with a weary gesture of despair.

"Where can I go then?" she cried piteously. "If you will have me, I will do my duty to my life's end."

"If I will have you!" he repeated bitterly. "Oh, Mona, do you not understand? It is because I love you and want you so much that I hesitate to ask you to take a step you might regret later."

She flung herself into his outstretched arms.

"God bless and help us!" he whispered, bending his head to her lovely, up-turned face. "You have placed your entire trust in me, and I shall not fail."

II

"You look very tired, Piers. Come and sit down for a little while. I am sure you want a rest after your hard day's work."

And Mona moved her skirts aside to make room for her husband on the sofa.

"What is the matter dear?" she continued, as he sat down beside her and passed his hand heavily across his forehead.

Piers looked lovingly at his young wife, who, two years ago, had left a luxurious home to cast in her lot with him.

"It is nothing much," he replied, with an attempt at cheerfulness which did not deceive her. "Only the usual fault-finding, and, as you know well, continual dropping weareth away a stone." The duke is a hard man, and nothing seems to please him. Everyone told me when I took the post I should find him very difficult to get on with."

"What has he been cavilling at now?" asked Mona, laying her hand in a sympathetic way over his.

"Oh, about the timber on the west boundary of the park. I did what he told me against my own judgment, and now he turns round and lays the blame on me."

"Poor Piers!" she said gently. "But he will see the injustice of it later on, and, at any rate, you have the satisfaction of knowing you did right."

"Ah, I know, Mona," he replied sadly, "but it is hard to be misunderstood and to suffer unjustly."

"It will all come right in the end," she whispered.

"A note for you, sir," said the maid at his elbow, rather roughly interrupting his meditation. "It was brought by one of his Grace's grooms."

Mona watched him curiously as he ran his finger through the envelope, for she feared it meant worry to her husband; but she was not prepared to see his face suddenly blanch and his eyes gleam with anger.

"Piers! Piers! What is it?" she cried tremulously. "Surely there is no fresh cause of trouble!"

"I am dismissed," he said slowly, hissing out the words with a bitterness which frightened her. "The duke wishes me to take six months' notice."

"Dismissed?" she repeated blankly.

"Oh, surely he could not be so unjust! There must be some mistake, Piers, or you have not read the letter rightly."

"I don't think there is any mistake."

She left her seat, and walked slowly round to his end of the table.

"Oh, my husband, don't take it so much to heart!" she whispered, kneeling down beside him. "We have six months to look about us, and you are sure to find something else soon."

"Alas, Mona, land agencies are such difficult things to get nowadays. They are generally kept in the family. I have known men wait four or five years for a chance, and if that is what I am to expect, how are you and the boy to live?"

He dropped his head on his folded arms, so that his face was hidden from her.

"Only trust in God and we shall pull through," said his wife, laying her hand caressingly on his fair hair.

He raised his head and looked at her, a slow smile dawning on his lips as he drew her closely to him.

"Sweet wife," he whispered lovingly, "you have comforted me in my trouble by the comfort wherewith you yourself are comforted of God."

III

"I'm so hungry, mummy. Baby wants something to eat."

Mona raised herself from the low, hard bed on which she was lying, and threw her arms round the little child.

"My dearie," she said, burying her face in his fair curls. "Daddy will be home soon, and he will bring you something. We shall not have long to wait now."

The boy drummed his fingers impatiently together, and seemed not to heed her words.

"I'm so hungry," he repeated wistfully. "Please—please, mummy, give baby something to eat!"

A low sob shook her slender frame as she tightened her arms round him.

"My God, my God, hear my prayer! Have mercy on us!" she cried, in her agony.

It was nearly a year since they had left Wenford, and yet Piers was still out of work. Agencies, as he had foretold, were hard to get, and though he would willingly have turned his hand to anything, there seemed no vacancy for him anywhere.

His uncle had gone to Australia for his health, so, as he was away, Piers made a desperate appeal for help to one or two friends; but he found a vast difference in their attitudes from the time when he was heir to a baronetcy and ten thousand a year.

In despair he brought his wife and child to London, and took a copying clerkship in a solicitor's office; while Mona did a little needle-work for one of the big shops, and cheered her husband on to the best of her power.

Then there came fresh trouble. Piers fell ill, and the copying-clerkship had to be given up. The little hoard of savings was dipped into to buy nourishing food and pay doctor's bills, until there was barely anything left to settle the rent, which was already overdue.