

# The Storyteller

MADGE STEWART

It was raining; yes, raining as if the sun had never shone, and never would shine again o'er that dreary winter scene. At a window of a large house in —shire, sat a girl of not more than twenty summers. She gazed abstractedly at the leafless trees that stretched and waved their gaunt branches to the grey, inclement sky. Her thoughts were far from the scene before her. Memory, with its swift and tireless wings, carried her back to a quaint little village in Southern France. There, in a cottage half hid with roses and woodbine, Madge had passed from babyhood to childhood, and from childhood into early maidenhood in all the enjoyment of a free country life.

After Captain Stewart's death, when Madge was a tiny, fair-haired sprite not yet three years old, his wife removed to this sunny home, hoping that change of scene would be as a balm to her broken heart. Besides, the doctors said the warmer climate might ward off that dread enemy—consumption—which threatened to carry her off prematurely, as, also, it does so many of England's fairest flowers. Here the years glided on peacefully. Mother and daughter were all in all to each other, and felt no need of outside companionship. They wandered through the fields and lanes surrounding the village. They read, and sketched, and chatted. Seldom were seen a mother and daughter so thoroughly one. Mrs. Stewart was to Madge friend and sister as well as mother.

There is no true, lasting happiness in this world. Such an ideal existence could not last. At length the fell disease appeared, and just when Madge was at the age when girlhood's developing ideas—like the shooting rosebud in early springtime, needed most of the gardener's care—required a mother's most watchful training, she was left an orphan.

Shortly before her death, Mrs. Stewart had written to her only living relative—a stepsister—begging her, for the sake of their own dear dead mother, to give a home to her lonely child. Seeing no alternative, Mrs. Redwood had, very unwillingly, accepted the charge laid upon her. So, soon after all that remained of her loving mother had been laid in the little village churchyard, Madge set out, accompanied by the kind old doctor's sister, who was going to England, and would put her safely on the train which would take her to Lyndham, the nearest station to her aunt's residence.

## CHAPTER II.

Four years ago, on just such a day as this, Madge had arrived at Redwood Manor, where dwelt her aunt and two cousins, both girls, and older than herself. Mrs. Redwood was an intensely selfish woman, having but two interests in life—her own comfort and the marrying of her daughters to wealth and position. The man was but a very trivial detail. He might be anything, from an idiot to a savant, provided he either had, or was likely to have, a handle to his name, and his banking account was satisfactory. So far her efforts to get her daughters off her hands had been unsuccessful, though she had pursued her end with an energy worthy of a better cause.

Stella and Maud were their mother reproduced. They were stylish to a degree, could play, sing, dance and ride well, were first-class tennis players. They could talk scandal in the most approved 'afternoon-tea' style, and were replete with small talk. In fact, they were splendidly veneered. But the more solid branches of their education, especially that training of mind and heart which alone makes the true woman, had been sadly neglected. To Mrs. Redwood's distress, her girls were too fond of flirting for their own matrimonial good.

To say that Madge's surroundings were uncongenial is a mild way of stating things. Added to this, her aunt and cousins treated her advent as a species of intrusion. Her nobleness and culture were such a vivid contrast to their emptiness and frivolity that they could not but feel her superiority. And, as is usual with persons of their temperament, because she was superior they cordially disliked her, and did not trouble to hide the fact. This feeling only grew stronger as time passed on. And when at the beginning of this season, Mrs. Redwood very reluctantly introduced her niece into society, the furor her beauty, talent, and charm of manner caused, made them wildly jealous. Society had not gone mad with admiration when they were launched upon its changing waves. What could people see in this unassuming little cousin of theirs? Had she been an heiress she might have understood it, but though Madge had an income sufficient for her needs, no one could call her wealthy.

But this was not all. Some little time before Madge's debut, the Redwood girls had met, at the de Brownson's ball, Mr. Gerald Stirling, a tall, handsome man of about seven and twenty, who, as time went on, had apparently fallen victim to Maud's bewitching glances. Mrs. Redwood, careful mamma as she was, took the earliest opportunity of enquiring into the eligibility of this new gailant. He proved to be all that even she could desire. Immensely wealthy, and—though it was not generally known, and she told only Maud—only the uncertain years of an aged grand-uncle stood between him and the title and estates of Lord Rothwell. How her heart, or what served her for that most maligned organ, swelled with hope and pride as she imagined Maud Lady Rothwell! If only that was an accomplished fact, she would not have lived her life in vain.

'The best-laid schemes of men (or women) and mice,  
Oft gang agley.'

In the beginning of the season Mr. Stirling was absent on the Continent. The first gathering honored by his presence after his return was the Hornsby's tennis party. The Redwoods believed him to be still abroad, and Maud, suffering from a severe cold, remained at home. Mrs. Redwood, Stella, and Madge were there. Madge looked bewitching in a pale blue dress and picturesque white hat. And to Mrs. Redwood's chagrin, Gerald Stirling was evidently very much bewitched.

There had been a complete round of gaities since then, and to Mrs. Redwood's watchful eyes, it was only too plain that the hoped-for prize was fast slipping through her fingers. Poor Maud had been completely deserted in favor of her cousin. The rage and jealousy of mamma and daughter knew no bounds, and in every possible way they showed her their displeasure. Madge, simple child that she was—could not imagine what she had done to make them so much more than usually cutting towards her. She thought nothing of Gerald beyond the fact that he was a pleasant companion, and talked a great deal more sense than the majority of men with whom she came in contact. She was ignorant of her aunt's designs upon his bachelorhood. Mrs. Redwood had made up her mind that she must say something to Madge. She could not stand quietly by and see all her plans wrecked in this manner, and all by a chit of a girl, to whom, in a moment of weakness, she had given shelter. Truly, she had nursed a viper in her bosom.

While waiting an opportunity to speak her mind to Madge, a thunderbolt descended which so altered the course of events that there was no longer any need to speak.

## CHAPTER III.

This morning, upon which our story opens, news had come that the company in which all Madge's money was invested had failed, completely, utterly failed, and she was penniless.

As soon as Mrs. Redwood was informed of Madge's change of fortune she plainly told her that she could not afford to keep her, and that she must look out at once for something to do. Her better nature, so long dormant as to be nearly dead, whispered that it was her duty to offer a home to her orphan niece. But, she argued, Maud and Stella had prior claims upon her. The only hope of their marrying well was for them to move constantly in society; they must go to London for the season, and to the seaside or Switzerland for the summer. To do this required every farthing of her income, consequently keeping Madge was out of the question. Besides, this seemed almost an interposition of Providence to remove Madge from Gerald Stirling's proximity. Once this dangerous rival was out of the way, could he fail to surrender to Maud's beguiling charms? Truly

'Tis an ill wind that blows nobody good.'

A fortnight had elapsed since Madge had found herself a penniless girl. One more added to the crowd of refined and educated women who eagerly search the educational columns of our dailies, and vainly send in their applications over and over again, to be considered by those who advertise for a 'Governess, competent to give a thorough English education, French, German, music, drawing, etc., to several children. Comfortable home' Only too thankful if among the hundred and one competent applicants, they are considered most competent to drum all the etceteras into the wooden heads of Mrs. Brown-Jones's half-dozen stupid olive branches.

Can it be wondered at, if Madge felt very miserable as she asked herself (as she had done about a hundred times a day for the past fortnight) what was she to do? Her spirits were at a very low ebb. Even the weather was depressing, for it was still raining. Longfellow's lines rang incessantly in her head—

'My life is cold and dark and dreary;

It rains, and the wind is never weary;

My thoughts still cling to the mouldering past,

But the hopes of youth fall thick in the blast,