

# The Storyteller.

## BOTH TO BLAME.

(By CLARA MULHOLLAND in *Are Maria*).

It was a dark, cheerless afternoon in November. The air was keen, the wind bitterly cold. From early morning a thick fog had enveloped London like a pall; and the streets in the West End were dreary and deserted, few people caring to leave their homes on such a day unless driven thence by business or duty.

In the dining-room of a house near Russell Square the firelight danced and flickered upon the green painted walls and old family portraits; upon the big, clumsy sofa and high-backed velvet chairs; upon the thick Turkey carpet, crimson tablecloths, and large stands of ferns and evergreens in the window. The furniture was all good and solid, the room high-ceilinged and well-proportioned; yet there was a dingy, gloomy look about it that harmonised with the general dreariness of this most depressing afternoon.

In an arm-chair by the fire sat a tall, slight girl of five or six and twenty. She had fair hair, well-cut, regular features, and a small, prettily shaped mouth. Her eyes were a clear blue, but their expression was somewhat hard; and her whole attitude spoke of weariness and dejection.

"Life is dull!" she murmured, stretching her feet toward the fire and folding her hands upon her lap. "I often envy Lucinda. She got out into the world, away from this dreary stagnation. Sometimes I feel as if it would kill me. And yet I am well dressed, well fed, comfortably housed; but"—she rose to her feet and walked restlessly up and down—"my soul, my heart, is starved—dead almost within me. I am withering away for want of something to care for. And how different was the life I had planned for myself!"

The door opened and the servant entered the room.

"If you please, Miss," she said, "there's a poor woman wishes to see you."

"What does she want, Mary? Is she begging?"

"She did not say, Miss. She looks ill and is wretchedly dressed. She said she was your maid once."

"Show her in."

Mary hurried to light the gas, introduced the stranger, and withdrew.

Evodia looked at the small, fragile figure, the pale, wasted face, and the trembling hands.

"Oh, how ungrateful I am!" flashed through her mind. "I grumble, and think my sorrows unbearable, forgetting the poverty and misery some people endure."

"Miss Mayne, don't you know—don't you remember me?" inquired the poor, scantily dressed creature.

"Laura! Is it possible?"

"Ab, yes, Miss! I am poor, wretched—starving."

"You ought not to be out on such a day. It is not safe."

"I had to come. My little ones are without bread to—"

"Your children!" Evodia made her sit down upon the sofa beside her.

"Yes; my sweet darling. O Miss, you are well off, I hear! You will help us!"

"But your husband—what of him?"

"He is dead,—drank himself to death."

"My poor Laura! Why did you never come to me before?" asked Evodia.

"I thought you were married, and did not dare to face the master."

Evodia cringed.

"He would have helped you. But who told you I—was not married?"

"Dr. Edgar Bruce."

Evodia started round, white as death.

"Who?"

"Dr. Bruce, Miss. I saw the master's death in an old paper yesterday, and I said I wished you were still at home. He told me you were, and that I ought to go to you."

"He—he said that?"

"Yes; and he praised you so, Miss."

"Indeed!" (coldly). "That was very kind of him. But he knows little about me; it is years since we met. Is he"—getting up and walking over to the fireplace—married yet?"

"No. They—that is, his housekeeper says that he'll never marry. He hates women, never goes any place where he'd see a lady, and just lives for his profession. But he's a good man and only for him me and mine would be dead long ago."

"I—I am glad to hear you have such a friend. And now, Laura, go down and get some tea."

She rang the bell.

"Mary"—as the servant appeared—take Mrs. Sawyer to the kitchen and give her a good meal. You need not be afraid, Laura," she said gently, pressing the poor woman's hand. "Your children shall now have everything they require."

"Oh, thank you! God bless you," cried Laura, with emotion; "and give you your heart's desire." And she followed Mary out of the room.

"My heart's desire? If it were possible! If he," her eyes shone, a smile softened and beautified her face—"he hates women! Thank God! for, at that rate, he will never, never marry. But why need I care?" And her hand trembled as she raised her handkerchief to her eyes to wipe away the tears that kept gathering there. But at last she let them fall freely, and sobbed as though her heart would break. "Bitterly do I repent my folly!" she cried. "But, alas! it is too late—too late!"

Some seven years before Lucinda and Evodia Mayne were extremely bright, pretty girls, full of fun, and bent on getting

as much amusement as possible out of life. At the end of her first season Lucinda succumbed to the charms of a gay young captain in the artillery, married him and accompanied him to India. But Evodia, the most unmitigated little flirt ever born, was hard to please, apparently, and refused to marry any of her various suitors. Then, to the surprise of everyone and the great annoyance of her parents, she engaged herself to Edgar Bruce, a struggling young doctor, to whom marriage, for the time being, was an absolute impossibility. Her father fumed and scolded; her mother implored. But Evodia was firm. She loved Edgar and would marry no one else. So, much against their will, her parents consented, and the engagement was announced. For some months the lovers were supremely happy. Edgar began to get on his profession, and their mutual every prospect of their being able to marry in a much shorter time than had been at first expected.

But Evodia went out a great deal; and, Edgar declared, flirted a great deal. This she did not attempt to deny; but, saying gaily, that she must have some occupation, laughed at his jealous fears. Bruce did his best to feel content, but he suffered keenly. The wilful girl's lightness and frivolity caused him many a pang. This state of affairs went on for some time; and then one day things reached a climax, and their brief happiness was at an end.

Amongst their acquaintances was a Captain Dean, a man of rather doubtful character, for whom Bruce had an intense dislike. He admired Evodia, and made no secret of his admiration. This maddened her lover, and he implored her to keep him at a distance. She promised to do so; and, foolish though she thought such a request, was determined to be true to her word. But she had no idea how difficult this would be.

A couple of weeks later a friend of the Maynes gave a picnic on the river. Bruce was detained in town by business. Much rejoiced at his absence, Captain Dean kept close to the girl all day; and, in spite of her cold looks and distant manner, paid her most marked attention.

In the evening Bruce ran down to Maidenhead to join the party at dinner; and as he stood in the garden of the hotel, watching the boats approach, he looked out eagerly for Evodia. But suddenly he flushed hotly, and his heart throbbed with indignation. In the second boat, a little apart from their companions, sat Captain Dean and Evodia Mayne. Her head was bent, and he was whispering in her ear.

Bruce stamped his foot, and an oath escaped his lips.

"This must end, or—"

"Why, Edgar, how angry you look!" said Evodia, springing lightly onto the grass, and lying her hand upon his arm.

"You have disobeyed me!" he cried. "Evodia, I—"

"Pray be calm! It was not my fault."

"Not your fault? I can not believe—"

"Then don't!" she flashed out. "And allow me to say, Dr. Bruce, that I will not be spoken to in such a manner. You do not seem pleased with me of late. But I—well, all things considered, I think we had better end our engagement."

"Evodia, do you mean it?"

"Certainly." She was hurt and angry, and did not weigh her words. "You are tyrannical, jealous. I—"

"Say no more!" He gave her one long look. "I will not trouble you; you are free. Good-bye, Miss Mayne!"

"Good-bye!" she replied; and, scarcely knowing what she did, she took Captain Dean's arm and quickly passed into the dining-room.

Edgar gazed after her in silent consideration; then, with a groan of anguish, turned away and strode out of the garden.

Evodia spent a miserable evening. Emboldened by what he had seen and heard, Captain Dean asked the girl to become his wife. But she refused him indignantly; and, with a storm of tears, accused him of having wrecked her happiness; and, with an angry scene they parted never to meet again.

As soon as she could, Evodia hurried home, half hoping to find Edgar waiting to forgive her; but he was not—had not been there. Then she thought she would write to him. But her pride stopped in and she could not bring herself to do so. He would surely come next day or in the evening, and very soon everything would be explained and forgiven. The day passed over, however; evening came and the night wore on. Another day broke, and another, and another; but Edgar nowhere came nor wrote.

The girl was distracted. He had taken her at her word. Their engagement was at an end; all was over between them. It was cruel, unfair; he ought not to have concerned himself the worst of her so readily. And yet appearances had been against her. It was not surprising he was angry. Once she wrote a long letter telling him this; then she tore it up. He must make the first advance; it was not right that she should do so.

All this happened in June, and in August Evodia went abroad with her father and mother. She told them quietly that she had broken off her engagement and they were not sorry. They were ambitious for their pretty daughter, and hoped that she would soon marry some one more eligible than Edgar Bruce.

The following winter was a severe one, and Mrs. Mayne, never very strong, became a confirmed invalid. Evodia, subdued and saddened, devoted her heart and soul to her mother; and the gay world, of which she had been so brilliant an ornament, saw her no more.

She now led a dull, anxious life; but she never complained. Her parents often wondered at the change in her, but they never guessed what she suffered. Her heart ached and her mind was full of one great yearning. If only she could see Edgar and tell him of her sorrow and beg his forgiveness. For long hours of the day she would sit with her mother, sewing or reading; and all the time she was thinking of Edgar—hoping, watching, waiting. But he never came. He dropped completely out of her life; and at last she became convinced that he had ceased to care and had forgotten her.