

# The Storyteller.

AT LAST!

## CHAPTER I.

'GERALDINE!'

'Yes, aunt.'

'What answer did you give Arthur Fareham this afternoon?'

'The only answer I could ever possibly give him.'

'Do you mean to tell me Geraldine that you have positively refused him?'

'Yes,' and the gentle eyes were raised for the first time and rested on the irate countenance of her aunt, 'for I could never, never marry him.'

'How long do you intend going on like this, Geraldine, defying me and setting my wishes at naught?'

'I always try to conform to your reasonable wishes, aunt but in this instance I cannot accede.'

An angry gleam shot from Mrs. Wentworth's dark eyes, and the lines deepened round the hard, set mouth, as she moved uneasily in her luxuriant arm-chair.

'Have you considered, Geraldine, all that you surrender in discarding this brilliant match—the position, the wealth, the social standing that would be yours? Geraldine!' she cried, almost beseechingly, 'you must, you shall marry him!'

'I cannot, aunt; I care nothing for his wealth.' The quiet tone carried conviction.

'You must be mad! No other girl in the whole of Eastshire would think of refusing Arthur Fareham!'

'It is useless to speak of it, aunt. As I said before, I could never marry him.'

'It is because he is not one of your Papists that you will not marry him. Is not that it?'

'Even if Arthur Fareham were a Catholic I should not marry him, for I do not wish to marry at all, aunt, and it distresses me when you mention the subject.'

Mrs. Wentworth's anger rose higher and higher, and, in the excitement, she sprang from her chair and stood on the hearthrug, rage and disappointment depicted on her sharp, angular features.

'I know what it is, Geraldine: I have sifted your motives. You think you will inherit all that I have and then bestow it with a lavish hand on your priests and nunneries; but rest assured of this, none of the Wentworths' money shall ever be devoted to such a purpose. I have quite made up my mind to that!'

Unconsciously Geraldine's lip curled.

'Indeed, aunt, the disposal of your property is a subject that has never crossed my mind. You are, of course, free to bestow it where you will, and I must claim at least the right to choose my own destiny and refuse to be forced into a marriage that is so repugnant to my feelings.'

Mrs. Wentworth saw that the argument was vain and useless, consequently her anger drew deeper and stronger. A union between Geraldine and Arthur Fareham had been her one aim and desire.

Arthur Fareham being the only son, and consequently sole heir to his father's vast estates, was considered a most desirable 'catch' by all ambitious and speculating mothers, as well as by their amiable daughters; and when he showed marked attention to Geraldine Mrs. Wentworth was delighted beyond measure. Such a union surpassed her most sanguine expectations, and the thought of eventually leaving her own immense wealth joined to that of the Fareham's vast domains pleased her fancy and flattered her vanity immensely. Under such pleasing prospects she could with complacency make Geraldine and Arthur Fareham her joint heir.

But here came the rude awakening from her cherished dream by Geraldine's obstinate refusal.

Mrs. Wentworth's heart grew hard and her will more determined as she gazed at her niece, who was so docile to her wishes in most things, yet she knew perfectly well that on certain points her will could be as inflexible as her own.

'Yes, Geraldine,' she said, in a hard, dry voice, 'I acknowledge you are free to choose your own destiny, and so by that choice you must abide; our lives henceforth must run in different channels. Don't interrupt me,' she cried, seeing that Geraldine glanced up questioningly. 'You shall hear me to the end.'

'Arthur Fareham implored me to-day to use my influence with you, to speak to you once more on the subject of your giving a favourable ear to his solicitations, and it is at his request that I speak to you to-night. Meanwhile I have been thinking this matter over very seriously, and I have come to the conclusion that if you thwart my wishes in this matter I wash my hands of you completely. I consider that I have done my duty and fulfilled the promise to my dying sister in giving you a home as long as you required it, and now that you have Arthur Fareham's offer you require my home no longer. If you choose to be so blind to your own interests as to reject his suit, I can only say to you that you must go your own way, choose your own path—my house ceases to be your home.'

The blood rushed into Geraldine's face, but her aunt mistook its meaning, for the lowered lids and long lashes concealed the glad joy that leapt into her eyes. Mrs. Wentworth looked at her niece expecting an angry retort or vehement protestation, and she was considerably taken back when Geraldine, raising her gentle, dove-like eyes, quietly replied: 'I am ready, aunt, to go at any moment.'

Stung by the answer, Mrs. Wentworth's anger increased, for she perceived that what was intended to be an overpowering calamity was only a subject of gratification to her niece.

'Go, ungrateful one!' she cried, her voice choked with fury.

'I see now what is my reward for nursing a serpent in my bosom.'

But what could I expect,' she added scornfully, 'from the daughter of a miserable French minstrel?'

The flush on Geraldine's cheek gave place to two burning spots as she turned to her aunt and said with quiet hauteur:

'You may say what you like to me, but I will not allow a slur to be thrown on my beloved father's memory. He bore an honoured and an honourable name, and he was every inch a true and chivalrous gentleman.'

Geraldine then hastily quitted her aunt's presence, and, gaining the privacy of her own room, she threw herself upon her knees, and, burying her face in her hands, she cried: 'At last, oh my God, at last! The hour has come when I can at last fulfil my heart's desire. Accept me, unworthy though I am, as Thy servant and handmaid. "Show me the way wherein I should walk; teach me to do Thy will, for Thou art my God!" And the tears gently poured down her cheeks—not the tears that are the outcome of anger and vexation, but tears that, like the gentle dewdrops of heaven, brought peace and relief to her troubled heart.'

Whilst Geraldine is there pouring forth her whole soul in prayer, we will take the liberty of making a short review of her past—and not altogether uneventful—career.

Geraldine was the only child of Mrs. Wentworth's sister, who had mortally offended that lady by marrying M. de Perrier, a professor of music, who, although coming from a good old French family, was not endowed with much of this world's goods, and who, moreover, was a devout Catholic; and when a little later on Madame de Perrier embraced her husband's religion Mrs. Wentworth's anger and indignation knew no bounds, and she ceased all intercourse with her sister. But Madame de Perrier was too happy in the society of her devout husband and the sweet little baby girl with which God had blessed their union to miss the companionship of her proud and ambitious sister.

Geraldine was the joy and delight of her fond parents. How lovingly did they watch the first baby steps! how sweet to them was the music of her childish prattle! and with what reverence, night and morn, did they join the tiny hands whilst they taught the baby lips to lisp the sweet names of Jesus and Mary!

Geraldine in due time was sent to a convent school. Oh how fervently did that Christian father and mother recommend their absent darling to the tender care of their Heavenly Father, that He might always have her in His holy keeping.

M. de Perrier, after attending a concert one night, caught a severe chill; inflammation of the lungs followed, and Geraldine, at the age of 15, was hastily summoned to the bedside of her sick father, where she arrived only just in time to receive the last look and dying blessing of her fond parent.

Overwhelmed with grief, Geraldine tried to console her almost inconsolable mother; but alas! the delicate constitution of the stricken widow never rallied from the terrible blow, and before the expiration of one short year Geraldine stood again beside the open grave and saw her much-loved parents united once more in the cold embrace of death.

Feeling that her end was approaching, Madame de Perrier had sent a message to her sister to come to her, and implored her with her dying breath to take care of her darling Geraldine, to give her the shelter of her home, extorting from her at the same time the promise not to interfere with her religion.

Had Geraldine been of unprepossessing appearance Mrs. Wentworth would not so readily have acceded to her dying sister's request; but she was struck by the graceful elegance of her fair young niece, and quick as lightning it flashed across the mind of this ambitious woman how, in a few years' time, this young girl, with her distinguished appearance and winning face, would have the power to draw to her house the circle of society which now she courted in vain.

Mrs. Wentworth was the widow of the senior partner of Wentworth, Baxter, and Co., bankers. As they were childless, Mr. Wentworth left his widow in sole possession of his effects and great wealth.

After the first years of her widowhood were over, Mrs. Wentworth, who loved adulation and flattery, entertained sumptuously, and left no stone unturned to make her parties an unqualified success, but the absence of someone young and more attractive than herself was keenly felt. The young people voted her a bore, and the older ones could plainly perceive the acidity of her nature in spite of her efforts to appear amiable. She could not shut her eyes to the fact that plainly there was something wanting which she herself could not supply, and to her chagrin, as time went on, she saw her acquaintances—friends she had none—dwindle away, till at last she found herself stranded, with only a small circle of sycophants left to render her homage.

Taking in at a glance Geraldine's attractiveness, she unhesitatingly assured the dying mother that she need have no fear for the future of her child—that her house henceforth should be Geraldine's home. Comforted somewhat by this assurance, the dying mother peacefully breathed her last.

Bowed down beneath the weight of this crushing blow, Geraldine could scarcely raise her head, and when she did so and looked into the cold unsympathetic face of her aunt, her poor, grief-stricken heart yearned for some warm, genuine sympathy, and a great longing rose up within her to go back to her convent school. There she knew open arms and loving hearts would be ready to receive her. Her gentle, docile disposition had made her a special favourite with the nuns, and in her deep sorrow she felt as though they were the only true friends she could look to. She therefore begged her aunt to let her go back to St. Mary's Convent. Mrs. Wentworth, to whom the sight of mourning and sorrow was distasteful, gladly gave her consent. It suited her for Geraldine to get over her tears and sorrow away from her: Geraldine in a few years hence, under a different aspect, was what she wished for.

Accordingly the orphan child returned to St. Mary's, and there, amidst the peaceful surroundings and loving sympathy of her beloved nuns, time at last assuaged her grief.