

The Storyteller

RECONCILED.

CHAPTER I.

In his cosy sitting-room sat Harry Lingard, and on the cheerful hearth-rug lay his sole companion, a fox-terrier named Jack. Jack, whose day had been spent in the frantic but fruitless chasing of sparrows in the snowy streets, looked tired but comfortable; the handsome face of his master, whose chief employment that day had been the choosing and despatching of a beautiful gold bracelet to a certain lady at Linden-Lea, wore a decidedly sad expression.

'It is good to be a dog,' thought Harry, 'bad to be a married man and have no wife. Such a wretch is an anomaly in polite society.' He snapped his fingers. Jack, sacrificing comfort to sympathy, rose and rested his white muzzle between his master's hands.

'Jack,' said Harry, 'it's hard lines, old fellow. It is not good for man to live alone. "Not alone," you say. "You rascal!" Well, not quite, perhaps. Put what do you know about Scripture? We used to be great company, you and I, Jack. But that was before Bessie—'

At the word Jack sprang round and stood with his eyes fixed on the curtained doorway, his stump of a tail wagging expectantly.

'She won't come, Jack.'

Jack resumed his position for conversation.

'No, she won't,' went on his master, and a dry, husky sob struggled from his breast and a tear—yes, actually a tear—fell into Jack's right eye and made him blink.

'Women have no hearts, Jack, nowadays, at least nothing to count on, or she would have come back long ago to her—to a faithful old dog that loves her.'

There was a ring at the door bell, and Jack, with a bark, rushed through the curtains into the hall, followed by his master, who opened the street door, and the light from the vestibule lamp fell upon as dirty a little impish face as could be found in the city noted for its cleanliness and sanitary economies.

'You Mr. Lingard?' asked the imp, unhesitatingly.

'I am, young man,' replied Harry. 'Step in out of the cold. Never mind your tunic. You won't be able to get into it again. Now?'

You're to come straight with me. A gentleman wants to see you,' answered the imp. 'The lady gave me 10 cents to fetch you.'

'Indeed? Where may this imperative gentleman live, my young Mercury?'

'That's not my name. I'm Joe—I am, and I wasn't to tell you anything—only to bring you.'

Harry, wondering a little at the imp's assurance, laughed, returned to the hall for his hat and coat, and in a few minutes was walking down the street with this strange guide. They entered a house in a row of shabby tenements in the East End, and the boy led Harry upstairs and knocked at the door of a room on the first flat. The door was opened by a fair-haired, sweet-faced young lady, who bade him enter.

'Harry, old fellow, I thought you would come. I am glad to see you,' came from a pale, sick-looking young man reclining in an easy chair.

'Herbert,' exclaimed Harry, clasping the thin, worn hand. 'Is it indeed you?'

'Annie,' said the young man, without rising, 'this is Harry Lingard, my sister's husband. My wife, Harry.'

'Your wife?' gasped Harry, taking Annie's hand and gazing in surprise at the softly-flushing countenance.

'My dear wife,' asseverated Herbert, with moist eyes. 'And the sweetest little woman that God ever made.'

The excitement brought on a violent fit of coughing, and Annie was by his side in a moment.

'Herbert,' she pleaded, in her low, tender voice, 'you must be quiet.'

'Yes, dear, I will be more careful,' said the husband, drawing his wife to him. 'Sit here, Harry, I want to talk to you.'

'When I left home two years ago I was forbidden my father's house. What I was before that, Harry, you know. What I have since been, Annie knows—don't you, dear?' he asked, kissing her hand.

'You have been the best and dearest of husbands,' was the fond reply.

'Then I am what my wife has made me,' said Herbert, simply.

'I vowed I would never enter my father's house again. Then I went to Montreal, where I met Annie and married her, and I have found that there is no truer protection under heaven for a man against himself than a fond and faithful wife. Everything went well with us at first, Harry, but my constitution does not seem to be the best. Three months ago I caught a severe cold, which, being neglected, pronounces to—' he winced a little—'to lay me up. Annie here is the cleverest little woman.' Annie blushed and raised a warning finger.

'She can speak French like a native. She is a capital stenographer and type-writer, and she has worked herself to death to make all ends meet.'

'Herbert!' exclaimed Annie, 'do not say such things, please.'

'I wouldn't care, Harry,' went on Herbert, 'if it were merely for my own sake—but something must be done for her now—and I have come here to play the prodigal—to humble myself before my father, and I want you to help me.'

Harry took out his watch, but it was remarkable what a time he was making out the hour.

It is nine o'clock. In ten minutes I shall have a hack here, and you and Mrs. Travick are going to my house. There is plenty of room there, God knows,' said Harry, with a bitterness his hearers could not understand.

'Now, not a word, Mrs. Travick. The drive will not hurt Herbert, so please be ready.'

Without waiting for further speech Harry was gone, and an hour later, to Jack's astonishment, no fewer than three persons were cosily grouped around the sitting-room fire, one of whom was young and fair, and, to his intense delight and comfort, wore petticoats.

Presently Herbert inquired:

'But where is Bessie, Harry?'

Harry's face flushed even in the ruddy glow of the fire as he answered.

'She is at home.'

'At home? Do you mean at Linden-Lea?'

Harry nodded, whilst Herbert and his wife watched the sad, averted face.

'I may as well tell you,' said Harry, looking up. 'It will save misapprehension.'

'Our marriage, Herbert, was a mistake. Bessie should have married a wealthy man, and I a woman like your wife.' And he smiled sadly.

'Business was bad—wretched, and I could not afford to go the pace necessary to meet Bessie's requirements. This led to misunderstandings, and I regret to say, bitter words, and she returned to her parents' home. That is all there is to it.'

'And does your—your wife never, never come to see you, Mr. Lingard?' asked Annie, with amazement in her tender eyes.

'She has not been inside of this house for two months,' Harry replied, huskily.

'I am afraid we are a sad lot, we Travicks,' said Herbert. 'We don't seem to be able to run straight. You won't care to accompany me to Linden-Lea to-morrow, then, Harry.'

'Oh, yes,' laughed Harry. 'Your parents and I are the best of friends; so are Bessie and I—friends, you know.' And he wondered how she would receive that gold bracelet he had sent her.

Herbert and his wife retired for the night and left their host alone with his thoughts—and Jack.

For some time Harry Lingard sat gazing at the two vacant chairs in such loving conjunction on the opposite side of the fire-place, and his thoughts were bitter as death. Alas! how many of these little tragical ironies of life are being enacted every day! To Harry, Herbert Travick, a homeless outcast, penniless, ill, almost starving, with that fair young life twining round his existence, was an object of envy. He, with his tasteful home and a competence sufficient to make a woman like Herbert's wife richly contented, could not keep the woman he had married within his home.

The clock struck 12. It was Christmas Day—a day in all the year sacred to tender feeling and the reunion of hearts estranged. With a groan Harry buried his head in his arms on the table.

Yes, it was a mistake he said to himself, to marry Bessie Travick. Nurtured in luxury, the belle of fashionable society, with a home and a life that satisfied every requirement of her nature, how could he, a mere business man—rising, it was true—hope to make her happy? And yet, he thought, he had honestly striven to do so. How often, when brain sick with planning and heart-sick with the fear of ruin, he had danced a nightly attendance on his beautiful wife in her ceaseless round of gaiety, and weary and leaden-souled had stolen from her side the next morning to renew the stern grapple with the hard necessities of business life! Then when banks were closing their doors and old reliable houses failing, when every dollar he had in the world was needed to keep his own little ship afloat, she had proposed and insisted on giving a series of entertainments that would have stripped the roof from their heads. What had he done then?

In his desperation he had inveighed against the useless extravagance, and when his wife, hurt by his stern words, had answered hotly, he had bade her mind her own affairs and cultivate a better temper. Then with the additional burden of this sharp estrangement round his heart, he had taken his way down to his office and by dint of clever management and pure pluck succeeded in floating his storm-tossed little barque into smoother and safer waters. He had come home that evening not unnaturally elated with his triumph and ready to make any possible amends for his harshness and necessary restrictions to find by his dinner plate a perfumed note from his wife, informing him that as she felt she had no place in his home or his affections she had resolved to seek the shelter of her parents' roof. Whereupon he had sprung from his table and despatched two notes, one to his wife and another to her father; the former stating that her home was open to her whenever she should think fit to enter it, but that he would never ask her to do so; the latter requesting Mr. Travick not to interfere, but to allow things to run their own course.

In the light and warmth of the touching scenes of conjugal trust and affection which he had witnessed that night he taxed himself with his fair share of the blame, but his heart was torn with tender regrets and