

# The Storyteller

## MARGA'S DRESSMAKER

### I.

We were strolling in one of the suburbs of Vienna. 'Look,' exclaimed my friend Marga. 'Here comes my dressmaker—a nice little body, is she not?'

A refined-looking, neatly-dressed woman passed us, with a smile and a graceful bow. She was walking rapidly, and a small boy followed her carrying a large wide box.

'She has crowds of fashionable customers,' added my friend; 'and I wonder how she can retain them all without extra help. But she is positively indefatigable. Her husband is a "Beamter"—that is, you know, in the State service, with a good salary.'

'Then he ought to be ashamed of himself!' I said. 'Fancy making his wife work like that!'

'You wrong him,' returned my friend; 'and here is where my story comes in. I must tell you why I am so interested in her. I went one day to see if she could manage to finish a theatre bodice of mine earlier than we had arranged; and, on entering, found the room occupied by a huge blonde gentleman, lounging about in the most nonchalant manner, and puffing a cigarette. He removed the latter on seeing me, but his face expressed a certain bewilderment.'

'Is Madam Strell at home?' I asked, somewhat puzzled.

'Certainly, Madam,' he replied; and called 'Gretta! Gretta!' with true marital authority.

A startled, anxious face looked out from an inner door for a moment, and Gretta's voice said:

'Please wait one moment: I am coming.'

In a short time she appeared, came forward, and to my surprise shook hands with me.

'This is my husband,' she said, introducing him formally.

She then began to chat; behaving in general like a lady who was receiving a visit from one of her acquaintances. 'My woman's instinct kept me on the alert, and I carefully followed her lead.'

'Do let me show you the new hat Raimund bought for me,' she said at last, leading the way to an inner room.

The Beamter profited of the move to make an elegant bow and take himself off. I then turned to my companion with a face that very probably represented a point of interrogation—like yours just now.

And Marga broke off with a laugh.

'Oh, do go on!' I said. 'I acknowledge I am curious.'

'Well,' continued Marga, 'she thanked me earnestly for not alluding to the dress. "The truth is," she said, "my husband is well-to-do—a Beamter, in fact—and he sees no necessity for my keeping up my trade. Madam will understand, however, that there are many people I cannot see my way to refuse—particularly friends who patronised me before my marriage, and have got so used to me they do not like to employ a stranger." (I was not one of these, but I did not say so.) "I did not expect Madam to-day," she went on volubly, "as it is a holiday, and Raimund would be at home. Of course it is wrong to have secrets from one's husband, but men are sometimes so unreasonable—and there are so many things wanted in a house. Why should I be idle, Madam? I am happy when I work; and my earnings are my own, are they not?"'

'Of course,' I said, recalling all my woman's independence theories. "You are quite right to work, and it is surely more praiseworthy than to pass your free time in dressing and visiting like so many other Beamters' wives. But perhaps your husband finds you overdo it and neglect your health?"'

'Oh, no!' she said, with a pleasant laugh. 'He doesn't mind my stitching, and only jokes at my vanity, for he thinks it is mostly for myself I take such pains.'

She then opened the ottoman on which we had been seated, and drew from among a pile of other materials the half-sewn bodice which had been the cause of my unannounced visit, at the same time resuming her professional manner, which she did not again lay aside.

'Raimund will peep into that box one day,' I declared.

'No,' replied Marga. 'He probably has no idea that it opens.'

'All the same, she cannot go long undiscovered,' I insisted. 'Spite her plannings and combinings, he will come home unexpectedly some day and find her pinning linings on you or me.'

'What?' exclaimed my friend. 'So you will patronise her, too? Merely for the pleasure of outwitting a man, I feel sure.'

'No,' I said. 'Your dresses are well made. I do not see why I cannot also help an industrious little woman who wishes to have a small income of her own, instead of being a parasite on her husband.'

'Very true,' answered Marga. 'That is just how I felt. But, do you know, if it had been anybody else that this good, quiet creature, I should not like to continue a customer.'

'Quite naturally,' I assented. 'But hard work can have nothing wrong in itself. It is a refutation of any unworthy motive. Besides, the face of that woman does not allow of suspicion.'

'How much you manage to see in one glimpse!' she laughed. 'My story is not lost, I see.'

'Give me her address,' I said. 'I admire her pluck or industry, and I am sure there is some serious reason at the bottom of it. But I shall not look her up at her own place, for I do not care to encounter the blonde lion. Are you sure he does not profit by her busy fingers?'

'I think not. I was curious enough to make inquiries, and my husband tells me he is quite a model clerk.'

'All the same, he can't be nice,' I maintained; 'otherwise his wife would not need to have this secret from him. She must want for money.'

### II.

It was about a year later that Marga and I happened to be again together, driving in the Prater, when she called my attention to a tall, well-dressed man walking toward us.

'That's Madam Strell's husband,' she said. 'As you see, he won't salute me; although he never failed to lift his hat most correctly when we used to meet after our first introduction. He looks sourly on those who patronise his wife and enable her to follow her trade, I suppose.'

'So he knows about it!' I exclaimed. 'I often wanted to ask you about her. Are you still satisfied with her work?'

'Well, no,' said Marga. 'I am on the lookout for another dressmaker. She has been very unpunctual and careless of late.'

'Poor thing! She looks so pale and tired!' I said. 'She must work harder than ever, now that there is no longer any concealment.'

'Yes,' she told me her husband saw how difficult it was to make both ends meet, and does not hinder her.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' I said; 'for I think she is working herself to death.'

'Let us drive there,' proposed Marga, with a sudden impulse. 'She has a promenade costume of mine in hands for over a month. Would it bore you?'

'Not at all,' I answered. 'Let us go by all means, although I have never been to see her about my clothes. Indeed, till lately there was no need to do so, as she used to be exactness itself.'

'Unfortunately, it is not,' said Marga; 'though she works late and early, and he has been promoted.'

We waited for some moments after Marga had knocked at a small door on the third storey. This had a tiny card pinned on the top panel, bearing 'Madam Strell, Dressmaker,' in her own handwriting. My heart sank at the wan face of the little woman who opened the door for us. I remembered her so brisk and pleasant—a different being. She led us into the room where she had evidently been at work, and began to apologise for delay.

'I see you have a great many things in hand,' I said. 'You should not accept more than you can do. You look worn out. Give yourself a rest.'

'Oh, no, Madam!' she replied, with a smile. 'I am not tired, and I can be happy only when I work. It is important, too, that I should earn.'

'But you will make yourself ill,' protested Marga. 'You are not reasonable. Don't you see that if you break down you will be obliged to give up your customers?'

'That is what I fear,' she said, with a startled look from Marga to me. 'But what can I do?'

She sank into a chair and clasped her hands.

'You won't withdraw your custom from me,' she murmured, 'when I tell you how—'

All at once she turned deadly pale and closed her eyes.

Marga and I looked at each other for a moment in utter dismay. I then stooped down and took the cold hands in mine, while Marga rang violently.

'Shall I get you a glass of wine?' I asked, as a small stubbarchen appeared. 'Here are salts. Only keep quiet and tell us what to do.'