

The Storyteller

A SIMPLE STORY.

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The Advent of Rottraut.

'WHAT, another girl?' said the Baron, as he stood at the cradle and gave a disappointed look at the little thing that lay with tight fists, its crumpled face half hidden. 'And the child seems dreadfully small to me, nurse. It is hardly to be found in the pillows. Is it a real healthy baby?'

'Indeed, I think it is, sir. But it is not at all like the other children. I did not care to show her to my lady, for she is so small. But then she has time enough to grow.'

'Papa, may we see little sister?' came children's voices from the outside.

The father opened the door. 'Easy easy!' he said, warningly, and three little girls from four to eight years old came tip-toeing into the room, looking wide-eyed at the cradle.

'Were we all so ugly, too?' asked the second eldest, after a few moments of astonished survey, turning her pretty face to her father, while the other two were still watching the tiny stranger in mute curiosity.

'Little babies are never pretty,' said the father soothingly.

'Mamma always says that I was pretty at the very beginning,' the oldest one said, full of the consciousness of her own charms. Rosy-cheeked, regular of feature, yellow-haired, and brilliant-eyed as she was, it did not seem, indeed, that she could ever have been anything but pleasant to look upon.

'What a funny nose she has!' said the second one again. 'Just look, papa, how it turns up.'

'Take care of your own nose, miss,' said the nurse, who, after proper nurse-fashion, took the part of the youngest arrival. 'Your nose will be so long some day that you'll be glad enough to give her a piece of it if you could.'

'People with large noses appear intelligent,' said the father consolingly to the offended second eldest.

'Why, papa, I believe little sister's hair is red,' the oldest began her critique again. 'None of us had red hair.'

'Sister is opening her eyes! Sister is smiling!' called out the youngest, as the little one stretched its tiny fists across its face, opened its blinky little eyes, and pulled up its mouth so that it seemed as if it were really smiling.

'O papa,' said the children in a chorus, 'look what a big mouth she has. It reaches to her ears.'

'Now be still, children,' said the nurse, reprovingly. 'You have waked up little sister. She's a smart little thing, just the same. See, she's laughing at your nonsense. When she grows up she will probably be much more beautiful than the rest of you and will marry a prince, and then where will you be?'

Just then the doctor entered, and the children's attention was diverted from the queer little sister, for, instead of the regular family physician, his assistant had come on account of the old doctor's illness. The new doctor, who was still a very young man, was not only a stranger to them, but he was somewhat crippled, an accident in his childhood having caused an injury to his spine. His face was pale and rather thin, as is often noticeable in cripples. But the eyes were large and fine, and the symmetrical head led one to think that he must possess unusual intelligence. He had, moreover, a look of settled melancholy, though his expression when speaking was most pleasant and kindly.

After he had said a few words to

the Baron, he stepped to the cradle and looked at the child.

'Do you really think the child can live? There is nothing wrong with her, is there?' asked the anxious father, while the physician examined the tiny being.

'I do not find anything that points to any defect,' answered the physician, 'and with good care—turning to the nurse—'which she will undoubtedly have, I am sure she will grow and thrive splendidly.'

The old nurse looked at him gratefully.

'A wonderfully plain little lady,' said the father. 'She will have to change considerably if she expects to make conquests some day. What color are her eyes, nurse? I believe they are blue.'

'Brown,' said the nurse.

'But I see distinctly this eye is blue.'

The physician bent over the child again and looked at it.

'The little one has, so far as I can see now, different colored eyes—one is brown and one is blue.'

'What! That too? Why, that is a terrible state of things for a girl,' said the father. 'She is a regular child of misfortune. If she were but a boy!'

'One can't tell that yet,' said the nurse again. 'Just see what a jolly face she has even now.'

'She will need to have something to offset the rest of her.'

'What shall we call the little lady of the red hair?' said the Baron again.

'Call her Rottraut. If she is sweet and loving everyone will forget her red hair,' said the doctor.

And thus the little lady was called, for in the old German name Traut means loving and true, and Rot red.

It was many years later. The little girls were all young ladies, even the youngest with the red hair and the turned-up nose.

'I am really grown-up and a young lady. I have even been at a number of balls. Just ask mamma, doctor,' she added, for there seemed to be a doubt in the eyes of her listener.

The man to whom she was speaking was the same physician who had stood at her cradle, and now a trusted and noted practitioner. After the death of the old doctor he came into most of his practice, that of the Baron's family included. The nurse liked him because he managed to persuade her into his way of thinking without antagonising her. Between them they brought up the dainty little girl.

'There is little of her,' the nurse was wont to say, 'but what there is is jolly and good and contented. Her off-colored eyes see nothing but the pleasant side of things.'

Although her mother sighed very often when she looked at the little creature and considered, with some dismay, her possible future, the physician in whom many trusted and believed was delighted at the affection the child seemed to have for him. The pleasant little face was full of life and vivacity, and even her parents observed what delight went with her presence.

'Rottraut always thinks of something jolly,' her sisters said of her, 'and the teachers like her best. For even when she does not know anything, she has some answer that makes them laugh, and they do not scold her, and they like her better even than Gertrude, who is so much smarter.'

Gertrude's nose had really become a little too long, but she had an air of brightness and intelligence, and people called her 'distinguished.' Elsie, the oldest, was beautiful, even

as she had been a child, and no one thought of what she knew or did not know when he looked at her. Lisa, the third, had a healthy bloom that was exceedingly pretty, though she was hardly a beauty, and it was said of her that she would be an excellent wife some day. Of the fourth, however, people said but little, or if they did, and meant to be kind, they said that children change a great deal as they grow up.

Now she was grown, indeed, but very little changed, so even the doctor, who was used to the irregularities of her face, had to admit. It came home to him particularly just now, after his return from a stay of several months spent at a university in special studies. It astonished him, too, to see the delight she evidently took in society. He himself never went out to social affairs because of his deformity, and for her, too, he feared that the rebuffs that came to plainness and unattractiveness would destroy her sunny disposition. He could not understand how her parents could expose her to the chance of experiences which are always so much more sad and bitter for a woman than for a man. But it had happened, and there she sat and laughed the same as ever, and talked even more gaily.

'I'll tell you how it is, doctor—or must I call you professor just now?'

He shook his head.

'But I would like so much,' she persisted. 'You see, I always have a better time than the others. If I were good-looking I would have to spend two or three more years studying, for Elsie does not care to have so many younger sisters going out with her. But mamma so often complained of staying at home on my account that the other girls found it uncomfortable, and at last they asked that I be taken along. It did not make any difference, being only me, for they did not think that I would take any of their dances from them. So I have gone to a number of balls and have come out much younger than my sisters did.'

'And you enjoyed yourself?' the doctor asked still dubious.

'Of course I enjoyed myself. Did not old nurse always say that I could please anybody?' she asked, roguishly. 'If anyone likes brown eyes I look at him with my right eye, if he likes blue, I let him gaze into my left. There were many girls there who did not dance, and I did not either at first. But I had my own special joke. It pleased my sisters so to have people ask who I was, and then have them remark that I do not look a bit like the other girls! Once I heard a little lieutenant asking Elsie, "Who is that wonderful Aurora over there?" and then see him wilt when he heard that it was her sister. Afterward he had to take me in to dinner. I believe he could not see straight for a few moments, he was so frightened. But I consoled him. "Aurora always precedes the light," I said. He became very red, a regular blush of dawn, and stammered all sorts of apologies, but when I laughed he finally laughed too, and we had a very pleasant time together after that. At the next ball he came to me right in the beginning and we had three dances together. Think of it, doctor, three dances! But don't be surprised. The belles had no wish to dance with him because he is so little and still so young, so that we two had a very nice time without anyone bothering. He is the nicest, the very nicest lieutenant that there ever, ever was—'

'If you enjoy going out so much I am afraid that the plan I was thinking of will not please you,' interrupted the doctor. During all her chatter he seemed to be thinking deeply.

Just now he was reflecting how often people who have the very best intentions in the world do the wrong