

The Storyteller

A SIMPLE STORY.

(Conclusion.)

Not until she was gone did she remember that he had said that her old nurse was ill, and had suggested how glad the good old nurse woman would be if Rottraut would come to see her and tell her some of her jolly stories. But what would she say to the old woman? In these days when the Prince was expected to call she had no desire to go away off into the suburbs. Moreover, she was convinced that her sister Lisa had visited her.

The Prince did not call on the following day, but he was so occupied with the different ladies of the house that he had but time to say a few words to Rottraut. He told her then how sorry he was that he could give her so little attention, and that was as good as a long conversation.

A few days later the Princess came and was most anxious to see the Baroness. Her maid of honor was ill, and she needed some one in her place; would she not let her have Rottraut for the time?

Naturally the Baroness was flattered, but astonished at the Princess' selection. Elsie or Gertie would have been more suitable, but Gertie said that the Princess did not want to be overshadowed by Elsie's beauty, nor by her, Gertie's, cleverness.

'She is careful on account of the Prince,' said Gertrude.

'That is it,' said Rottraut. 'I always get the good things because no one is afraid of me.'

She said it laughingly, but for the first time her too ample mouth showed a bitter and disagreeable line. Perhaps she could show her sisters that she could make a different impression to what they imagined.

In the service of the Princess Rottraut found so much to do, and she had to accustom herself to so many new things, that she had little time to think. In a few days the Prince himself called, and remained to tea, something which he had never done before. He seemed highly pleased to meet Rottraut and talked a good deal.

'He just stayed because you entertained him so well. You always gave something interesting and pleasant to say. I wish I could talk as you do. I can never say a word to him no matter how hard I try. Can you not help me?' asked the Princess, and her great velvety eyes were fixed so confidently on Rottraut that the girl had a guilty feeling of being unworthy of so much of her confidence.

'I believe I can tell you,' she answered, 'why you have nothing to say. A woman can never say much in the presence of some one of whom she is very fond. A man, on the other hand, finds all the more to say,' and she smiled and buried her little nose in the tea rose which the Prince had given her.

'If women cannot talk when they are in love then you must never have been in love,' said the Princess, as she brushed back the girl's red ringlets almost tenderly. These same ringlets were built up now after the most approved fashion, and pale yellow tea roses nestled in them.

'Those yellow roses in your hair were really a happy suggestion on the part of the Prince. You ought always to wear brown velvet and pale yellow roses, especially if it should happen some day that you too would be afflicted by a thick tongue and nothing to say,' and the Princess kissed the girl tenderly.

If it is true that a man's wit is quickened by being in love, as Rottraut said, then it was not well with the Prince. For he had a desire to do and say many things these days,

and most of them had some relation to the plain little maid of the beautiful Princess. He had a new plan for every day. Sometimes it was a visit to the museum, sometimes to the theatre, sometimes a little excursion into the country, winding up with a country dance. If Rottraut noticed these things she gave no sign, although she usually took part and wore her pale yellow roses. The Prince spent a great deal of time at her side. The Princess may have noticed this, but she would not let herself think of it, for she did not believe that she could come to grief through Rottraut, in whom she had confided utterly.

It was true, too, that the Prince had made it a point to express opinions upon many things at these fetes—and he had particularly insisted that a pretty face could never satisfy him. Wit was more than beauty; he admired the effervescent quickness of mind that brightens and fascinates. This was most pleasant to Rottraut, for even her best friend, the doctor, had never praised her in that way. And so she began to think again that if the Princess had taken her merely because she was not good-looking, and there was no need to be afraid of her, she knew differently by this time.

And with all these thoughts it was not unnatural that she became quieter and more quiet all the time.

The Prince thought so too, and said to her one day: 'The air of the court is not good for you; out in the country you never looked as serious as you do now. I hope that when we go out to my lodge to-morrow you will find your delicious sparkle again. Do you not remember how we walked through the woods together, and you had a different story for every flower, every tree?'

'I hope I may count on you to-morrow,' he added, softly, 'for I have something particularly to say to you—for once I should like to have the privilege of saying something unusual myself,' he added, and stooped to pick up the rose which she had dropped. But not to return it to her, but to fasten it into his buttonhole as if he too had acquired a fondness for pale yellow roses.

When Rottraut went to bed that evening she lay awake, filled with a strange restlessness that banished sleep for the first time in her life.

In the morning she found that the country air might not be good for her, and as she had not seen her father for so long a time, she would spend the day with him. He would be all alone, for her mother and sisters would join the country party. Then, too, she could at last make the long-promised call to her old nurse. And really the party would not miss her.

The Princess seemed distressed at her request, but she gave her permission nevertheless, saying, however, that the Prince would no doubt be displeased, as he had planned the outing for Rottraut's benefit.

As Rottraut sat with her father and watched the coaches roll away her feelings were most conflicting. Would the Prince miss her? And she felt that he would, and somehow she found little to say to her father, who was not in very good humor himself.

Indeed, lately all sorts of unpleasant thoughts had come into his mind.

Elsie, Gertie, and Lisa, his three beautiful daughters, had been out in society for many years, and had been taken to every function, and what had come of it? Elsie could only marry Count Walden when he obtained his court appointment, and that was still far afield. Who knew

whether he would ever get it? Also, was it not said that the Prince cared but little for the Princess who had been selected as his bride, and that he loved someone else not his equal in rank. Even yesterday he had heard similar allusions at the Casino—and why did Rottraut stay at home to-day? What could it mean?

But Rottraut would not listen to her father. She brought out the cards and reminded him of the jolly times they had had playing cards in the country, and then the Baron called her his good little daughter, who always knew what to do to amuse him. Between times he scolded about the Prince, who did not seem to know enough to marry the Princess, and was thus making himself and others miserable.

But Rottraut at this became very silent, and found that it was time to go to see the old nurse.

III.

The Real Prince.

'Ah,' said the sick woman, 'thanks be to God that you think of visiting poor old nurse again! I have waited so long for you. Is it the same merry face we used to know, doctor? I cannot see as well now as I did then.'

At the word 'doctor' Rottraut looked up in astonishment. A man who had been sitting at the side of the bed rose. It was the doctor.

'Professor, I ought to say now,' the old nurse amended.

Rottraut herself hardly knew why she felt so strange when his earnest eyes were fixed questioningly upon her. She blushed and suddenly thought what beautiful and expressive eyes the doctor had. In her embarrassment she held out her hand quite in the old way, and congratulated him, telling him that he had become a great man.

'But he is just as good as ever,' said the old nurse. 'As good as gold. He never forgot me, and always brought me help or consolation.'

'But the very best thing of all—the sunshine—I could not bring. You never have looked as happy for me as you do just now.'

'To make people happy has been Rottraut's gift since she is on earth,' said the nurse.

'It is one of the most gracious gifts. God keep it for you at all times, and in all places,' said the doctor to Rottraut significantly, and then raised her hand to his lips, something he had never done before in his life. It seemed as if he were about to say something more, then he turned and went to the door.

'A very good man,' said the old nurse, 'and he has a sad lot.'

'But why sad?' asked Rottraut, hastily. He has a great name—everybody likes him.'

'To be liked is not to be loved, many a heart has found,' said the old woman. 'Many a girl would have him, but he always thinks of his deformed appearance, and—'

'But he is not at all homely, with his beautiful eyes,' protested Rottraut, 'and love does not bother itself about personal appearance very much.'

'Ah, but his heart belongs only to one,' the old woman went on, with a sigh. 'Perhaps he did hope to win her for a time, but now he says it was foolish of him to think so. Since then he looks so sad. Do you know that he told me the Prince is in love with you? Everybody in the city is talking of it. They say he does not care for the beautiful Princess, but for you. Is it true? A Prince, a real Prince? What will your charming sisters say to that? Is he real good, too?'

'How can you talk such nonsense of the Prince, dear nurse?' Rottraut asked, and bending over her old nurse she took her by the shoulders and kissed her. 'The Prince is probably not half as good nor clever as our dear doctor.' The girl was glad that the clock struck just then,