

The Storyteller

ALL FIVE OF THEM.

Winter had unexpectedly arrived in the night. It had quietly come while all were asleep and had filled the streets and the lanes of the city with snow, to the delight of the children, who scarcely expected their good friend the snow so early in the year; but not so to the older people, who found walking in the soft, loose snow very difficult.

Dr. Brandt, a thick-set man of about 50 years, with an unmistakably good-natured face, made his way through the snow, now and then uttering inaudibly an exasperated remark over the detestable weather.

Having arrived at a pleasant house standing alone in the suburbs the doctor walked through a small hall into the kitchen, and there found a group of five children standing expectantly before the hearth.

'Well, what are you doing here that you are all huddled together as if in a swallow's nest?' said the doctor, laying aside his hat and cane and stamping the snow from his shoes.

'We are waiting for our baked apples to be done,' said the children.

'So? Don't forget to save one for me. Is your mother in this room?' He did not wait for an answer, but opened the door after a hasty knock.

A delicate, slight woman arose from a table covered with all kinds of drawing material near the window. Her still perfectly brown hair and the lively expression of her beautiful eyes made her seem younger than her slightly stooping figure and the downcast features of her pale face would indicate, but she could not have been more than thirty odd years of age.

At the sudden entrance of the doctor a quick flush came over her features, while a cough shook her whole frame, compelling her to delay greeting the doctor for a moment.

The doctor took in her appearance with a quick glance. 'Why did you not send for me earlier if you were sick?'

'I hoped it would pass by,' she answered, still struggling for breath.

'It sounds like it,' grumbled the doctor. 'But we will see.' He then put a few short, pointed questions to the sufferer and examined her lungs. When he had finished his countenance wore a peculiar expression.

She threw a searching glance at him and, smiling with difficulty said: 'You find me worse than you thought?'

'I find you very sick,' he answered, without changing his expression. 'You must lie down immediately. Absolute rest is the first necessity for you.'

'It is impossible for me to think of rest now,' she replied. 'It is already November. These drawings must be done in two weeks at the latest. The preparation of illustrations for the large journals requires so much time, you see.' She took up a couple of drawings from the table and held them out to the doctor. 'This wreath of Christmas roses and holly branches is designed to encircle a Christmas poem. This little Swedish peasant's house, with the Christmas sheaf on the roof and the Christmas tree, between whose boughs children's heads are peering forth, is to be the headpiece of a Christmas story.'

'You must not dare take another stroke of work on these things,' said the doctor, pushing the papers hastily away.

'But, you see, they must be done for Christmas.'

'Someone else can be found to finish them.'

'I should forfeit for ever the confidence of the editors who gave me a chance to earn some money. No,

doctor, that will not do. Rich people can allow themselves the luxury of being sick, but not the poor.'

She had spoken her last words in a sportive tone, while her eyes still retained their anxiously searching expression.

'Poor people die also,' he said, evading her glance.

'Do you mean that I must die?'

'Have I said so?' answered the doctor.

'Not with your lips, but with your eyes. Suddenly she seized his hands and said imploringly. 'Do not say that I must die. I dare not, for the sake of my children. There are five of them and their father is dead.'

'Have you no property?' asked the doctor.

'No.'

'No relatives who would take care of your children in an extreme case?'

'I have none.'

'No acquaintances? Friends?'

'No one. As long as I live and breathe I stand between my children and misery. If I die—'

'You must learn to give yourself absolute rest.'

'How can I? Must I not earn bread for all? But I shall surely be better again, doctor? The desire to live does much, and I long to live. Not too long, but several years still until my children are in a condition to help themselves.'

The doctor shook his head.

'You are more experienced and worldly wise than I, doctor. Tell me according to your best knowledge what would become of the children if I should be taken away from them now.'

The doctor rubbed his forehead a few times with his handkerchief. 'Have you the right of a native here?'

'My husband had.'

'H'm, the community would have to take care of your children then. One of the older ones would probably go into the orphan asylum, the smallest into the infant asylum, and the others would be taken into poor workmen's families for a small recompense.'

She pressed her lips convulsively together, then quietly said: 'You see that I dare not die. Or do you indeed believe that my tender children, nurtured in love, would survive being torn from one another and divided among strangers? No, God cannot wish it. But I will follow your advice, doctor, and will spare myself. As soon as these drawings are done I will lie down and take a thorough rest. Are you satisfied with that, doctor?'

'If it is not too late,' he wanted to say, but he had not the heart to do so. He pressed the woman's hand and left the house hastily, without paying any attention this time to the company of children in the kitchen. When he was already on the street he suddenly heard himself called.

'Doctor, doctor, here is the apple which we saved for you.' He stood still and let the child, a boy of about nine years old, come to him. 'Just you eat it yourself, my boy.' He stroked his flaxen head in a kindly way. 'Or give it to your mother. And take good care, do you hear, and see that she does not work too much. Who knows how long—'

He did not finish the sentence, but at the corner turned once more and saw the boy still standing in the middle of the street looking after him with earnest and inquiring gaze, still holding the apple in his hand.

Dr. Brandt fought his way home in the storm with bowed head and coat wrapped tightly about him after a hard day's work, for No-

vember had brought with it sickness and death. The dampness had settled upon his hair and clothes, while the cutting wind threatened to extinguish the cigar between his lips. He drew a long breath when at last he stood in the comfortably-warmed entry hall of his dwelling.

'Say, Stina,' he called as soon as he got his breath, 'please draw off those detestable boots. The things stick as if they had grown to me. Such miserable weather! I believe there is not a dry stitch on me. Put my boots on the hearth, but not too near, so they won't shrink like old glove-skins. Understand? You can hang my coat nearer. Supper is ready I hope.'

'The cutlets are now on the table.' 'That is good. I am as hungry as a wolf.' Just as the doctor was opening the door of the dining-room, where his wife was busily engaged among rattling dishes and glasses, the shrill ring of the door bell broke upon his ear.

'Thunder and lightning!' exclaimed the doctor. 'I hope no one else will come to-night. One thing I know, whoever it may be, I will not go out to-night. A physician is also a human being, so to speak, and I have done my share for to-day.'

He opened the door so violently that he almost threw the boy standing close in front of it backward down the steps. 'Well, can't you look out?' he called, grasping the boy. 'What is the matter?'

The boy did not answer, but stood panting heavily and turned his face to the light without much ceremony.

'What, is it you?' asked the doctor, suddenly calmed when he recognised the boy who had brought him the apple a short time before. 'I hope no misfortune has occurred at home?'

'My mother!' was all that the boy could utter. The doctor asked no more. The terrified look of the boy must have expressed more than his words.

'Ha, this has come quickly,' he murmured. 'Just wait a moment, my boy. I will come with you at once. Stina, my coat and boots.'

Sighing, the doctor crawled into the damp coverings of his outer man which he had just laid aside. Five minutes later, without having taken time to greet his wife or cast a glance at the supper table, he was tramping towards the little house in the suburb through wind and rain and holding the boy fast by the hand.

This time no group of children stood by the hearth roasting apples, but a kind neighbor was busy warming cloths and heating water for poultices.

With a few words the doctor made himself informed of what had happened and then walked into the room. The two older children stood before their mother's bed groaning bitterly, and the boy who had come for him now joined them, weeping aloud, while the two younger children were fast asleep in their little bed with no forebodings. One glance at the sick woman, who lay upon the bed with closed eyes as in a swoon, showed the physician that there was little more for him to do. He hastily wrote a prescription which seemed necessary for the moment and sent a neighbor to the apothecary.

Suddenly the sick one opened her eyes, her questioning and confused gaze wandering about until it fell upon the face of the doctor. At the same moment the sobbing of the children pierced her ear. An expression of anguish spread over her countenance. 'I cannot die. Oh, my children!' she whispered.

Without answering, but with tender sympathy, the doctor sought to give her all the aid within his power. But again and again as he raised her head higher, moistening her dry lips or wiping the perspiration from her forehead, there sounded in his ear in monotonous, heart-rending tones: 'I cannot die. My children!'

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