

The Storyteller

MAY

What a beautiful spring it was! Just as if it had been made to order by a poet for a happy pair of lovers. In the beginning of March the last ice carnival had been held, at which fair-haired Greta Schaffner had quarrelled with her true knight, the young professor, Karl Borndorf, leading her shrewd friends to conclude for the hundredth time that these two would be the next to become engaged. Six weeks later the gardens and orchards which surrounded the town and extended to the beach forest on the heights were covered with white cherry blossoms. The farmer does not like so early a spring, but the city people delighted in it, and the skies were in accordance with the feeling of the majority, and continued the fair weather as if there were a full supply of it for all succeeding months.

In the garden of the university, outside the windows of auditorium No. 8, a nightingale sat among the blossoms of a great magnolia tree and sang as insistently as if he alone had the right at this season, to lecture to the students. It was small wonder, when one considers that his was the only course that had been begun punctually on the first day of the summer term, the 2nd of April, for years and years. But he had never found his desk, the magnolia tree, so beautifully decorated since his first return from the long vacation on the Nile. So he made a special effort this time; he had already been addressing the class for two weeks, day and night, and it was not his fault if one of the students behind the window panes allowed his observations to pass unheeded.

At any rate, they influenced Professor Karl Borndorf, who on the last day of this sunny, lazy April, as on every other Tuesday and Friday, from six to seven o'clock, lectured on 'Old Germanic Myths and Folk Lore.' To-day, when he came to the end of his speech, he raised his eyes from his book and smiled at his colleague in the magnolia. Then, with a commanding look, as a general collects his forces, he caught the attention of his pupils, who were already beginning to put up their books, stroked his brown moustache, and said:

'Even among our own surroundings, gentlemen, at this particular season of the year we find many of these old Germanic customs springing to life again like the flowers and the songs of spring and of love—like love itself. To-day, as in centuries past, on the eve of the day which was once the most important festival of the Germanic peoples, the village youths go into the country with great secrecy. There they gather the flowering may, and on the first night of May they place it before the windows of their sweethearts as a declaration, often, perhaps, the first formal acknowledgement of their feelings and hopes. But the maiden who is over coy, arrogant, and cold is given the false may, and when she opens her windows on May-day she finds a branch of the gnarled wild cherry as a sign that she has driven away the suitor, who thus shows her what her character is—early blossoming, but hard, obstinate, and untender. We of the cities have forgotten this flower language, gentlemen, and have exchanged it for other learning. But its spirit reaches us from time to time, and in the suburbs at least, where the villas of the city business man encroach on the tilled fields one who gets up early enough shall find here and there on the first of May a house before which is laid the may—or possibly the false may.'

After this discourse Dr. Karl Borndorf took leave of his three faithful pupils and left auditorium No. 8 to take an evening walk in the woods and work out poetically the substance of his learned remarks.

Heaven had endowed him liberally. The young professor had already a fair reputation for scholarship, and, in addition to being well connected, he was the favorite pupil of the well-known Geheimrath Schaffner and nephew of old Professor Wendelin Borndorf, who occupied the chair of botany in the university and was as famous for his learning as for his absentmindedness. But as a budding poet Dr. Borndorf was the soul of all private theatricals and such affairs in college circles. He was a valuable assistant, who always found something appropriate to write for a 'polter-abend,' a jubilee, a dedication, or a charity fair. Without imagining himself a Goethe, he plied this art of verse-making with untiring willingness and even with pleasure, when the name of Greta Schaffner was among those who had need of it.

'Of course she is to be there again,' he would remark in the same tone and with the same resigned smile with which Greta, when she was invited to take part in these entertainments, said:

'Well we must learn another dozen of Dr. Borndorf's allegorical verses by heart and accept his lectures on incorrect intonation patiently at rehearsals.' The patience was of a peculiar kind, to be sure, and the intercourse between author and leading lady was punctuated by remarks as sharp as a hedgehog's quills; but the strange thing was that he gave her the best parts and the prettiest verses time after time, and that she followed his instructions minutely when the performance came off, although she had run counter to them with a shrug of her shoulders or with affected amiability at rehearsals.

'It's the funniest thing about those two,' old Mrs. Mahike used to say. 'When they were school children—

heavens, I have known them from their cradles!—well, then, right through their school days they were the best of comrades; and now, why they quarrel so that they can scarcely endure each other.'

But it had really gone too far at the last rehearsal. The occasion was a little play for the 'polter-abend' of a friend of Greta's who was to marry a man in the forestry department, and Greta, in the role of 'wood-fairy,' had the lion's share of poetry. At first all went well, but when Dr. Borndorf announced that for technical reasons he must lengthen the wood-fairy's monologue some three minutes, and the wood-fairy exclaimed, 'Good heavens, more of the stuff!' the trouble began. Greta Schaffner had the last word, as usual, but she realised that she had overstepped the bounds of politeness. 'It's all his fault, though,' she tried to tell herself in answer to her qualms of conscience; 'why can't he put an end to it?'

It was with an air of great decision that Dr. Karl Borndorf placed his 'Monologue of the Wood-fairy' in an envelope with a short accompanying note, directed it to Miss Greta Schaffner, and set out to leave it personally at the Schaffners' house in Bismarck street. But he chose an hour in which only important telegrams are usually delivered—between one and two o'clock in the morning. He glided through the streets of the suburbs, with their little houses as like as peas in a pod, as quietly as a thief, and, in addition to the letter, he drew from beneath his coat something which, however, he did not put in the post box. But he was not unobserved. The old night watchman of the district, who had made himself a very comfortable resting-place in the doorway of the opposite house with the help of his cloak rolled up like a pillow, recognised the quiet visitor and took note of what he was doing.

'Now, see that!' the watchman growled to himself. 'The idea of these city folks having nothing better to do. Ever since the Kneipp cure came in they must copy the peasants in everything.'

Then he got up and walked after the retreating figure with the greeting, 'Good evening, doctor. May I trouble you for a light?'

'Certainly,' replied Karl Borndorf, with quick understanding, and he brought forth his well-filled cigar case.

The watchman congratulated himself that the professor had not forgotten this form of student expression.

'Thank you, doctor,' he said, drawing out two cigars and sticking them in his waistcoat pocket. 'You can rely on me: I have seen nothing,' and he helped himself to another cigar, which he lighted at the flame of his lantern.

Then they parted with friendly nods, and Bismarck street was quiet and dark again save for the occasional tapping of the watchman's stick on the pavement, and the glow of his cigar, which shone like a giant lightning bug in the May night.

Toward six o'clock in the morning the watchman went home to fortify himself with breakfast and sleep for new duties, among which was that of dog-catcher.

At daybreak other young men with green branches in their hands fitted about with an air of great mystery, stopping at sundry doors and windows without being disturbed by the night watchman. As it grew light the street became alive with people. Whistling bakers' boys trudged along and hung their baskets of bread on the door-knobs. Here and there a servant girl peeped out of the house expectantly simpered and blushed when she saw a may branch outside, but did not take it in, for her master and mistress must first admire it, and, above all, the neighboring maids who were not favored with such a love token must behold and envy. At seven o'clock, before the shutters of the houses were opened, the first city pedestrian appeared. This was Professor Wendelin Borndorf, called simply Wendelinus by the students, a round little gentleman with long, white locks, spectacles on his nose, and a lorgnette hanging from his neck, for he was very near-sighted. He was as early a riser as any old maid, and it was his habit to take a walk in the woods as soon as the sun was well up, deep in thought over an engrossing problem, and usually carrying in his hand something that he had picked up on his way and would lay down elsewhere in his absentmindedness. This time he held a branch between his fingers, a gnarled, crooked branch with white flowers.

Before the window of the Schaffner house his attention was attracted. He laid down the wild cherry spray and held the new object of interest close to his spectacles.

'To be sure,' he murmured, 'the may. Betula, quite right. Betula alba, our true may. And tied with a blue ribbon. How singular.'

Then he meandered on, deep in his problems again, and entirely unconscious that he still carried the branch of betula alba in his hand. But ten or twelve houses further on he saw a couple of servant girls standing together and regarding another such branch with smirks and nudges. Then he recollected himself.

'Oho!' he thought, 'if that is the case, I must take this thing back where it belongs. Where was it, though?'

He retraced his steps, peering at the houses with both spectacles and lorgnette, and stopped before a window.

'It must have been here,' he said, with satisfaction, and he laid the branch on the window-sill.

At the same moment something black and bristly assailed his nose, and when he turned round a chimney-sweep stood before him with a ladder, brushes, and the