

The Storyteller.

THE TOYS.

(By MAURICE F. EGAN.)

(Continued.)

The new Mrs. Sefton was a woman of tact; she never asked questions, and this was probably one of the reasons why she continued to make her husband as contented as possible until she died, in 1885, a year after their marriage. Then Sefton plunged deeper into the schemes of Wall street. His beard grew white, and he lived alone in the great house, which had been made very splendid for his late wife.

The doings of the Prince Strelski and his wife had been chronicled in the Press during the summer, when they stopped at Newport. After that there was a rumour that the Strelskis with the little girl, Olga, whom God had sent them, were in Paris, though they never appeared in the American colony.

The truth was that Prince Strelski had not been long in finding out that his wife had no private fortune. Her father's generous gift had soon disappeared and he and his wife had drifted from a suite of rooms in the Hotel Bath at London, where the most exclusive Americans had called on them, through Mrs. De Wood's amiability, to a fifth floor in a Quartier Latin at Paris—and one day the Prince had gone away, leaving a little note, written in French. "The Czar is offended by my marriage," he said. "I have gone to St. Petersburg to explain to him. It may happen that I shall not return."

The Prince never did return, and Hildegard, who had some talent and practice in the art of drawing, registered herself at the Louvre as a copyist of the masterpieces. She had been prudent enough to keep some money—a very little—from her husband; and on this she lived. Olga was five years old, "as blonde as the wheat," and full of delightful ways.

Remembering the experience of Gilbert, Hildegard did not dare write to her father, though now her pride was gone. She lay awake at night wondering what would become of the little girl if she should die.

Her funds had grown low; her little copies of bits from the masters did not attract attention in the dealers' shops. She had waited patiently for her turn to paint and worked carefully, but the dealers were not anxious to buy. She wrote to Gilbert—wrote to his old address, but there was no reply.

Her money had gone down so far beyond the rim of the little box in which she kept it that she began to feel desperate. December had set in, and the prospect of the winter in Paris filled her with horror. She and Olga must suffer terribly unless some means of earning money could be found.

She made a picture out of her head, with the assistance of Olga as a model, and signed it, "The Princess Strelski." The dealer took it with less grumbling than usual; he was tired of her copies, and this sketch in oils was vivid and bright. An American woman of fashion saw it; the blonde head and the aristocratic name induced her to buy it; the dealer paid her five hundred francs, less his commission. After this, she determined to take no more risks. She had her passage to America and something over; if she must starve she would starve at home. She was delayed only one day; the art dealer sent her a copy of *Le Figaro* with a paragraph marked, it began:

"Prince Strelski, once of the Russian Legation, died last Saturday. He is said to be the dashing and not too scrupulous hero of Ivan Warivitch's latest novel."

Hildegard said nothing to Olga; but she waited one day longer in Paris in order that she might make a communion for the dead. Then she tried to forget him, except in her prayers. The voyage across the Atlantic was not unpleasant. Olga kept in good health; and she was a good sailor. There were few passengers and the weather was fairly good. For some days at least she was at rest; there was no danger of the wolf coming to the door. She read and rested and dreamed. It seemed strange to her to find, now that she had time to think, how the world had changed in her view. She found excuses for her father; she reproached herself. Oh, if she could only see him again! Perhaps he loved her as much as she loved Olga. This was a revelation to her. Could any father or mother in the world love a child as she loved this little one? It seemed absurd to think of such a thing and yet it might be possible. If so, her father could never forgive her, for such a great love could not die of ingratitude and insolence; it must live on, but as a desperately wounded creature lives on, hating the hand that had pierced its heart.

She reached New York three days before Christmas. It was not hard to find a room, high up in an old-fashioned house, in one of the cross streets.

Olga was rather feverish the first night, and, having set the room to rights, she gave the little girl her cooling draught and waited for her to go to sleep. Sleep came to Olga but not to her mother; she sat before the dormer window of the attic, with the radiance of the moonlight, reflected from the snow-covered roof, around her. She was numbed by a blow she had received that day. She had asked on landing at the shipping office for her father—everybody in business knew Martin Sefton, and she asked about him.

Old Sefton, of Sefton & Swift!"

"Yes."

"He's gone long ago; he was buried with a swell funeral months ago. Friend of yours? Sorry. Boy, give the lady a glass of water."

And the chief clerk turned away to his books.

"Say," he said to his assistant, when that young man had come back from luncheon, "isn't old Sefton dead?"

"Don't know," said the clerk, hanging up his coat, "somebody died. It was in the papers. Think it was his wife. Yes, it was his wife!"

"Maybe!"

And the two men dropped the subject from their minds.

Hildegard, now that Olga was sleeping gently, was alone with her grief. In the white moonlight she could only see one picture. There were two shadowy forms between her and heaven, one her mother, who had waited on the heavenly shore for the coming of her father. She saw her greeting him, and she heard the sad voice of her father saying:

"The little girl I loved became hard and proud; she left me."

After that Hildegard knelt in front of the chair and prayed with all her heart. Let God take her and the child, if He would, but might they never part, might Olga's heart never become proud and arrogant, as hers had become! The night wore on, and still she prayed.

When Christmas eve came she could not endure the gay and expectant bustle of the city. There could be no toys for Olga and she took the child for a long walk in the country. The ground was covered by frost-packed snow. And Olga's cheeks glowed and she trotted beside her mother twittering more musically than a meadow lark. Hildegard found a sprig of holly and a few chrysanthemums in a clump of shrubs in the forsaken grounds of a deserted country house. Here, in a latticed arbour, they sat for a time and ate the sandwiches they had brought.

"Mamma," said Olga, caressing her mother's hand. "You have no rings now, I wish I could give you some this Christmas. And, mamma, can't we have a beautiful tree, with candles, you know, and little lambs? Let us go back to the city to trim it!"

Hildegard sighed.

"Oh, we must, mamma!" Olga said. "Why, every child in the world will have a tree, every little child! And I have tried to be so good, mamma!"

The mother seized the little daughter's hand and said,—

"Let us run."

They crossed a little bridge that passed above a frozen stream, border with dry mullein stalks and leafless alder bushes. The noon was not long gone, but already the shadows of the short day began to show themselves, and a fierce sleet fell.

"Now—for home," said Hildegard, as she turned with Olga clinging to her gown and laughing breathlessly, to recross the bridge.

Somehow or other Olga pushed against her, and in her attempt to avoid the child she fell. A sharp pain ran through her ankle and she sank against the railing of the bridge.

Hildegard set her teeth hard; she dared not move—the pain in her ankle was so intense; she would not cry out, for fear of frightening Olga.

A patch of bright red was visible above the mount of snow that had drifted on the steep path that led from the bridge into the road. The patch of red grew larger. It turned out to be the woollen cap of a chubby boy, clad in brown and dragging a sled after him. He stared at the helpless mother and child. As Olga called to him he ran away.

Olga had scarcely expressed her disapprobation of this action when a woman appeared in his place; a sweet voice asked—

"Are you hurt?"

And Hildegard looked up to see a pure and serene face, framed in soft brown hair, bending over her. The little boy in the red cap was looking at Hildegard with a frightened glance.

"You are hurt!" said the newcomer, giving her muff to the little boy. Awkward as her position was, Hildegard noticed details. "I am afraid you are hurt."

Hildegard felt the sympathetic vibrance in the voice.

"She is a gentlewoman," she said to herself. "She may give Olga and me shelter, the shelter of a home through the day I dread, a homeless Christmas."

With the assistance of the lady, the little boy Richard, and Olga, Hildegard managed to rise. She stumbled with them down the road until they reached a little wooden house, pretty and porched.

A hundred needles seemed to be running through Hildegard's foot, but she contrived to reach a great comfortable lounge by the bay window of the cheerful parlour, that showed traces of children everywhere. A little girl, a few years older than Olga, brown-haired and brown-eyed like her mother, had dropped a picture book on the floor; her two little sisters, who were so much alike, were busy with their dolls.

As Hildegard sunk, with a sigh of relief, among the cushions of the lounge, and her hostess bent over her, she caught sight of their faces in the inclined mirror over the chimney piece. Hers so worn, so changed; the other serene and fair.

"Have you ever suffered?" Hildegard asked, almost involuntarily.

"Much," answered the brown-eyed woman, without surprise. "But I learned through it to understand how fatherly is God's love."

"I am learning it too," said Hildegard, as her hostess removed her shoe and stocking.

"Thank you."

"God makes things come right. I never hoped for the joy I shall have to-morrow, though I prayed for it. But how like somebody I have seen you are! How like—I can't remember. This is serious. Dick and I were going into town for some trifles for the Christmas tree. We'll get a doctor; he'll be here at once."

She made Hildegard as comfortable as possible, bade the children look after the guest, and ran off merrily with Dick.

"At the worst you'll have to stay with us a day or two, and your dear little girl will not object to that! Shall I telegraph to anybody," she called back.

"No, my friends are not near."

Olga and the three little girls soon became friends. Hildegard noticed that all the details of the room showed refinement and frugality; the only valuable thing was a fine miniature of the Mother of Sorrows in a gilded case on the chimney piece. Olga took her place at the piano, which had seen better days, and played all sorts of pretty French songs for the little Americans. In spite