The Storyteller

LOVE THE GIFT

The father stood looking at the boy. Straight as an arrow, his handsome head thrown back, his dark, passionate eyes flashing; he said: 'Of course I can do it, you can do anything if you try and are bound to, can't you, Faddy?'

And then he was off with the boys. The father leaned back in his chair to look out of the window at the fellow. 'At last my great desire is granted—and such a son! What a man he will make with that will, intelligence, and fine physique!' He allowed himself to dream dreams—this industrious, quiet, unworldly Steinmetz Kleeber, after the manner of fond fathers. And then in the midst of his dreams there came something most real, insistent—a scream of agony, and then the sound of running feet.

The father was down the stairs in a moment—just in time to see his boy brought in from the street, white, unconscious, struck by a rock.

'He is dead,' said a voice, and turning Kleeber saw his wife, as white as the boy. And then she was on her knees beside her darling, chafing him, calling to him, until the doctor came.

Engel Kleeber was spared to them, but as the years passed the accident was found to have left its cruel, life-long mark as a reminder. His growth was stunted; his back had an enlargement, never very large, but plainly visible. He was not a cripple or a dwarf, but he was different from his kind; set apart as a being unlike, because unable to enter into his companions' sport and labors. At first his energy and will overcame much, and then as he grew to manhood his mother's watchful eye detected the vein of bitterness creeping into his voice and manner; the undercurrent of rebellion; the silent moods increasing upon him. She redoubled her tenderness, her care, her love, only to feel that now she was powerless.

'He must fight out his battle alone,' she thought, and suffered as only mothers can. Then came one of those sudden epidemics to the city, and Engel's mother was one of the victims.

It was months after this fresh sorrow that Engel came to his father's study. Steinmetz remembered with a pang that other time so long ago when the boy had entered, so full of life and confidence—the unconscious arrogance of childhood.

The son did not waste time on preliminaries. He sat down opposite his father.

'I want to leave college, sir,' he said. 'I want to study finance; I want to be a business man; I want to be rich. Money is power; I shall fight hard to obtain it. I fear this is a disappointment to you anyhow. Are you willing?'

Steinmetz pale, thoughtful face turned paler. It was such an unexpected thing to him. But he was as direct as Engel.

'It is a great surprise, my boy,' he replied. 'I never thought of you as anything but a literary man, or possibly a musician. We Kleebers never have made money, or cared for it much. But you take your mother's little fortune; take your own way. Each man must follow his bent; he must live his own life. But, Engel, don't say that you've been a disappointment. I'm proud of you; what indeed would life be to me now if you were gone?'

And so Engel Kleeber put all the energy and will of which he was capable into this scheme of making money. He went into the world of men; he gave no sign of any possible shrinking he felt; and tried to learn his new lessons. Then he entered a bank, and with his money became a shareholder. He gradually won a reputation for shrewdness and brains.

'The family life, the world of fair women, I cannot enter. Very well: I can do without either. But I shall make men respect and fear me,' Engel declared.

He surrounded his father with comforts and luxuries Steinmetz had sighed for in the shape of books and pictures. He grew rich—not suddenly or fast—but surely It became more and more fascinating, this pursuit of wealth, this study of investments, this lottery of fortune.

Social attention, invitations, came to him, but he declined them all. A cold wintry day he came into the warm, cheerful dining-room, dressed scrupulously as usual, for dinner. He noticed that his father looked unusually moved.

'I've had a letter,' the latter began, over the soup 'I confess that it has rather upset me, Engel. Years ago I had a dear friend and there was a misunderstanding. I found out only a year ago that I greatly misjudged him. This letter is from him. He is in great trouble. It seems that he has married a second time, and the new wife and his only daughter by his first wife do not get on together. He writes to ask if the young girl can come to me and make her home here for a year, and go on with her music under Auerbach. He insists on a strictly business arrangement as to board, etc. He seems to think that my sister is keeping house for us.'

Steinmetz paused, looking intently at his son.

'Of course it is out of the question for her to come here,' said Engel decisively.

'Yes,' assented his father, 'but we might ask cousin Lucy here—I've—I—ahem; really, Engel, I have thought for some time that we were getting into ruts that weren't good for us. Perhaps for a few months it would be well to have women in this dull, quiet place.'

Again there was a pause. Then Engel spoke with evident effort.

'I don't want to be a dog in the manger, father,' he said. 'You lead a lonelier life than I. This is your house; your friend. Do as you please. It won't be for long. This young school girl needn't interfere with me. I need scarcely meet her except at meals.'

And the result was that weeks later when Cousin Lucy was installed as housekeeper to her great delight, when Engel came home he stumbled upon a young woman in the hall. A tall, beautiful woman, she was, in her dining gown of pale blue silk and dainty lace; her hair high on her fine head; her eyes clear and straightforward. Engel stood there in his great coat, too amazed for a moment to recover himself.

'I am Felicia Oliver,' said the newcomer, easily, 'and I think that you must be the Engel Kleeber that Mr. Steinmetz Kleeber and Miss McIntosh have told me about.' She held out her hand frankly.

Engel could not remember what he replied. His head was full of a new business deal; he had never dreamed of the girl who was, as he thought, so unceremoniously thrust upon them, and a real bugbear, who must be endured as a creature like this. He hurried to his room and made his toilet for the first time in his life with his thoughts dwelling upon a woman. Felicia Oliver was certainly unlike all his preconceived ideas of the women of his set. She had evidently been her father's companion, and seemed to know and like men. She had that open, frank manner which is, to say the least, disarming. She had no coquetries. She talked naturally, sensibly, and to the point. Engel found himself lingering down stairs after dinner to talk to her. Then his father asked her to try their new piano. Again, Engel who was himself no mean musician, was surprised and pleased at her firm touch, her exquisite expression, and execution. She asked him about Auerbach.

'I've not had many advantages since I left school,' she said, 'and father was determined that I should take lessons of him. It was so kind of your father to let me come. My father has his own ideas about girls and—and—everything. He seemed to think that if I came to this great city and boarded in a strange house, that I was lost.' She laughed merrily. 'He never will see that I'm grown up and no longer a girl. Oh, Mr. Kleeber do you care for Chopin, or Liszt? I am fond of both; listen to this rhadsodie.'

And so the time passed; not only that evening, but many more. Engel found that when Miss Oliver had engagements—and they became more and more frequent—were seasons of keen disappointment and restless discontent, which were so new to him that he explained it to himself with careful analysis.

'It is the novelty after so many years of being with men only,' he said. 'And then Miss Oliver is so absolutely sincere and unaffected. I feel so at home with her' And besides this was the feeling that never by word or look had this beautiful, charming girl showed that she ever thought of his misfortune. She seemed to enjoy his wide-awake, well-informed mind. And Engel forgot his bitterness when with her. This, to him, was the most marvellous fact of all. He knew himself so little that he felt only wonder—knowledge had not come to him. And so the months went by, and Engel thought less of business out of hours than he would have believed possible. Life took on for him a new and pleasurable excitement. And still he was so strangely ignorant, so heedlessly content—until that memorable night when he came home late He heard voices in the drawing room and went in. The two at the piano did not hear him. Engel's friend, Tegner, was leaning over the piano talking to Felicia. But the light of his face, his complete absorption, gave Engel a start. He was off guard, and even to Engel the fact was apparent that he loved this woman. Felicia's face was turned away, but Engel could imagine it a counterpart of Tegner's. He stole softly out and up to his room. Only when the door was shut did he trust himself to face the overwhelming fact that he too loved Felicia Oliver. But to him this meant despair and shame, not exaltation.

'How could I be so weak, so ridiculous, as not to keep myself well in hand?' he asked himself. 'Have I