

THE PRICE OF AN INSPIRATION

GUTEN Morgen, Fräulein Katinka!"

She menaced him over the banisters with her violin case. "Good-morning, Mr. Carl Brenner! Why don't you speak English? and my name is Kathleen, *not* Katinka!"

He shrugged his shoulders, and the sunshine laughed in his eyes.

"Ach! I have not the brogue, and your Irish tongue runs itself away until I stop you with a big German word."

"*Why* Katinka?" she persisted; "it is most rude to call me anything so ugly."

"It is not ugly, and your 'Käslein' is hard to say. But Katinka! she is of me the ideal—so good. She will cook me my meals—warm me my pantoffeln! Ach! She is hausengel, mit all the kitchen graces at the ends of her fingers."

"How commonplace you are! As if the Goddess of every German did not live in the kitchen and spend her very soul in making him fat. Your Katinka will have no second idea beyond kartoffeln and pickled cabbages!"

He looked down a little shyly, yet smiling.

"But she will love me, and the kartoffeln and cabbages shall be but her care of me. Love has a thousand voices, yet are they not lowly or despised."

"But your imaginary Katinka, with her soul all frittered away with little things, how will she ever know enough to help you? She will live alone, outside your life."

"You mistake," he answered, with mingled pride and tenderness. "I lean not upon her, but rather she on me, for that is as it should be. And then a too clever wife might burn me my rhymes if they pleased her not, and so break the fine heart of a poet."

She leant a little more towards him, the smile in her dark-blue eyes giving the lie to her sharp words.

"In fact you require a knitting-machine and cook combined. I wish you joy of your Katinka, *when* she is yours."

"Then is the joy sure to come, my Fräulein; but first I would want your pity, that I may only dream of my love, until the golden *thalers* come to visit an empty purse."

"The dream is sometimes best," she answered softly. "It never disappoints. Now one of mine is just coming true, and I am a little frightened."

A certain apprehension drove the gaiety from his face. "This dream then is it—? Ach, no! You would not announce it so. Tell me, mein Fräulein, that I may know what can make you look so happy."

She was indeed radiant, and palpitating with anxiety to share her good news with some one; just then Carl Brenner was a special providence. He was always so charmingly sympathetic in anything that concerned her.

"On Tuesday I am playing at a concert—a *grand* concert!"

"So! At the Conservatoire; but that has happened often before?"

"Now, do you think I am making all this fuss about a mere students' concert? Don't you know I am out of my apprenticeship, and have my name to make?"

"No!" he interrupted, "I make it for you, Katinka the Great!—not the little Käszelein!"

This time he had to defend himself against descending justice, but she was too proud of herself to be severe.

"I am to play two solos at the Grand-Ducal Concert on Tuesday! Was denkst du—— Oh! your detestable German! I mean what do you think of *that*?"

With a quick impulsive motion of his hand he had brushed away her momentary confusion—for in such things Carl had gentle ways—and his enthusiasm quite satisfied her.

"It is wonderful fortune, Fräulein; I congratulate you. So, like another Lorelei sitting aloft in your high chamber, you have made captive the Grand-Ducal ear as his Highness passed by? Wunderlich!"

They both laughed, for it was well known that his Highness could sleep peacefully and enjoyingly through the loudest and most impassioned strains. Even his own regimental brass band, blaring and clashing outside the palace windows, was to him as a lullaby inducing sweet rest. But then he was a brave old man, and had faced cannon and lived through bombardments, so his occasional snores accentuating a dainty pianissimo passage were charitably allowed for.

"He has nothing to do with it. The Directorate have substituted me for Frau Fichte, who is ill. It is a grand chance, one in a thousand, and may mean Paris, London—fame!"

It was no idle boasting, for she recognised her own power, and had worked hard to perfect it. Nothing gives such confidence so much as hard work. Moreover she was speaking to a fellow-student in another branch of art, one who himself had ambitions and eager hopes. They understood each other, and his face reflected the light on hers.

"And I too," he began so eagerly, that his good careful English suffered a little. "There is to me a great chance also. You have heard of the Preisgedicht that shall be chosen by the Heidelberg University before many days?"

She nodded. "But I thought Schiller gold medallists might not compete?"

"Nein! Nein! Es war mir—it was of me the error! The struggle is for them only, and the honour great to the winner."

"But how little time! Have you only just learnt this?"

"I knew it not an hour ago; but I will be ready. I am even working now. It shall mean perchance fame—and my loved ideal!"

She stretched down to him a hand of warm encouragement. "Courage then, brave comrade! for we are both trembling on the brink. But how can your Katinka help you here, unless yours is to be the romance of a cooking-stove!"

He looked up in laughing rebuke. "Ach! das Käszlein! I kiss the velvet paw that can only play at scratching. My theme is love, therefore is Katinka already my great inspiration."

A golden ripple of merriment parted them, but as she darted away out of sight he called up the stairs—

"One little moment, Fräulein! Does it happen on Tuesday your concert?"

"Yes," her clear voice answered him, and then became hesitating. "But this time it must only be a tiny bunch of violets. I will wear nothing more extravagant."

"So," he agreed cheerfully, and "so," as every one knows, stands for anything or nothing, just as a German chooses. But Kathleen Haynes little knew as she entered her room so blithely that Carl's preoccupation in his inspired task had made him a little less clear-headed, and that in his mind an English Tuesday confused itself with a German Wednesday before he had written two lines of his poem. But he did not forget her flowers, which were to be rarer than violets.

In pure lightness of heart she went singing to the window and threw it open. What a joyous time had been hers in Weinbergen—a time of hard work, of earnest endeavour and happy play with the glamour and romance of a quaint old German city to gild all her life, and set even its lonely hours with precious stones of remembered glory. It was as the miniature of a young face framed gorgeously with jewels and gold. Nor were such rich surroundings wasted, for she had weaved them cunningly into her work, and she would play wearisome scales by the hour together to the honour of some departed hero who had been great in patience.

Why! just over against her, in the narrow street, the eyes of a great genius had first seen the light. True that a fine statue in a more aristocratic centre bore witness of him, yet it was even better to be able to look into the very room where he had played as a child, and lisped his first prayer.

The gleaming white pigeons seemed to have their own sentiment on the subject, and sunned themselves more benignly on that quaint slanting roof than on any other. Kathleen returned their bows, cooing to them softly in their own tongue—one need only be happy to do such ridiculous things—while from the street below a pleasant babel of busy feet, cheerful voices, and quick laughter proclaimed how good it was to be alive. But few go sadly when the market-place is one great bouquet of flower-laden scents and luscious ripe fruits;

when the ramparts of the city are all vineyards bursting to a rich harvest, with summer itself caught and stayed in the golden meshes to heighten the mellow glory of autumn, and make the vintage rare. Life then is strong and glad; the heart beats merrily, bright ripples are on the river, and in the air a song of plenty and thanksgiving.

No wonder then that Kathleen had to take even the pigeons into her confidence, and make them sharers of her joy, for she was buoyantly elated, and tremulously hopeful of astonishing not the Grand-Duke—for that was beyond her—but the artistic, critical audience which follows in the wake of Grand-Dukes. Amongst such would be, as she knew, her judges, with power to dispose of her future, and Frau Fichte's illness had paved the way to a quick sentence. But she meant to plead her own cause with burning eloquence and win it; conscious power sent the bright flush into her face, the light into her eyes, and again she nodded blithely to the pigeons. Then, too, there was Carl Brenner—such a pleasant background to the picture, in which she mistakenly thought ambition was the central figure. Of course she knew that these sentimental young Germans had pretty poetical ways of expressing themselves, which were only to be lightly heeded.

But was not Carl different from the rest, more earnest even in his merry moments—and, to herself she whispered, more faithful and true of heart? For the present it was enough that they were in a sense fellow-students, which is a close and dear and wholesome companionship—try it, men and maidens, who are weary of playing with each other—and a haze of sunlight veiled all the future.

Once more she and the self-satisfied pigeons mutually genuflected, and then she made herself some coffee—the happiest young soul in all Weinbergen.

Carl Brenner sat at his disordered desk in despair. The cathedral chimes marking every passing quarter of the hour maddened him. They did not pass—they raced; and his pulses beat out the second, until he was conscious of nothing but the remorseless throbbing. To-morrow his work would have to be posted to Heidelberg; he had almost reached the limit of time allowed, and yet even under the stimulus of knowing this—perhaps because of it—he could not finish the poem. Either he had been overtaxing himself, or else for no good reason his powers had momentarily failed him. Genius does sometimes play these unhandsome tricks upon her children, and cannot always be relied upon to work to order. Carl knew perfectly well what he wanted to say and express, but the right language perpetually evaded him. In searching for and choosing a word that pleased him he would forget the context, and knew that the very fire and life of his composition was being extinguished by mere mechanical difficulties.

Throwing aside the pen, he folded his arms on the desk to support

a weary drooping head. No strength of will could avail against the inertia that was creeping like a dead mist over his faculties, and he saw no escape from failure; yet it was hard, with the work so well begun and more than half accomplished.

From the very depth of his despondency he was roused by a certain sound which once he had anathematised—but that was before Kathleen's deep blue eyes had smiled into his—and petitioned of Providence that all music students might be gathered together into one dissonant bunch and solemnly prohibited. But now, although the scale in C Major is not beautiful, even upon a violin, it seemed to him hope personified, and without a moment's hesitation he ascended a single flight of stairs and knocked at Kathleen's door.

Receiving permission he opened it, and in his trouble never noticed her quick disappointed glance at his empty hands. She herself was dressed as daintily as means would permit, and fortunately at homely German courts an ex-pupil of the Conservatoire may play before even Serene Highnesses in a slightly glorified Sunday frock. But it was a sharp disappointment that Carl had so evidently forgotten her flowers—and how pale and strange he looked!

"Mein Fräulein! I am in the saddest difficulty. My poem refuses to finish itself. There is something lacking in me, but I know not what, and the hours are getting few. It might be, that if you played to me even a little the mists would clear."

She knew him as a man of moods, for so the poet is made, but until then she had never seen him dejected or cast down. She rose instantly, her whole heart drawn to him in his need, and feeling strong to help. How fortunate that excitement and unrest had made her be ready so much too soon! Why, there was an hour, nearly two, before she and the violin need set out! She would not even mention her engagement lest he should remember the flowers and be vexed with himself. Thankfully he saw her glad willingness to serve him, and if her finery moved him to any thought, it was that she might be giving up a coffee-party at some fellow-student's in order to do him a kindness. Perhaps he never even noticed it, for to him she was always fair.

"I will come," she said cheerily. "I suppose you are sitting like a shipwrecked mariner in a troubled sea of MS., and starving for something to eat."

His rooms were somewhat larger and better furnished than hers, but still redolent of forced economy, and her very first move was a somewhat contemptuous examination of his cupboard, containing a few of the necessaries of life. For once he heard candid and unflattering comments on his larder, and her dainty sniff at the breakfast sausage was frankly suspicious.

"Pouf! I would at least kill my own cats, and have them fresh! There's nothing here fit for a Christian, much less a poet! Imagine a sonnet inspired by a 'bratwurst.' Have patience a moment." With

a silken rush and rustle she was in her own room again, ransacking it of dainty cakes and two fresh eggs.

With cunning deftness she smuggled the eggs into some hot strong coffee, and meekly obeying her imperious orders, he ate and drank, feeling already strengthened, while the tender strains of her violin stole refreshingly over his disturbed nerves and quieted them.

"Tell me your theme," she said, as with renewed hope he took up his pen, "and in my own way I will accompany you."

"I have named it 'The Sacrifice of Love.' See! much is already accomplished. But it goes not—somehow! Here is a *pastorale*, so stiff, so unliving, like a set theatre scene, and nothing of what is in my heart."

She held the violin more firmly, and let the bow fall quiveringly upon the strings.

"I see, you want the birds to sing, the leaves to rustle dreamily, the stream to babble brightly in the sunshine, before it goes to sleep in the quiet shadows of some enchanted lake. Listen then, and translate into words."

She touched the chords with power, and little by little the very breath of life stirred all his dumb creation. No longer doubtful or hesitating, with the mists cleared from his brain, he worked joyfully and with zest, happily conscious that under the stimulus of her music he was doing the best that was in him. For her, it was a rich reward to see the stress and strain of vain endeavour pass from his face, and watch the busy pen so seldom pausing or at a loss. Such a keen pleasure is the rarest that even a musician may know, but the darkening of the room warned her that she must soon leave him.

"Tell me!" she said, still playing softly that the spell might not be broken, "what is the sacrifice? What does she do?"

"Ach! It suits not me that the woman should sacrifice herself to the man. My story is otherwise told, yet even now I set it differently according to your music, which inspires me to do better than myself. I shall win the laurel crown—we shall win it together, and then the golden days shall no longer be waited for, they will be with us."

His burning enthusiasm found its true answer in her, and again the rich notes filled the darkening room. He had soon to light his lamp, and across her face, as she stood near the window, passed momentary flashes of illumination, accompanied by the swift roll of wheels. Some of the Grand-Duke's guests meant to go early and get good places. She played on patiently, until the very last moment that she could spare him, and then the notes dropped softly into silence like the ceasing of summer rain. She tried to slip unobserved from the room, but before she could do so the busy pen had stopped, and Carl sat like one wakened from a dream.

"Mein Fräulein! you will never leave me with your gracious work half done! Give me but this one evening, and I will pay it back with all my life! There is fame, honour, almost to my hand, but without

your help I have no power to write even one line. Herzliebste! I entreat of thee!"

He pleaded so confidently, never dreaming of all he was asking, yet as she listened she began to see that ambition was not the central figure in her picture after all. If it had been she would not have moved quietly and wordlessly back to her place again, where the flashing of passing lamps showed her face pale and set. She was breathless with sudden renunciation—giddy from the haste of resolve, and only conscious that already his success was dearer to her than her own. Would the cost be too great, if only the setting of her sun meant for him a new and happy dawning? She thought not, and so played on, with his warm thanks ringing in her ears, and stilling the tumult of crushed hopes, played with a perfect understanding of his theme, making him wonder and rejoice at her divining power.

"The streets are noisy to-night," he said to her gaily, "but that disturbs not us. To-morrow it is not poor little autumn violets that shall grace your *début*, but rare roses, white as your hand. When their sweetness greets you they will remind you of all I owe, and you will play the better, inspired by your own goodness."

She saw his mistake, letting it pass in silence; yet she was glad he had not forgotten her flowers, although they would be no longer needed. Her chances in Weinbergen were lost. True, the audience, with a long programme to enjoy, would never miss an unknown violin soloist, but the Directorate, who had strained a point of etiquette to admit a *débutante*, would shake off her ungrateful dust and leave her comfortless.

Some of the carriages were already returning, and the cathedral chimes had rung out the hour of ten, before Carl Brenner had finished his task, and translated it aloud, for his English was stronger than Kathleen's German, and to them both it seemed very good.

"We shall win," he repeated with that certainty which is sometimes prophetic; and then carried away by the joy of a well-completed task, and all the happy emotions which love, hope, and gratitude bring with them, he took her suddenly in his arms and kissed her. Impulsive as the action was, he meant nothing but what was reverential, tender, and thanksgiving. In his thoughts she was already his betrothed, held in highest honour and esteem, yet he had made a grave mistake. To her, it seemed as though he had desecrated the white altar on which she had laid her sacrifice, and a great revulsion of feeling against her own act and against him made her ungovernably angry, almost beside herself with scorn and self-reproach. She was Irish, with the faults and fineness of her race.

"How dare you! how dare you! Is it for this that I have?— I will tear your work in pieces!"

With reckless, unreasoning fury she seized the sheets of MS. He made one quick involuntary gesture, as though to rescue them from her, and then stood shamed and patient. If she chose to punish him

so, he would submit, and to an extent his forbearance conquered her, for she flung the MS. down again.

"I will not tear the living words,—they might cry out, but I hope you will *fail!* Do you hear?"

She was so fierce, that Carl, not understanding, and himself unnerved with the day's strain and toil, hardly knew how to deal with her or allay the storm he had raised.

"Mein Fräulein!" he began gently, "I have done what is wrong, but it is because I——"

But she would not hear him, being in that passion of heat and resentment which sees nothing but itself.

"I hope you will fail!" she repeated, and so left him.

But after a while he comforted himself. "She will forgive me. To-morrow's triumph will soften her heart, and she will understand all the joy and forgive. I have no fear—no fear at all!"

He went out then to calm himself down with the cool river breeze, and found the streets full of a joyous crowd, who were returning from the palace, where they had been cheering the illustrious guests as they came out from the concert. At first Carl gave no heed to them, but a few words overheard quickened his fears, and he asked a bystander what was the reason of so many people being about at that hour.

"There has been a grand concert at the palace. Nothing worse, and we have just been shouting ourselves hoarse for all the pretty women. You have missed something, I can tell you!"

"*What!* the concert *to-night?* Then there is one also to-morrow?"

"No, it is the parting festivity! The Grand-Duke goes early to-morrow to Berlin."

Carl went on dazed, and all the bright lights shining on the river turned dim in his sight.

"Ach Gott! the little Käslein! She has sacrificed herself for me, and I—Ach Gott!"

If only she had heard his passion of remorseful tenderness, her hurt would have been healed; but although he tried to see her the next day, he failed, and the day after that she left Weinbergen without his knowledge.

For six long years he searched vainly for her, and none could understand why Carl Brenner, the successful flattered poet—for the prize poem had made his name—always wrote sorrowfully, as one who had missed the best in life. But just then it was the fashion to be sad, and they suggested this as a possible reason for his melancholy.

"Miss Haynes, will you play for us again?"

Kathleen rose promptly if a little wearily, because she was paid to entertain these people. For six years she had struggled on, neither failing nor succeeding, but just balancing between the two, earning enough to feed and clothe herself, but quite outside the real artistic circle.

The ring had opened once to let her in, but she had not seized the chance, and it had closed against her inexorably. Out of Weinbergen there had been none to lend a helping hand, and she had fought her way through the years, dropping in weariness many a bright hope and ambition, and leaving it by the wayside. She had laughed sometimes, remembering the girl so young and so silly making playfellows and confidants of the very pigeons; but she was not without consolations, for Carl Brenner's work was well known in England, and it had been her labour of love to go through every line, dictionary in hand, and rejoice that he at least had caught the tide at the flood. Her rancour had soon died of its own inanition, and what was good stayed with her.

The warm auburn had faded a little from her hair, and the discipline of life had tamed her into patience; but she touched the strings with all the old love and even greater power, only the last chord instead of being true was a trembling faint discord, for advancing towards her, and parting the careless throng as he came, was Carl Brenner. The entertainment had been given in his honour, and God had sent her there to meet him. His face was simply irradiated with the joy of finding her at last, and as he caught her hands the tears were in his eyes.

“Herzgeliebte! I have found you—after many days!”

And the crowd looked on in dumb amazement, dry as Gideon's fleece, whilst on the chosen two the richest dew of heaven descended. Yet the mere onlookers could not be all unmoved, for even to witness such happiness from afar off is a solemn thing. But to Carl, he and Kathleen were alone with their joy. He was conscious of nothing else in the world.

“Beloved! I have sought you everywhere. In Paris, in Munich—at Berlin, Leipsic—through all your native land. Never a written word of mine but it was a message seeking you through all the world. Ach! the little Käslein to be so cruel—so unforgiving. But now is all the sorrow and vain longing overpast. There remains to us only the joy of meeting, and thou art of me once again the great inspiration!”

In his impetuous tender hurry of words he waited for no answer, nor was there need of any. She saw that he had remained faithful, and for them both there was a new heaven and a new earth.

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