



THE STORYTELLER

Saki

It was a hot afternoon, and inside the train it was steamy. The next stop was Templecombe, which was almost an hour ahead. In one car of the train there were a little girl, an even younger girl, and a little boy. Their aunt sat in a seat in the corner. In the opposite corner of the car was a bachelor who didn't know them. The girls and the boy were all over the train car. The aunt kept telling the children "Don't," while the children

kept asking her questions starting with “Why?” The bachelor said nothing to them.

“Don’t, Cyril, don’t!” exclaimed the aunt, as the boy began hitting the seat cushions, making clouds of dust fly up. “Come over here and look out the window.”

Reluctantly, the boy went over to the window. “Why are they driving those sheep out of that field?” he asked.

“I guess they are being taken to another field that has more grass,” said the aunt weakly.

“But there’s lots of grass in that field,” protested the boy. “There’s nothing but grass there. Aunt, there’s **lots** of grass in that field.”

“Maybe the grass in the other field is better,” the aunt suggested foolishly.

“Why is it better?” came the quick, obvious question.

“Oh, look at those cows!” exclaimed the aunt. Almost every field they passed was full of cows and bulls, but she acted like it was an unusual thing.

“Why is the grass in the other field better?” Cyril kept at her.

The frown on the bachelor’s face was deepening into a scowl. The aunt saw him and decided he was a mean, unfriendly man. And she couldn’t come up with any good explanation for the little boy about the grass in the field.

The younger girl tried to entertain herself

and everyone else by starting to recite a poem. She only knew the first line, but she used that as much as possible. She repeated the line over and over again in a dreamy but loud voice. The bachelor thought it seemed like someone had bet her she couldn't say that same line two thousand times without stopping. Unfortunately for him, it seemed like she was going to win the bet.

"Come over here and listen to a story," said the aunt, when the bachelor had given her two nasty looks and looked like he was going to call the train conductor.

The children moved over toward the aunt without any enthusiasm. They obviously did not think the aunt was a very good storyteller.

In a quiet voice that was often interrupted by loud questions from the children, the aunt started a not-so-interesting story about a little girl who was good. Because she was so good, she made a lot of friends, and was finally saved from a wild bull by people who admired how good she was.

"Would they have saved her if she hadn't been good?" demanded the older of the little girls. That was exactly the question the bachelor wanted to ask.

"Well, yes," answered the aunt lamely, "but I don't think they would have run so fast to help her if they hadn't liked her so much."

“It’s the stupidest story I’ve ever heard,” said the older of the little girls.

“I didn’t even listen after the first part because it was so stupid,” said Cyril.

The younger girl didn’t comment on the story, but long before she had stopped listening and started repeating the line from the poem again.

“You don’t seem to be a very good storyteller,” said the bachelor suddenly.

The aunt immediately got defensive at this unexpected attack. “It’s very difficult to tell stories that children will understand and enjoy,” she said stiffly.

“I don’t agree with you,” said the bachelor.

“Maybe you’d like to tell them a story,” the aunt shot back.

“Tell us a story!” demanded the older of the little girls.

“Once upon a time,” began the bachelor, “there was a little girl called Bertha, who was very, very good.”

The children’s temporary interest started fading immediately. To them, all stories seemed boring and the same, no matter who told them.

“She did everything she was told to do. She always told the truth and kept her clothes neat and clean. She ate food that was good for her instead of junk food and sweets, got good grades in school, and was polite to everyone.”

“Was she pretty?” asked the older little girl.

“Not as pretty as any of you,” said the bachelor, “but she was horribly good.”

The children showed they liked this part of the story; the word horrible in connection with goodness was something new and they liked it. It seemed real and true, unlike the aunt’s stories about children.

“She was so good,” continued the bachelor, “that she won several medals for goodness, which she always wore, pinned to her dress. There was a medal for following rules, one for being on time, and one for general good behavior. They were large metal medals and they clicked against each other when she walked. No other child in her town had three medals, so everyone knew that she must be an extra good child.”

“Horribly good,” repeated Cyril.

“Everybody talked about how good she was, and the Prince of the country heard about it. He decided she was so good that he would let her walk once a week in his park just outside the town. It was a beautiful park, and no children had ever been allowed in it before. So it was a great honor for Bertha to be allowed to go there.”

“Were there any sheep in the park?” demanded Cyril.

“No,” said the bachelor, “there were no sheep.”

“Why weren’t there any sheep?” came the unavoidable question.

The aunt had a big smile on her face.

“There were no sheep in the park,” said the bachelor, “because the Prince’s mother had once had a dream that her son would either be killed by a sheep or by a clock falling on him. So the Prince never kept sheep in his park or a clock in his palace.”

The aunt gasped in admiration at how well the bachelor had answered the question.

“Was the Prince killed by a sheep or a clock?” asked Cyril.

“He is still alive, so we don’t know if the dream will come true,” said the bachelor. “Anyway, there were no sheep in the park, but there were lots of little pigs running all over the place.”

“What color were they?”

“Black with white faces, white with black spots, black all over, gray with white patches, and some were white all over.”

The storyteller stopped to let the children imagine all of the great things about the park, and then started again: “Bertha was sad to find that there were no flowers in the park. With tears in her eyes she had promised her aunts that she wouldn’t pick any of the flowers. She wanted to keep her promise, and it made her feel silly that there weren’t any flowers to pick.”

“Why weren’t there any flowers?”

“Because the pigs had eaten all of them,” said the bachelor right away. “The gardeners told the Prince he couldn’t have both pigs and flowers, so he decided to keep the pigs and forget the flowers.”

The children were all happy with the Prince’s choice; so many people would have picked the flowers over the pigs.

“There were lots of other fun things in the park. There were ponds with gold, blue, and green fish in them, and trees with beautiful talking parrots, and hummingbirds that could hum popular music. Bertha walked around and totally enjoyed herself. She thought, ‘If I weren’t so very good, they wouldn’t have let me come to this beautiful park and enjoy everything in it.’ Her three medals clinked against each other as she walked and again reminded her how good she was. But then a very big wolf came into the park to hunt for a fat little pig for its supper.”

“What color was it?” asked the children, who were now very interested in the story.

“Mud colored all over, with a black tongue and fierce pale gray eyes. The first thing it saw in the park was Bertha. Her white dress was so spotlessly white and clean that you could see it from far away. Bertha saw the wolf creeping toward her, and she wished she had never been invited to the park. She ran as fast as she could,

but the wolf came after her with huge leaps and bounds. She managed to reach some bushes and she hid in them. The wolf sniffed the bushes and she could see its black tongue hanging out of its mouth and its angry gray eyes. Bertha was very scared, and thought, ‘If I had not been so very good, I would be safe back in town right now.’

“However, the smell of the bushes was so strong and the branches were so thick that the wolf couldn’t smell or see Bertha, so it decided to go catch a pig instead. Bertha was so scared of the wolf that she was shaking and her medals for goodness started clinking together. The wolf was just moving away when it heard the medals clinking and stopped to listen. When they clinked again in a bush near him, it dove into the bush with its gray eyes shining fiercely. It dragged Bertha out and ate her all up. All that was left were her shoes, pieces of clothing, and the three medals for goodness.”

“Were any of the pigs killed?”

“No, they all escaped.”

“The story started badly,” said the younger girl, “but it had a beautiful ending.”

“It is the most beautiful story I have ever heard,” said the older little girl seriously.

“It is the *only* beautiful story I have ever heard,” said Cyril.

The aunt disagreed. “That is an inappropriate story to tell young children! You will undo

years of careful teaching.”

“Anyway,” said the bachelor, getting his stuff together so he could get off the train. “I kept them quiet for ten minutes, which was more than you could do.”

“Poor woman!” he thought to himself as he walked down the platform of Templecombe station. “For the next six months those children will beg her in public for an inappropriate story!”