

# An extraordinary gift

by Ulrike

Little Sophie wended her way onward. She had a firm goal and an important intention. To put her plan into action, she had explored Central Park meticulously.

She loved all kind of flowers and animals, but blooming flowers had a magic appeal. Mostly, she got on somebody's nerves when she picked them, asking the older children to braid a garland for her.

This time it was different. Her activity had to be top secret. To keep it, she had to go alone, so she checked out the area, then went above alone for the first time in her life.

At first, her way led her to the spot where the grape hyacinth were blooming and she hand-picked only the most beautiful ones and arranged them in a small bouquet. She looked at it closely, and smiled, satisfied. Sophie continued her walk, and very carefully gathered other spring flowers to add to her bouquet; snowdrops, yellow aconite and little wild daffodils.

She was holding the flowers tight in her little hand, which was damp with perspiration now. Best of all should be some crocus, which were unfortunately growing in a different area of the park.

"Oh, this has been more tiring than I thought," she mused. "I will take a short rest."

She climbed onto a near by bench, still carefully holding the bouquet. She dangled her legs and enjoyed the sunshine. A short time later, she continued her walk, humming a song or hopping here and there.

Finally, she reached the beech grove. At the feet of the trees, spread a carpet of blooming crocus, their purple blossoms pointing at the shining sun. She carefully picked a few flowers to add to her small bouquet.

Satisfied with her task, she headed home to the tunnels, holding the spray close in her soaked little hand. Overall, it had been a very long way and she was starting to feel tired, thirsty, and a little hungry too.

"A hard day," she remarked to herself and sighed. She paused in the glow of a torch.

But it was worthwhile, she thought, satisfied, and sighed again, as she looked down to her flower bouquet.

“ Oh, no!!!

Suddenly losing strength, she slid down the tunnel wall.

Big tears were starting to wobble like pearls along her cheeks, accompanied by a bitter snivel. She felt faint and a wave of despair washed over her.

Sophie looked again at her bouquet, where all of the little crocus and aconite were hanging limply and sadly. A new wave of tears overwhelmed her and she searched for a handkerchief. Then her nose started to run, but she couldn't find her hanky with only one free hand.

Of course Sophie's different unusual behaviour and her absence attracted attention. As Mary started to get worried about Sophie, she met Vincent and informed him about the girl's odd manner. They agreed that there was no reason to be overly concerned for now, but Vincent promised to keep his eyes open.

So he changed his plans and walked around the tunnels. After walking a while, he heard a faint snivel. He advanced cautiously to the source of the noise. As he spotted Sophie at last, he hurried and reached her in a few paces. Vincent kneeled down beneath her.

“Sophie, what is it? Are you hurt?” he asked in concern.

Sophie shook her head with a sob.

“Tell me, what is it?” he asked again. He reached out his hand and slowly lifted her chin upwards.

“I.....I...” she stopped and snuffled.

“Do you need a handkerchief ?” Vincent asked.

He sat down beside her and invited her to crawl into his lap. Sophie nodded and accepted the invitation.

“So, come on Scarlett O'Hara, take a deep breath and then blow your nose, like a little elephant.”

He handed her the handkerchief. She took it and did what he suggested.

“But Vincent, wiping a nose in this manner isn't ladylike. You know that, don't you? And who is Scarlett? I don't know her,” Sophie responded.

“Oh, yes, Scarlett O'Hara is the heroine in the novel “Gone with the Wind”. She was well known for missing a handkerchief in every important situation of her life. Nevertheless, she was a very tough lady. But of course, you are right, we are committing a breach of etiquette.

“But .. would you agree we can make an exception of the rule? Look, there’s only the two of us and we won’t tell. Let’s keep it a secret,” Vincent suggested.

Sophie contemplated his advice, but when she heard the word ‘secret’, her heart sank and she wept again. Vincent took the handkerchief and dabbed the tears carefully away. He nursed her gently in his arms, giving her comfort.

“Please, tell me,” Vincent whispered.

Heaving a deep sigh, she stretched out her hand.

“I went above to gather these special spring flowers. For you,” she added shyly. “I wanted to make you a special present. Here, this bouquet is for you!”

“Sophie!”

That was all Vincent was able to reply, at first. Sophie’s gift affected him deeply. He was puzzled, thunderstruck, speechless, all at once. So he hugged her heartily.

“Why did you decide to do this?” he asked.

“Look, these are the first flowers that are blooming after winter. But during the night they close up to sleep. So, you will never be able to look at them when they are awake with open blooms. I went out to pick them in the sunlight for you. But now.....look. It doesn’t work,” Sophie explained with a sob.

“Oh.... don’t worry..... I’m very touched. Never has anyone done something so beautiful for me before,” Vincent assured her, while considering the bouquet. “It’s really wonderful.”

“Really?” Sophie asked with shining eyes.

“Really.” Vincent hugged her again and nodded.

“Flowers like crocus are very delicate, like elves I think. If you pick them, they feel as if they were imprisoned and caged. You know, elves can’t endure that - they will die.”

“Oh..... Vincent, are you an elf then, too?” Sophie asked.

“Uh, I don’t think so. Do you think that elves look like me?” Vincent asked with a light grin.

“Nope.....not really. But you don’t like being caged either.....,” Sophie replied carefully.

Vincent was deeply impressed with Sophie’s explanation and sighed.

“That’s right and you are a good observer. It is not only elves that are not able to endure such treatment. When I look at you, I think this description might better fit a little elf I know. Would you want to be captured?” he asked finally.

Sophie shook her head, but she enjoyed the thought of being an elf very much and beamed.

“Did you know that these first flowers are very important as nurture for the bees, when they start to fly again in spring? There aren’t so many at this time. Don’t you think we would be better able to enjoy the flowers if we left them unpicked?” he asked.

Sophie nodded devoutly.

“So, now I’m curious to hear all about your adventure. Tell me everything,” Vincent demanded.

Sophie looked up at him and started to tell her story, leaving out nothing.

As she finished her tale Vincent said, “I see. So, we will have to take note that you are no longer a little one. But as a bigger girl, you have to remember that there are others who care about you and who will be anxious. Mary was, so please no solo actions in future. We are a community, and we care for each other, you know. And finally, I think we must save the flowers. Better?”

“Better,” Sophie nodded.

Vincent rose with Sophie in his arms, the bouquet in his hands, and carried her to the nursery, where they met Mary. Vincent gave Mary a soothing look.

“Sorry Mary. Vincent said I’m a big girl now,” Sophie murmured, as Vincent got her between the blankets. After a big yawn she drifted off to sleep with a happy smile on her face.

“Sweet dreams, little elf,” Vincent whispered in her ear. Then he kissed her forehead.

He carried the flowers to his chamber and put them in a small vase with water.

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