POOR COPY

Prince Eric and the Nut Girl.

BY MARY E. MOFFAT.

It was nutting time.

A blooming band of peasant children had gathered from far and near to have a merry day amid the nut trees.

I say children—but girls of fifteen and lads of eighteen or twenty were scattered through the chattering group.

The nut harvest was a joyful time to them.

The young are always attractive in a certain way. The undimmed brightness of the eye—the satiny smoothness of the complexion—the happy smiles hovering around the rosy lips—each has a beauty in itself; but add to the youthful face the charm of perfectly chisled features, and of lustrous brown eyes looking out upon the world with an innocent wonder at the changing scenes of loveliness so constantly unfolding themselves before them—frame it in a mass of shining, wavy gold of nature's own crimping—and poise it upon a form so lithe and slender in its exquisite grace, that Praxiteles might have chosen it for his model—and you can form an idea of Rika Bremer—the acknowledged beauty of the whole surrounding country.

And there was a romantic story about her going the rounds. It was said that no less a personage than Prince Eric, the son of the great and good Gustavus, had been standing one morning by one of the palace windows to witness a rustic procession which had been gotten up in honor of some important victory recently won by his famous father. As he stood gazing listlessly out, his eyes brightened suddenly, and he turned to an attendant and whispered a few words which caused him to hasten away.—When he returned he was not alone—Rika was with him.

Prince Eric's beauty-loving eyes had been attracted by her as she had stood amid a group of other maidens, looking at the gayly-dressed columns of her countrymen filing by. She, too, was in holiday attire, and the black velvet jacket, fitting closely to her slender figure, and adorned with silver-gilt buttons, brought out so vividly the exquisite fairness of her skin, with its rose-leaf tints of red upon lips and cheeks, that she looked liked a being of a different sphere as she stood amid her mates.

Confused and blushing, she now awaited the prince's pleasure. She dared not raise her eyes to his face. Had she done so, she would have been overpowered by the earnestness of the gaze with which he regarded her. Let sceptics scoff at the tender passion as they will, it is one of the moving powers of the world, and ofttimes it springs to life within the heart as suddenly as the sun rises from his bed of clouds to proclaim the advent of the new day, and like to the magic glory with which his beams invest the earth is the rose-hued coloring that makes the hertofore prosaic life like a blissful, fairy-like dream of bliss, when in the presence of the one beloved. So it was with Prince Eric. From the moment his eyes rested upon Rika's face the world held but one peerless woman to him. It mattered not that his younger brother, Duke John, was even then in another kingdom wooing for him a royal bride upon whose brow rested a diadem whose splendor far exceeded the one which he was to inherit upon the death of his father. No. In that moment Elizabeth of England was forgotten. The peasant maid who stood before him had become the queen of his fancy.

"Thy name, little one?" he asked.

Rika raised her eyes to the handsome, earnest face, but dropped them timidly as she met his glance.

"I am Frederika—the forester's daughter—your majesty."

"Nay, not yet crave I that title, maiden. Young blood must have its vent, and I am glad to know that the cares of government are not soon likely to rest upon my shoulders, broad though they be." With a smiling glance at the stalwart frame which was acknowledged to be one of the finest specimens of physical comeliness in the country, as was his face called the handsomest of any prince's in Europe.

Rika courteied respectfully but did not reply. If the gracious prince chose thus to address as an equal one of the humblest of his father's subjects, she knew well her position, and was to the full as proud of her unsullied innocence and integrity as the haughtiest maid in the realm—count she her ancestry back for many generations.

Her shy modesty added to her beauty in Eric's eyes.

"Where livest thou, Frederika?" he asked, softly, "for I would well like to send thy father a commission to fell some trees which much interfere with the comfort of the king's hunting parties in the forest."

This he said, knowing intuitively that it would startle Rika had he given her his true reason, and said that he intended to start out himself in quest of fairer and more precious game—which must be ensnared in tenderer toils than those at the command of the keenest sportsman at his father's court.

After a few words more he suffered Rika to go. But the sweet memory of her presence went not with her. It nestled deep within his heart.

After this interview scarcely a week passed that did not find Eric's steps turned in the direction of the forester's cottage. A glass of milk from Rika's own white hands was the draught most preferred by the royal hunter, although out of courtesy he would sometimes accept a mug of mead from the sturdy old father.

Rika had still the same shy ways, and Eric found it hard to break through the reserve which had thus far proved her safeguard in his presence. If she knew in her secret heart what was the attraction which so constantly brought the young prince to the cottage, she let no one be the wiser for her suspicion of the truth.

This was the romance connected with her life. It was even rumored that Eric had serious intentions toward her, and lacked but his royal father's consent to raise her to his own lofty position.

But that was mere surmise. Like all similar tales it had gained in volume until the grain of truth which was its nucleus was almost entirely hidden by what was false and imaginary.

Matters were in this stage at the time our story opens.

The nuts were gathered, and the merry groups had dispersed to their various homes, with the understanding that they should meet again the next day and go together to the palace and dispose of their treasures.

The next morning found them on their way, dressed in their best, as became so eventful an occasion in their usually monotonous lives; for royalty has such a glamour to uninitiated eyes that the mere sight of the walls which shut it in is eagerly coveted; and who could tell but they might catch a sight of the king himself, or of the queen, or of the handsome Prince Eric? Nay, who knew, but what another summons to the palace might come to one of them, as it once did to Rika?

It was a pretty sight to any one who might have been stationed at the window, to see that blooming procession of neatly dressed lads and lasses as they wended their way along with many a merry laugh and jest, until at last they halted in the great square before the palace.

But to the watching eyes of the prince—who had received a hint of the coming of the nutgatherers—there was but one face worth looking at among the throng.

"Come," he said to the courtiers who were standing near, "let us go down to the square in a body and make the hearts of yon merry rustics even merrier to-day by exchanging some coins for the nuts they have with them."

A prince's suggestion never lacks for listeners nor for followers; and soon the rich toilettes of the court people were scattered about amidst the crowd in the square.

Eric's steps were turned at once toward Rika. He soon possessed himself of her nuts, and after paying for them lavishly in golden coin, he took from an inner pocket a locket and chain which he gave to her saying:

"Wear it for my sake. There is no one who would look fairer in it. You ought to be a queen, little Rika, and I will yet make you one."

Before Rika had time to realize aught but that his words had filled her heart with a bewildering sense of happiness, he had gone. His gift alone remaining to prove that she had not been dreaming.

But she soon came to her sober senses. It was well-known that King Gustavus had been holding negotiations with the maiden queen of England, to induce her to bestow her jeweled hand upon his elder son, and it had reached Rika's ears. Such a thing had been known as a maid of low degree being wooed and won by a royal suitor. The tale of Grisel's happiness and of her woes as well, was a favorite one among the folk stories told around the humble hearths of the peasantry, and if fate had ordained it to happen to her, also, Rika would have been as glad and proud a maiden as ever the sun had shone on. But she would listen to no words of love from one whose hand was as good as given to another.

Thus she thought as she walked slowly homeward.

So the next day a little barefooted boy—the child of a neighboring farmer—was sent to the palace by Rika with Prince Eric's gift carefully tied up in a piece of linen cloth cut from the corner of a web which she herself had woven from flax raised from the seed, and prepared by her own deft hands. Could the unconscious trinket have told Eric that Rika's bright eyes had lingered lovingly and regretfully upon it, and that she had pressed it to her red lips again and again, it might have lessened his chagrin in receiving his present back again.

As it was, it only kindled his determination to win Rika for his own, be the consequences what they might. It should not be said of him that a lowly peasant girl had given him—the Crown Prince of Sweden—such a rebuff.

He threw a large cloak over his rich court suit, and thus disguised he mounted Olaf—his favorite hunter—and hastened towards Rika's home. Hot anger was contending with his love for the rustic beauty as he rode along. But when he at last reached the borders of the cleared patch of land in the forest which held the little cottage, had dismounted from his horse and tied him to a sapling, and found himself standing at the door awaiting an answer to his rap, all was forgotten, but the thought that he was soon to gaze upon the beautiful face which had haunted his fancy so persistently, since fate had first brought it before him.

Rika opened the door and stood for an instant in glad surprise, gazing up into her lover's face in utter forgetfulness of the difference in their stations.

"Ah! little one, thy face for once tells me all that I wish to know. Thou lovest me! I see it in those eyes!"

And before Rika had time to retreat he caught her to his heart and imprinted passionate kisses upon her trembling lips.

She drew herself from his encircling arms and stood panting like a frightened fawn. Then she threw herself at his feet, and clasping her hands entreatingly, she said:

"Oh! most noble prince, let it not be put against thy record that innocence and virtue received no respect at thy hands. Go, I entreat you! Should my father return and find thee here, he would surely first kill me, and then kill himself in shame and despair. Oh, go!"

"I mean thee no harm, Rika. I love thee; and when one loves he hurts not the object of that love. To win thee I will give up my heirship to the crown to my brother John, and while he wears the diadem upon his brow, I will content myself with love and happiness with thee."

"Not so, noble Eric," said Rika, firmly; "if thou wouldst make such a sacrifice, I, for one, will not be a party to it. After such a marriage—entailing, as it would, so much loss—love would prove but a transient guest within our home. Reproaches would drive the fickle god away."

"Tell me the truth, Rika," interrupted Eric, with passionate earnestness; "do you love me?"

"So well that I would rather die than know that harm would come to one so noble through any influence of mine."

"And yet you refuse to make me happy?"

"I refuse to work your ruin, noble Prince. The present is not all of life. But see, the sunlight has already reached the middle point of your dial. In ten more minutes my father will be here. If thou wouldst shield me from harm, go."

"I will obey now; but I will not promise to give up the hope which lured me hither. Farewell for a time, most obdurate maiden."

Then with a long, lingering, regretful look, the prince turned and departed.

Days and weeks passed on. At last came a time which was to plunge the nation in mourning. The good and great Gustavus was stricken with a mortal illness. He died, and was laid beside his kingly progenitors, and Eric was the reigning sovereign in Sweden. Young, impulsive, and his own master, with his heart filled with but one image, is it to be wondered at that he suffered no obstacle to delay his union with the maiden of his love after the days of his mourning were fully accomplished, and that the pretty nut girl of Sweden became its crowned queen?

Search the annals of history, and you will find the romantic story of the marriage on record, adding still another folk-tale to those the country maidens tell over to each other at that witching time between daylight and starlight, when all nature is going to rest, and young hearts are attuned to sympathy with all true lovers.

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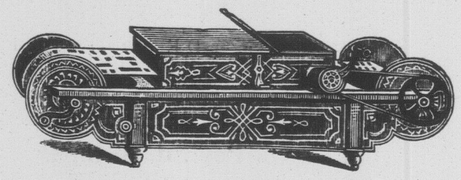

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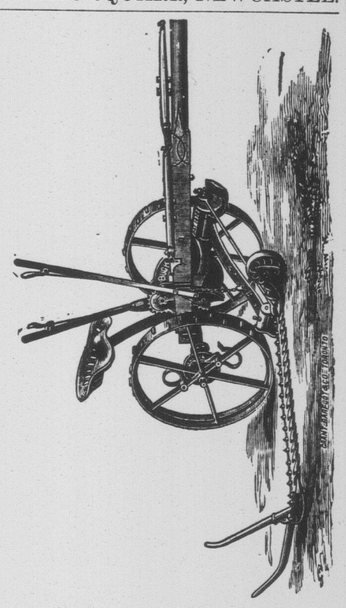

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