



RING-FALLA BRIDGE

A FAIRY TALE

BY K. E. SUTTER.



ONCE upon a time there lived a King who had two kingdoms to govern—his own always the perfection of law and order, while the other was given over to confusion and rebellion,

which, strive as he would, got ever worse instead of better.

It had been the worry of his life ever since he began to reign—and as he had no son to help him, he was obliged to find a ruler for it among his Ministers, but not one of them, however clever, could manage to control its unruly inhabitants.

Sometimes, at long intervals, he even went to live there himself, on which occasions his troubles in regard to it multiplied so exceedingly, that he swore they were half demons, as the name of their kingdom, Nökköland, proved, and for his part he wished they could find an evil spirit like themselves to govern

them in his stead, as no mere mortal could. And then, as he could think of nothing else, he called a council of his most trusted chiefs, and conferred with them, but as they had all given their best consideration to the subject many times before, none of them could come to any more brilliant conclusion than formerly.

Therefore King Kaftan said he would hunt on the morrow to distract his mind, so a great party set forth at daybreak, and scoured the woods far and near, but no sport could they get; no four-footed beast could they find excepting rabbits, and they were everywhere.

Unwilling to return empty-handed, and hoping for better luck on the morrow, the King gave the order to camp in the wood. Some of the men were catching rabbits for supper, whilst others were making fires to cook them, when just as the last rim of the sinking sun disappeared below the horizon, a beautiful hart as white as snow, with antlers and hoofs of gold, suddenly appeared, and walked leisurely down the glade towards the sunset.

Instantly, with one accord, King, courtiers, huntsmen, and servants rushed off in hot pursuit, helter-skelter over each other, on foot, on horseback, armed or unarmed, just

as they found themselves when it first appeared. The King, who had not dismounted, was ahead of the others, and urged his steed with whip and spur; but poor Rolf was very weary, and do as he would, his master could get no nearer to his quarry.

Night was rapidly closing in when the King found himself far ahead of his attendants, and alone with a spent horse in a part of the forest where he had never been before, and miles from any human habitation.

More and more faltering grew Rolf's jaded pace, and in proportion as it slackened, slower went the hart. The King's pulses quivered with excitement. He leapt from the saddle, drew his dagger, and prepared to follow on foot; but, to his astonishment, the beast had turned and was coming slowly towards him, the moonlight turning his antlers to silver, and gleaming on his milk-white coat.

Half instinctively, the King had raised his dagger, when the hart stopped and spoke in courteous, but authoritative, tones.

"Stay thy hand, and know that I also am a King in my own country. I have much to say to thee, therefore follow me and fear nothing."

So King Kaftan followed, wondering, until the hart stopped before a great rock, overhung with a tangle of eglantine and honeysuckle—and pushing aside the fragrant curtain dexterously with his horns, disclosed what appeared to be the mouth of a cave. Entering this, closely followed by the King, they proceeded for some way in almost total darkness. Gradually it grew lighter and the path wider, when the King perceived, to his amazement, that the illumination proceeded from countless numbers of bats, ridden by small imps carrying lighted glow-worms.

Presently they came to a spacious garden, where all the trees were lighted by coloured

lamps hanging among the branches, and the air was filled with music and perfume.

Within the garden was a great pavilion of purple silk, most gorgeously emblazoned with scarlet and gold, and having a Royal banner floating from the roof.

Within was a table, covered with every variety of food and wine, lavishly decorated with flowers and gold plate, and laid for two. Here the hart entertained his Royal guest to supper, and after he was completely refreshed and rested, handed him an enamelled box, which, on being opened, disclosed a clay pipe, blackened with much use, a tinder, and a flint.

"Smoke, oh King!" said the host; "unfortunately I cannot join you; and now to explain why I have lured you from your own people to my enchanted land.

"I know your difficulties in Nokkëland, because for one reason we are very near neighbours, though probably you are unaware of it. The people who inhabit that kingdom are descended from a water fiend, and the turbulent instincts inherited from him can never be quelled until the power of the Neck, who rules the river between your kingdom and

theirs, is broken. Now, the Neck is my enemy as well as yours, and if you will ally yourself with me and follow my counsels, you will have peace, honour, and happiness for the rest of your life in all probability."

"I am ready," said the King, "only tell me what to do; the Klavs are the plague of my life, but from what you say success even then is by no means a certainty."

"Much depends on luck," said the hart, "and to neither your Majesty nor myself is it given to do much. You have three daughters, Solveig, Ulva, and little Kirsten; one of them must go over Ringfalla Bridge without stum-



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"AN ENAMELLED BOX."

bling and without speaking one word. This done, your troubles and my own are at an end."

Now, Ringfalla Bridge it was that spanned the river between King Kaftan's own territory and that of the Klavs, and what between the Klavs themselves and the Neck who inhabited the river, it had a very evil reputation indeed.

The King looked grave, and then he laughed rather grimly. "There won't be much difficulty about that," he said. "To cross it has been the desire of their hearts ever since they were babies; it is only my strict orders that keep them from it."

"She who undertakes it must go of her own free will, and if she accomplish it without stumbling and without speaking, the kingdom is saved." Those were the last words of the hart ere bidding the King good-night, and they were ringing in his ears when he awoke in the morning. But he was no longer lying on the silken cushions on which he had rested the night before. Pavilion, garden, and hart had vanished, the sun was high in the heavens, he was lying on a heap of moss and ferns in the wood, with Rolf standing over him and thrusting his soft nozzle into his face.

The King was greatly perplexed as to whether all the events of the preceding night had actually happened, or if he had only dreamt them, and was rather inclined to the latter belief. Mounting Rolf, and leaving that good steed to find his own way back to the camp, he pondered deeply over all the hart had told him, and resolved at least to try what he had suggested.

When at last they came to the camp it was nearly deserted, as most of the party had gone to hunt for the King, but after much blowing of horns, the company was collected, and, abandoning all further idea of sport, rode back to the capital.

There they found everything silent, except that the bells were mournfully tolling, and the flag over the palace hanging half-mast high. "What is this? Who is dead?" asked the King, but no one seemed inclined to explain.

At last the captain of the guard, who could not run away, was forced to salute and answer the King.

"Sire," he said, "your Majesty's daughter, the Princess Solveig, was drowned yesterday in trying to cross Ringfalla Bridge."

Greatly to the captain's surprise, however, the King inquired no further on the subject, but went straight up to the tower where the

apartments of the three Princesses were situated.

There he found the two youngest overwhelmed with grief for their sister's loss, but overjoyed to see him and give an account of the catastrophe.

On the previous day, after seeing the King start at the head of a great cavalcade on his hunting expedition, the three Princesses cast about in their minds how they might amuse themselves, and finally agreed to go down and picnic by the river. Now, although the river itself was not absolutely forbidden, they were quite aware that the King disapproved of their going there, but they pacified their consciences by taking a strong escort, their old nurse, and a very large variety of hampers containing lunch.

Poor old Nurse Gerda was as much averse to the expedition as King Kaftan himself could have been, and told gruesome tales of the evil water spirit and his doings; but the Princesses only laughed, and enjoyed preparing their own lunch, and eating it afterwards, extremely. Then they wandered along the banks, gathering primroses and long grasses, all the while drawing nearer to the forbidden bridge; but it looked so inviting with its stone parapet and curious wooden pavement, and the water flowed so peacefully beneath the arches, that they there and then made up their minds to cross it, and drew lots to decide which should venture first. The lot fell to Solveig, the eldest, and she set out boldly, with six archers to guard her—three before and three behind, walking abreast—a last precaution insisted upon by Gerda, the nurse, who watched the proceeding in terror.

All went well till they had almost reached the middle, when she tripped, and in falling touched the parapet, which instantly gave way, and the Princess fell into the river. As she touched the water a great pair of hairy arms caught and drew her under, so that she was seen no more. "And," continued Ulva, who up till now had done most of the talking, "the wall closed up again, with no sign of a break, directly she disappeared, and though two of the guard jumped in after her, the Neck took no notice of them, and they swam ashore in the end quite safely."

"The bridge is enchanted," said the King, gloomily; and then he told them of his adventure with the white hart.

"Then," said Ulva, with great decision, "I will go: it is very simple. Solveig talked to Ulf, the archer, all the time, and was looking at the river when she stumbled. Now, I



“A GREAT PAIR OF HAIRY ARMS CAUGHT AND DREW HER UNDER.”

know what is required of me: I will look at my feet and say nothing, not a word. Do, father, let me go.” And she gave the King no peace till he consented; but she fared no better than her sister.

Boldly and silently she marched in the very centre of the fatal bridge, till suddenly she saw in front of her an enormous serpent with fiery eyes and forked tongue, with head up ready to spring. Poor Ulva's chief fear in life was a snake. She recoiled in terror, calling to warn the archers, who had seen nothing. And then the flooring gave way beneath her, and she too sank into the flood, a great pair of hairy hands clutching her as she fell.

Then there was great mourning throughout the land. The people clothed themselves in black, and the King reviled the hart and his own folly in acting on his advice, and refused to be comforted.

Then little Kirsten, the youngest sister, and the fairest maiden in the land, put her white arms about his neck and told him to be of

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good cheer, “for I will ride across,” she said, “and if Freyja my mare stumble, it will be her fault, not mine, and I will neither speak nor scream, for they will tie a scarf over my lips so that I cannot. So, father, let me go, for it is I who will save the kingdom.”

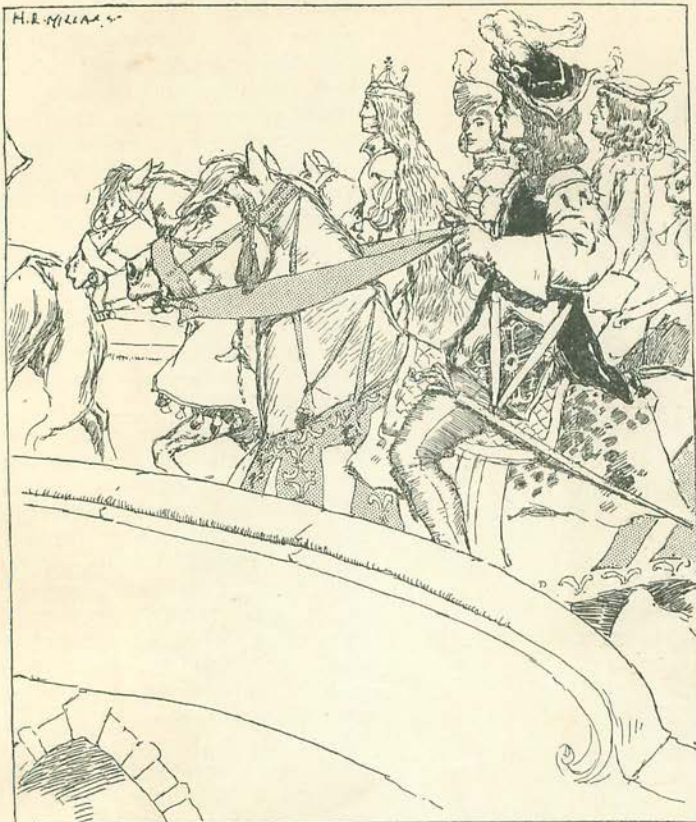
But the King swore a great oath, and vowed she should not, and for three days nothing could move him. Then the Princess prevailed, and the whole city came out to see her ride over Ringfalla Bridge.

This time neither guards nor soldiers attempted to cross—a dozen courtiers, richly apparelled and mounted, accompanied the youngest Princess, who, dressed in white, and all her pet jewels, with diamond fireflies glistening in the golden hair that floated to her little shoes, and her small, red mouth, bound fast with a silken scarf, rode gaily upon Freyja till she had crossed the middle of the bridge—when, once again, appeared a wonder on the verge of the forest—a great white hart, with horns and hoofs of burnished gold. And straightway all the courtiers were tearing after it helter-skelter in

hot haste, entirely forgetful of the poor little Princess and everything else.

And Freyja that morning was very frisky; she minced along sideways on her golden shoes, coquetting with her own shadow, and making little, playful snaps at her bridle. So she, too, stumbled at last on the treacherous planks, throwing her mistress over the parapet into the swiftly-running stream; but this time no demon hands were stretched out to receive their prey—only a flash of white and gold ere the water closed over her head, and then all was still.

Meantime the white hart was giving the truant courtiers a lively time of it; he bounded, trotted, and doubled, keeping all the time close to the bridge, but eluding all their efforts to come near him. When, however, the maiden fell, a marvellous thing chanced—the beautiful beast vanished, and in his place stood the handsomest knight that had ever been seen in that or any other land. His armour was of gold, curiously inlaid with silver; on his helmet was a crown of



"THE YOUNGEST PRINCESS RODE GAILY UPON FREYJA."

emeralds, and his long purple mantle was lined with ermine, so there could be no doubt about his being a King.

Then all the courtiers doffed their plumed caps, and did obeisance to him; but the stranger, after acknowledging their homage, called aloud for "Asaph," and out of the wood, running as fast as he could, came a beautiful little page, clothed in green, and carrying a golden harp.

Then the strange knight crossed the bridge and saluted King Kaftan, who was standing on the bank, looking at the river like one dazed.

"Be of good cheer, Sir King," he cried; "the Princess Kirsten has broken the charm, and I am no longer the white hart, but the rightful King of your troublesome Klavs—me they obey and no other; and now, thanks for your courtesy." So saying, he took the harp from his little foot-page, and, seating himself on the bank, began to play.

Ver softly at first, but so wondrous were the magic notes that all the assembled people listened silent and motionless, for never before had they heard the like. First the sound was like the distant echo of silver trumpets, when they welcome the hosts back from battle; and then coming, as it were, nearer, like the ripple of waves on a pebbly beach, and all the fishes swam up to listen, while out of the wood flocked bird and beast also. So wondrous was the strain.

And then little Kirsten came smiling out of the water and sat upon the harper's knee, and one arm he put about her to hold her fast, but still he kept on playing. And now the music waxed fierce and terrible, like the roll of thunder among the mountains, or the crash of armies when they meet in battle.

And the waves grew black

and angry, and lashed themselves into foam, for the Neck, the evil water spirit, was furious, but he could not fight against his master, and so at the last he also came forth, black and hideous, but subdued, leading the two Princesses Solveig and Ulva, who looked more beautiful than ever, and none the worse for their sojourn below the river.

So there were great rejoicings in both kingdoms, for the youngest Princess had broken the spell laid on Sir Sigurd by the Neck, who caught him in the forest alone without his harp, and condemned him to wander as a white hart until a Royal Princess should of her own free will cross Ringfalla Bridge without stumbling and without talking.

This little Kirsten did, and she had her reward, for she married Sigurd and reigned over the Klavs, who were turbulent no more, because their King and Queen had been born for the special purpose of ruling over them.