

THE ANT MOUNTAIN

A STORY FOR
CHILDREN.

FROM THE GERMAN.

How could she work? She had no longer anyone to work for.

One day, shortly after her sad loss, she was sitting on the doorstep looking sorrowfully out into the distance, when her attention was attracted by something long and black that moved rapidly over the ground towards her. She looked with curiosity at the moving mass, and saw it was an endless procession of ants. From whence they came she could not discover, the wandering host stretched so far. At a short distance from the cottage they halted, and formed an immense circle round about the astonished maiden. Several of them, apparently the leaders of the host, then stepped forward, and said :—

“We know you well, Viorica, and have often marvelled at your industry, which closely resembles our own, a thing we very rarely find among mortals.

“We know also that you are alone in the world, and therefore beg you to come with us and be our queen. We will build you a palace that shall be larger and more beautiful than any house you have ever seen, only first you must promise to remain with us all your life long, and never again return to dwell among men.”

“I will willingly remain with you,” replied Viorica; “I have nothing to keep me here except my mother’s grave; that I must visit from time to time to plant it with fresh flowers.”

“You shall certainly visit your mother’s grave, but you must speak to no one on your way, otherwise you will be untrue to us, and our vengeance will be terrible.”



HERE was once a most beautiful maiden named Viorica. Her hair was of a golden hue, her eyes were blue as the heavens, her cheeks like milk, her lips red as cherries, and her slight, graceful form was supple as a reed. All mankind rejoiced when they beheld the beautiful maiden, but not so much on account of her surpassing loveliness as because of her great industry, and her exceeding skill in weaving and in all kinds of embroidery.

All her linen, her dresses, and even her Sunday stockings she had embroidered with flowers. Her little hands could not rest for a single moment; she worked whilst walking in the fields and meadows, as well as in the house. All the young men were in love with the beautiful Viorica. She, however, paid no heed to them; she did not wish to hear of love or marriage; she had no time for that, she said, she must look after her mother.

But the hour at length arrived when her mother fell ill, and all Viorica’s love was unable to chain her to the earth. The beautiful maiden had to close the beloved eyes, and was left all alone in the little house now so desolate. For the first time in her life, Viorica’s little hands lay idle in her lap.

So Viorica went away with the ants. They journeyed on for a long time, until at length they reached a place where it seemed suitable to build her a palace. Then she saw how much less skilful she was than the ants. She could never have erected such a building in so short a time. There were galleries one above the other leading to spacious rooms, and ever higher and higher: at the summit of the building were the rooms for the larvæ, who had to be carried out into the sunshine, and brought in again swiftly should rain-drops threaten. The bed-chambers were adorned in the most costly manner with the leaves of flowers, which were nailed to the walls with the needle-like leaves of the fir-tree; and Viorica learned to spin cobwebs; these formed the carpets and the coverings for the beds.

But though all the rooms in the palace were beautiful, their beauty was as nothing when compared with the apartment destined for Viorica. Many passages led thither, thus in a few seconds she could receive news from every part of her kingdom, and these passages the industrious little ants daily strewed with the leaves of the crimson poppy to form a rich carpet for the feet of their beloved queen. The doors were rose leaves fastened together by a silken thread, so that they might open and shut without noise. The floor of Viorica's chamber was covered with a soft, thick carpet of forget-me-nots, into which her rosy feet sank, for she did not need shoes here: they would have been much too rough, and would have spoilt the beautiful carpet. The walls were covered with carnations, honeysuckle, and forget-me-nots, cleverly woven together; these flowers the ants also constantly renewed, and their freshness and sweet perfume were almost overpowering. The curtains were of the leaves of lilies, spread out like a pavilion; the couch which the diligence of the little ants had stored up in many weeks' work was composed entirely of the dust of flowers, and over it was spread a coverlet of Viorica's spinning. When she lay there wrapt in slumber she was so beautiful that the stars would have fallen from Heaven could they have seen her. But the ants had placed her chamber in the centre of the palace, and guarded their beloved queen most closely and jealously. There was not one of them would have ventured to look on her while asleep.

In the ants' little kingdom everything was most perfectly arranged. Each ant strove to do more work than the others, and to be the

one who should best please the industrious queen. Her orders were carried out with the rapidity of lightning, for she never required too much at a time or ordered impossible things, while her commands were issued in such soft, gentle tones that they sounded more like suggestions or kindly advice, and one sunny glance from her bright eyes was deemed by all a more than sufficient reward for any amount of toil.

The ants often said they had the sunshine continually in their house, and exulted much in their good fortune. To show their gratitude to Viorica they built her a platform, where she could enjoy the fresh air and sunshine should her room feel too small and close. From thence she could see the height of the palace, which already resembled a mighty mountain.

One day as she sat in her chamber embroidering the wings of butterflies on a dress, with the silken thread of a caterpillar that the ants had brought her, she heard a noise about her mountain. It sounded like the noise of voices, and the next moment all her subjects were crowding around her alarmed and breathless.

"Our house is being destroyed!" they cried. "Wicked men are knocking it down. Two, three galleries are already destroyed, and the next is threatened. What shall we do; oh, what shall we do?"

"What, nothing more than this?" said Viorica. "I will stop this immediately, and in two days the galleries will all be rebuilt."

Saying this, she hastened through the labyrinth of passages and suddenly appeared on her platform. Then she beheld a handsome youth, who, having dismounted from his horse, was busily engaged destroying the ant mountain, his attendants assisting him with swords and lances. On seeing her they at once stopped their work, while the handsome youth, half-blinded by her beauty, shaded his eyes with his hand and gazed in admiration at the slim figure in shimmering garments that stood before him. Viorica's golden hair fell in thick masses around her feet; a soft flush overspread her features, and her eyes gleamed like the stars. She lowered them for a few seconds before the youth's admiring gaze, but at length, raising her lids, she opened her rosy mouth and said, in a musical voice:—

"Who is it dares lay insolent hands on my kingdom?"

"Pardon, gracious maiden!" cried the astonished youth; "I am a knight and a king's son, but henceforth I will be your

most zealous defender! How could I guess that a goddess, a fairy, ruled this kingdom?"

"I thank you," replied Viorica. "I require no other service than that of my faithful subjects, and only desire that no human foot should enter my kingdom."

With these words she disappeared suddenly, as

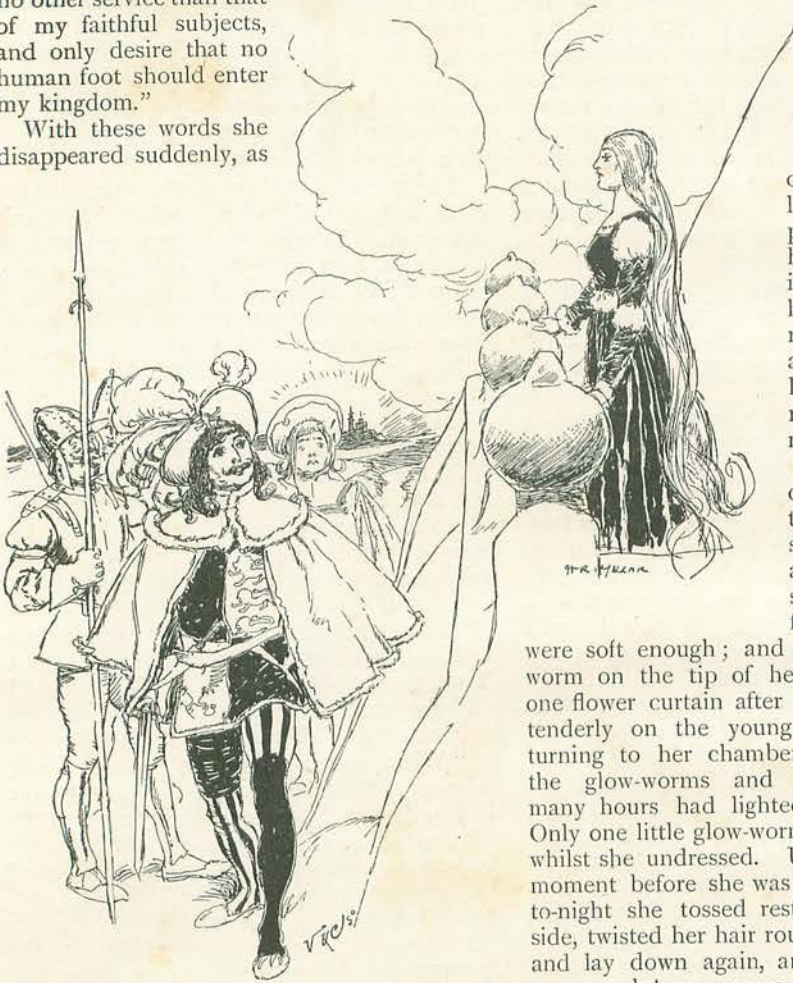
would willingly have trodden under foot in his anger and impatience, for although he questioned them it seemed they either did

not hear or did not understand his words, but continued their work and ran quite boldly about his feet, as if certain of their safety. At length, in despair, the prince mounted his horse and plunged into the forest, where he rode about all night trying to devise a scheme by which he might win this most beautiful maiden for his wife.

Viorica always lay down to rest later than her subjects; she used to look after the larvæ herself every night, and feel if their little beds

were soft enough; and so, holding a glow-worm on the tip of her finger, she raised one flower curtain after another, and looked tenderly on the young brood. Then, returning to her chamber, she dismissed all the glow-worms and fire-flies which for many hours had lighted her at her work. Only one little glow-worm remained with her whilst she undressed. Usually it was only a moment before she was sunk in deep sleep; to-night she tossed restlessly from side to side, twisted her hair round her finger, sat up and lay down again, and then she was so warm—oh! so very warm! She had never before found there was too little air in her kingdom. Now she longed to hasten out into the open air, but feared she might be heard and her evil example infect others. She had already, pressed by her subjects, been obliged to pass many a hard sentence, and to banish ants from the community on account of forbidden wanderings; she had even been compelled to sentence some to death, and to watch with bleeding heart whilst they were pitilessly stung to death by the others.

The next morning she was up before any of the ants, and astonished them by building up one of the galleries alone. That she had at the same time looked out into the forest, and also listened a little, she did not even



"WHO DARES LAY INSOLENT HANDS ON MY KINGDOM?"

though the mount had swallowed her up; those outside did not see how all the ants came crowding round to kiss her feet, and then led her back in triumph to her chamber, where she resumed her work as quietly as though nothing had happened. The king's son remained standing before the mountain like one lost in a dream; for a whole hour he did not stir, or even think of remounting his horse. He still hoped that the gracious queen would reappear, even were it with reproving look and word, so that he might once more behold her. But he waited in vain. Ants came in endless crowds, all eagerly striving to make good the damage that he in his youthful gaiety had caused. These he

know herself. She had scarcely returned to her chamber, when some ants came running in in great consternation: "The wicked man of yesterday is here again, and is riding round our mountain."

"Leave him alone!" said Viorica, the queen, quite calmly. But the heart of Viorica the gentle maiden beat so loudly she was obliged to draw a deep breath.

After this a noticeable unrest took possession of her; she wandered about much more than formerly, complained that the larvæ were too little in the sun, and carried them out herself, but only to bring them in again just as quickly; moreover, she often contradicted herself when giving her orders. The ants could not tell what had happened to her, and exerted themselves doubly to make everything good and beautiful; they also surprised her with a new and magnificent curtain, but she scarcely looked at it, and quite forgot to praise.

The tramp of horse's feet could be heard daily round the mountain, but for many days Viorica did not show herself.

She was now seized with a longing for the society of mankind such as she had never before experienced. She thought of her village, her little home, her mother, and her mother's grave that she had never visited.

A few days later she told her subjects that she intended visiting her mother's grave, whereupon the ants, terrified, asked if she were no longer happy with them that she remembered her home.

"Oh, no," said Viorica, "I shall only be away for a few hours. I will be with you again before nightfall."

She forbade any of them to accompany her, but a few ants followed her at a distance without her noticing them. Arrived at the village, she found every place so altered that she knew she must have been away a long time. She began to reckon how long it would have taken the ants to build the great

mountain in which she dwelt, and she told herself that it must have taken years. Her mother's grave was no longer to be found, it was so overgrown with grass, and Viorica wandered about the churchyard weeping bitterly because this also had grown strange to her. Evening came on, and still poor Viorica sought for the grave she could not find. Then close beside her sounded the voice of the king's son. She wished to flee. But he held her fast, and told her of his great love in such soft and tender words, that, with bent head, she stood still and listened. It was so sweet to hear once



"THE WICKED MAN IS RIDING ROUND OUR MOUNTAIN."

more a human voice speaking of love and friendship. It was only when darkness had quite fallen that she remembered she was a queen forgetting her duty and not a forsaken orphan, and that the ants had forbidden her to hold any communication with mortals. Swiftly she fled from the king's son. But he followed her until they came quite close to the ant mountain, when she begged and implored him to leave her. This he at length consented to do, but not

until she had promised to return the following evening.

She crept in softly and groped her way carefully along the narrow passages, but often paused and looked round anxiously, for she seemed to hear strange sounds, as of a swift tripping and whispering all around her. It was, however, only the anxious beating of her own heart; for as soon as she stood still all was quiet. At length she reached her chamber and sank exhausted on the couch; but no sleep visited her eyes. She felt she had broken her promise, and how could she be any longer respected since her word was not sacred? She tossed restlessly to and fro. Her pride revolted against secrecy; still she hesitated to reveal her adventure of yesterday, for she knew the ants, their fierce hatred, and their pitiless punishments. Oftentimes she raised herself on her elbow, and always she seemed to hear the swift tripping of many thousand feet: it was as if the whole mountain were alive.

As soon as she felt the approach of morning, she raised the flower curtain to hasten out into the open air. But how astonished was she when she found the opening completely blocked up with the needle-pointed leaves of the fir tree. She sought a second, a third, and so on all the openings; but in vain, all were alike entirely filled up. Then she began to call aloud, and, behold! immediately, through many thousand invisible openings, the ants came in in crowds.

"I wish to go out into the open air," she said, sternly.

"No, no," replied the ants, "we cannot let you go out, else we should lose you."

"Do you then no longer obey me?" she asked.

"Oh, yes, in all things except this one. You may tread us under your feet as punishment: we are ready and willing to die for the welfare of the community. The honour of our beloved queen must be preserved at all cost."

Viorica bent her head, and tears streamed from her eyes. She implored the ants to give her her liberty; the stern little creatures silently, and with one accord, departed, and she was left alone in the sweet-scented

chamber. Oh, how poor Viorica wept and lamented, and tore her beautiful hair; then she began with her delicate fingers to tear her way out, but, alas! all that she tore away was as swiftly rebuilt, and, at length, she threw herself on the ground baffled and exhausted. The ants then returned, bringing her the sweetest flowers, nectar, and dewdrops to quench her thirst,

but of her complaints they took no notice. Fearing that her lamentations might be heard by the king's son, the ants built the palace ever higher and higher, until at length it became a mountain that towered far above all the mountains around, and it received the name of the Ant Mountain, which name it still retains.

The king's son has long since ceased to wander round the mountain, but the unfortunate maiden has never ceased to weep, and when the stillness of night reigns over the forest, the sound of Viorica's weeping may be heard to this day.



"IT WAS SWEET TO HEAR ONCE MORE A HUMAN VOICE."