

I THE BRIDAL 2 ELLA THE SHE-BEAR



I
"HOW SEEMETH, HOW SEEMETH
OUR ANNA MITREVNA?"

2
"THIS IS NOT A SAVAGE BEAR;
IT IS ELKA, THE SHE-DRAGON."

I

THE ground-mist folds round the green earth in a robe that is grey below, but rose against the sky, circling tree-tops as a sea circles islands; the tree-tops look wan. Rises the sun refreshed like a bridegroom; Mother Earth shivers through her veils, like a bride; the hills sigh softly; hedge-flowers gleam with a whiteness of morning stars, raising tiny cups, tiny crowns, all, save those that muse till it is day.

Now the high roads echo, echo loudly, with brisk footfalls, gay talking, and much laughter; each maiden, in a green or new red kirtle, each beautiful damsel, is bright with ribands and neatly braided hair. Fine young fellows, on swift horses, ride up from the cross-roads, with greetings to the chatting parents, brightest glances for the daughters, and they ask—"Where is this feast and beautiful betrothal of Anna Mitrevna, the fair Anna Mitrevna, to that powerful lord Ivan Timofeievich?"—and all give prompt answer, with hands raised forward to sweep the horizon, "There! there is no bidding, all are welcome; and, oh! how merry will be this

merry wedding, and glad with many people; so bide with us, as we are going there."

Fresh grass becomes trodden by hastening feet; the morning air tingles to the sound of gay guslas; the White House gleams in dew-dipped sunlight; about jump happy people, with heavy feet they jump in circles, thumping the ground, they dance with outstretched arms, singing—"Oh! singing ha, and ha, this merry wedding!"

*"Come, come, bright sun!
Come forth, good people!
I have caught Katenka, Katenka,
In my cornfield, nigh the oak-grove,
Katenka, to be my bride."*

Within the house, fair Anna Mitrevna sits among the tire-maidens. They have washed her white limbs, they have robed them in silk, and combed her pale thin hair with a silver comb, they have braided her hair till it hangs below her girdle, the girdle is of silk well spun: in a diadem of gold, she sits among the maidens; they laugh softly, but she does not laugh; her mother has fallen on her neck and passionately kissed her, yet she could not weep.

Anna Mitrevna is tall, slender as a Rousalka, her face is white, her eyes are like hawk's eyes, and she sits among the maidens.

Lord Ivan has come, with all his kinsmen, to woo, to seek the damsel; he asks of some of her near companions, "How seemeth, but how seemeth, our Anna Mitrevna?" and they chant and sing the bridal song, and answer him, that she is tall, and very slender, as a Rousalka, her hair is plaited to her waist,—golden the hair, but light beneath the golden crown—and her eyes are like a hawk's.

Anna's portly father donned a flowered robe and called loudly to his daughter, whilst hired singers carol a merry song; yet the bridegroom waits.

Her mother has folded in stately folds the wedding veil; but the bride does not move.

Ivan's father has taken her by the hand, her parents push gently at her shoulders: they leave the room, the outer threshold, where waits the noble wooer looking handsome. His mantle is of marten's skin, his curly head bonny with a scarlet cap, trimmed about with silver; thus he stands before the hazel-coppice.

*"You, you can not hold me,
Yet you would kiss me,
Boris, with your lips, Boris!
Yours pout like a grey mushroom,
Mine laugh like a rose."*

But, faltering, she grapples with his sturdy shoulders, cries in his face "Thou red-eyed devil! cruel devil! ah! with those red eyes! red with blood! also thy hands, that most treacherously slew Vladimir Kamarazin, my comely, my beloved lover!"

She tears the dagger from his belt, thrusts it in his breadth of breast, holding on with both hands till his cruel heart is pierced, and with gaze revulsed he falls to the damp earth for a bridal-bed, a dead bride by his side upon the chilly ground, for his brothers have slain her.

The red sun sets behind the forest, now it is time for her soul to depart, departing thus it addresses the sinful body and bitterly laments:

"Farewell! farewell! oh thou, my white body! poor body! thou hast felt but little joy, yet so much sorrow; thou goest, sinful body, to the cold earth to be devoured, to be dissolved.—There lies Vladimir Kamarazin. I cannot dissolve, or lie in the still ground with Vladimir Kamazarin! for I, the soul, must go to grief eternal, to a terrible, an eternal agony."

2 ELLA THE SHE-BEAR.

So

So

*"Since thou hast parted from thy mother
Thou art a pale yellow,
Like a yellow orange,
And like a green bush."*

How snug was the bears' house in winter: it was pleasant to listen to the tinkle of the falling snow as it crept without, or cunningly clomb the pine-trunks, to get back to Mother Sky; but the bears' house was pleasanter in

summer, for about it a cool black pine-wood hummed and talked, broad fragrant boughs drooped above the door; yet, in a damp cave, some few rocks beyond the thinning of the trees, lived the She-Dragon Elka, the White Enchantress who loved beautiful men, but doted most upon young husbands. She was wicked and subtle, so many mothers had she made to mourn, in the hamlets through the absence of lovers the gardens drooped, and the graves blossomed. Bridal sheets, well spun with loud singing, remained unbleached, for the brooks were full of tears. Prowling at night in the shape of a She-Bear, she called the youthful shepherds "sweetheart," and by her cunning enchantments seemed to them a white woman; tall as a green palm, softer than driven snow, white cream, or the sprinkling of the plum in blossom; when they had tasted of her treacherous lips, they grew very wan and yellow; as bushes do in autumn, they faded away. But to those Elka did not love she seemed a grey She-Bear; and the bears hated her, gladly they would have killed her, but how could they? They bitterly cursed her when she was not near; mother-bears were troubled if the father spake of her doings, and they would have slain her, but they dared not.

One Saturday, the little Ella heard these things, as her mother combed her fur; the little She-Bear seemed as though she did not listen, yet her honied eyes flashed, like sungleams caught in cruel icicles; she shut them that she might the better remember, and thought "it would be very pleasant to be an enchantress, seemingly like a soft woman, with a face like a blossoming tree, soft as the drift of the blossoming plum, and to love beautiful men."

Came the young spring coyly as a betrothed—like a bride, with nose-gays upon her green kirtle—and she whispered to the black pines who laughed into light buds: running among the trees she filled them with scents and airs, the banks with soft strawberries and furry mosses. When the tender corn skipped from the ground the very rills sang like birds. Ella's desire burst from bud into blossom, her coat shone like silk, with a lovesong in each ear, she has left her mother; to each stranger she has said, "I am Elka the White Dragon."

Malemka, Sirma, Daria, sweet maidens all, washed winding-sheets in the brook, Irma made poppy-cakes. Each sister was stripped to the waist, the men being away, all save the dead man their brother; as they washed the winding-cloths, with the flow of the waters they wept.

When they saw Ella they started and fled, so left the linen, to float down the stream to the eddies, past the mill, to the eddies, to the bridge, where the little children said, "Look! look! at the drowned white woman in the stream."

Young Ella wondered at her wisdom, her spells, for he was of great beauty, the shepherd Stoyan, and stalwart as he lay on the couch, but a faded lily his face—his eyes she could not see, for, as the bud hides the honey-drop, his eyelids hid his glance; he slept.

Ella's heart throbbed like a cuckoo's song, she whispered softly, "'Tis I, 'tis I, my dear love! dear love, why dost thou hide thine eyes from me? 'tis I, yes I, thine Elka, thy loving enchantress."

Now the men have left the pits, and some the kilns, or the hewing of

wood ; they droop their heads like grass, their hands like falling leaves, for their sisters and sisters-in-law have told them how the cruel Elka is with poor Stoyan, Stoyan who has died of her many enchantments, "and we left the winding-sheets to float down the river ;"

"A bird flew away with a poppy-cake, and with it my heart fled away."

Then all longed to kill the enchantress, but they dared not, they wished to slay her, but how could they? Yet a priest who was old, comforted them, saying :

"Rather let us rejoice, that God, in his goodness, has delivered her into our hands, for mark ye, good people, that it is day, and not night, for it is noon ; let each man take him a cudgel, and let Michel, the son of Nicholas, toll the bell, that warns the people of the passing of spirits, perchance this spirit is but some stray Lamia not clothed by the night."

Poor, poor foolish Ella half died with fear when came the pealing and rolling of the bell ; she shook and moaned, and would have entreated the enchantress, but she dared not ; gladly would she have fled, but how could she? she crept crying to the door, where Basil, the stalwart woodman, struck her with his axe, and all the brave young fellows beat her into a thousand pieces.

3 SNOW IN SPRING.



"The streams gush from the heart of the earth,
The earth as she sorrows.
If the sun knew half the sorrow of the earth,
The earth in sorrow,
The sun would turn pale and hollow, like the Moon."

The Sister. The apple-bloom like snow tinged with blood drifts to the earth, my brother, my red sun, do not go away, this is snow in spring.

The Brother. Do not weep for me, my sister, do not sob like a labouring brook, snow melts in water, your tears will not melt this snow ; the apple-bloom in spring is ever flecked with blood, for the earth and pine-roots crave for blood in spring, till the Infidel be driven away ; and, oh my flower-sister ! the little brooks will wash my body of its sins, each eye they will wash clean as a separate crystal, that my eyes may forget. The tree-roots will comb my hair ; the earth kiss and wrap each limb of mine ; for if I die, will not the birds bury the hero, the willow and elder sing me to sleep? and the purple anemones, that are the eyes of the field, will watch above my grave.

The Sister. Brother! brother! didst thou not hear the sobbing of the wood-pigeons to the pines? the pigeons that have stolen their murmurs from the brooks. The pine-trunks reel red, drunk with blood :—Oh, my brother! the oak-trees tell me that in spring the gallows-tree grows in Priapol for the merriment of the governor's wife, the governor's children : for those whose grave is not already red in the woods, the gallows puts on boughs.

And behold, as he went by the high roads, the birds, the trees, the rivers, and the little brooks said to him "do not go," and the apple-trees said "this

is snow in spring ; the wasting of thy fruit ; thou art snow in spring, through thee a maiden's womb shall swell with nought but barren longing." And the rivers said "We shall wash thee of all thy blood, wash thee, so will the rains." And the tree-roots crept nearer, "We shall comb thy hair with our grey fingers, the birds and the winds will bury thee with leaves that did not live." Then the black earth said, "I shall rock thee in my lap, bind thee with night, and kiss thy lips that thou mayest never see, or remember, whilst the willow and elder will sing thee to sleep."

When he, the hero, had met the *wanderer* on the spot near the road, where the trees grow thinly, the elder-tree said to the dead man, "Lo! I and the willow sing thee to sleep, were we not right? thou frost in spring!" but he smiled at their song. The earth, wrapping him round, said, "I was right!" yet he opened not his mouth, and the birds told the rivers, and the rivers complained.

But he laughed, because he knew they could not mean what they said.
CHARLES RICKETTS.

So WE WOULD THANK
TSM. & HJR.
WHOSE TIMELY AID
MADE POSSIBLE THE
PUBLICATION OF THIS
NUMBER OF THE DIAL.