

Brandeis Madeline

Little Erik of Sweden



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CHAPTER I

THE GNOME

Erik sang as he skated across the lake. The lake glistened with chill, bluish crispness like steel.

It was as natural for Erik to sing as it was for most little boys to breathe. Sometimes it seemed that he had the throat of a bird.

"Down the mountainside came thundering,
Fierce and wild, a giant tall."

It was Greta who had taught Erik these fairy-tale songs. Greta made them up. She was the eighteen-year-old daughter of Fru Hansson, who owned Hanssonborg, the large estate where Erik lived. Erik was the son of a poor tenant farmer, but Greta had always treated him like her own little brother. They were often together, and Erik thought her as beautiful as any fairy-tale princess.

"Carried off the lovely princess,
To his gloomy dungeon – "

Suddenly Erik stopped singing and stood still to listen. He had heard the music of sleigh bells on the other side of the snowy pine forest. Now came the thud of horses' hoofs and the crunch of a sleigh's runners, as it stopped before the Hansson home.

"Christmas is coming!" smiled Erik, and struck out again in big, vigorous strides. Christmas in Sweden means visitors and fun and lots of food; and Erik licked his lips. His cheeks glowed with health like ruddy, round apples. His blue eyes caught the icy sparkles from under his feet, and he began to sing once more.

"So the brave prince slew the giant,
Carried off the princess fair."

But Erik would not have been so happy if he had known who it was that had just arrived at Hanssonborg. He would not have sung so lustily about wicked giants carrying off fair princesses. For something unpleasant and very real was happening to his friend Greta.

Darkness was falling fast. In Sweden, the winter sunlight is shy. It shows itself late in the morning, and then by early afternoon, it has run away again.

Erik skated to shore. He took off his skates and started walking through the woods toward home. A Swedish law says that everyone who cuts down a tree must plant a new one; so the Swedish forests are thick and beautiful.

Little, lighted candles glowed in the windows of Erik's

cottage, which was painted red and had white window frames. Vacation time was a good time, he thought, as he stamped into the cozy kitchen, where a big fire crackled.

His brother Nils sat at a rough, wooden table. Nils's arms were crossed in front of him, and his head rested upon them. How could he study with his head so low? Surely he was not asleep – not big Nils! Why, he was always far too busy studying his farm books or working on the estate to fall asleep in the daytime. What was the matter?

Erik stood in the center of the room with his legs apart and his snow cap pushed back upon his fair, curly hair.

"Ho, Nils!" he shouted.

The older brother did not stir. Erik went over and tapped him on the shoulder.

"I say, what's wrong?"

The young man raised his head. He had a strong, brave face, but just now there was a shadow over it.

"Have you heard the news?" he asked.

The little boy shook his head.

"Baron Karl von Engstrom from Stockholm arrived at Hanssonborg today," said Nils. "He is to spend the holidays here, and they say that he will ask Fru Hansson for Greta's hand in marriage."

Erik's mouth fell open. His eyes widened with horror. A baron from Stockholm! Greta's hand in marriage!

The memory of a few lines from his fairy-tale book flashed

over him:

"Down the mountainside came thundering,
Fierce and wild, a giant tall,
Carried off the lovely princess – "

"No, no, Nils," cried Erik. "You can't let him do it. You shan't!"

Nils smiled, but it was a bitter smile. "What are you saying?" he asked Erik. "Do you think that I, a poor tenant farmer, could possibly prevent the marriage of Fru Hansson's daughter?"

"Yes, yes!" screamed Erik. "You must! You shan't allow this giant – this Baron to marry her!" He recalled the words of his song,

"Then the brave prince slew the giant,
Carried off the princess fair."

And he added, "You must march against him. That's what you must do. With a sword and – and a shield and – "

"And if you don't watch out, you'll drop that platter," laughed Nils.

Erik put down the platter and the knife. He had snatched them up in his anger and excitement, to use them as a shield and a sword.

Oh, but Greta must never marry anybody but Nils! Ever since childhood, they had been the best of friends, and Erik knew that

his big brother loved Greta dearly.

However, he had never told her so, for Fru Hansson was proud and belonged to an old, aristocratic family, while Nils was only a peasant. Still in the fairy tales it was always poor Boots who won the princess in the end, because he was brave and cut off the heads of giants.

At the supper table, Erik, who usually did all the talking, was strangely quiet. He did not ask for second helpings of food – which worried his mother. And when, soon after supper, he stole silently away to bed, she decided that all was not well.

When she came to kiss him good night in his funny little cupboard bed built into the wall, she found him scowling to himself and mumbling.

"What's the matter, Erik?" she asked.

"Then off came his head!" answered Erik to the ceiling.

"Off came – what?" cried the astonished mother.

"His head. The giant's," said Erik. "It happened in a fairy tale. The prince slew him with his sword and rescued the princess and –"

"Go to sleep," said his mother, and tucked him in.

That night Erik dreamed of Baron Karl. He was a monster with long, hairy arms; with shoulders like huge boulders and a neck as thick as a bull's.

Next morning Erik could hardly wait to see this terrible creature – this enemy who had come to take Greta away from Nils. So he ran over to the big house and stood outside in the

courtyard. He knew that soon the family would be coming out on their way to church. Sunday chimes already were ringing from the near-by village.

Hanssonborg had been built over two hundred years ago. "Borg" means "fort," and that is what it had been, like many other castles in Sweden. But today it looked tired and weatherbeaten.

Snow was falling and the wind whistled through the big chimneys. But Erik did not mind the cold. He was used to it. Besides, his ancestors had roamed icy wastes. Some may even have been brave Vikings – pirates who sailed the northern seas in high-prowed galleys. He was a sturdy boy.

Presently the front door opened, and Fru Hansson walked out. She was straight and tall. Next came Greta, like a lovely, slender flower, and beside her – No, no, it could not be true!

The Baron was far from a giant. Indeed, he was not much taller than Erik himself. Furthermore, he was thin and puny, and his pinched little face peered out through the folds of a great coat.

Erik thought of the wicked gnomes of legend who forged iron in their underground caverns. Some people believe these to be the iron mines of modern Sweden.

The Baron looked like a wizened little gnome.

Erik saw him shiver and draw his warm coat closer about him.

"I shall catch cold!" he muttered, and Erik clenched his strong young fists together.

"He's a weakling!" thought the boy miserably. "A weakling!" Erik could imagine nothing worse.

CHAPTER II

THE GHOST

The longer Baron Karl von Engstrom remained at Hanssonborg, the less did Erik like him. In the first place, Greta now spent all her time with him; and that meant no more story or music hours with Erik.

Then, to Erik, a man without strength was like a meal without food. The men of his country were brave. Colonel Lindbergh's family came from Sweden. But Erik could not help feeling that the Baron was not only weak, but a coward. And at last something happened to show Erik that he was right.

One night after dinner, when the bright moon painted the snow silver, Erik watched Greta and Baron Karl come out of the house. They were followed by Greta's big dogs.

Every evening these dogs were given their last run and always by someone in the family. This duty was called "looking at the stars." And while Greta and Karl were "looking at the stars," Erik was looking at them.

The Baron was bundled up in his fur coat, but Greta had only a light wrap thrown over her evening gown. She ran off into the forest, the dogs barking at her heels. She thought, no doubt, that Baron Karl would follow her. But he stood there alone, shivering and scowling.

Erik hid behind a near-by tree. He heard the Baron mumble, "This is absurd! I shall freeze to death! The doctor says – "

Erik suddenly exploded with a loud "Boo!" and the Baron jumped up into the air.

He lifted his hands above his head and squeaked, "Help!" When Erik came out from behind the tree, he cried, "Don't – don't hurt me! I'm – I'm sick. The doctor says – "

However, when he observed that it was only a child who stood innocently smiling at him, he lowered his hands and stopped whimpering.

"Good evening, sir," said Erik.

Even though Erik could not help feeling contempt for this frightened little man, he was polite to Baron Karl. Swedish children are always polite to everyone. But he kept thinking of his brother Nils, who would not have been frightened by anything on earth.

Nils studied late every night, and that, Erik knew, was because he had a dream. He wanted to become the manager of Hanssonborg some day. He wanted to marry Greta.

There was no reason why Nils's dream should not come true – no reason at all. If only this cowardly little gnome of a Baron would go away! He must go away. And all at once Erik decided to see that he did.

The Swedes love peace. In fact, all Scandinavian peoples love peace. This fact is shown by the wise way in which Sweden and Norway, who were united for many years under a Swedish king,

dissolved their union in 1905. Without the firing of a gun or the shedding of a drop of blood, the two countries broke the bond and settled their differences in a peace that has lasted to this day. For over a century, they have not had war, and Erik was as peaceful as a boy could be. But then, Sweden has never been invaded by a conquering enemy, and Hanssonborg had. Erik vowed to drive his enemy away.

A Swede by the name of Alfred Nobel (nó běl) invented the famous Nobel Peace prize; but he also invented dynamite. Erik, who could sing like an angel, now declared war upon Baron von Engstrom. And the plan that flashed through his mind was like a flash of dynamite. What an uproar it was going to cause at Hanssonborg!

Mysteriously Erik looked about him, then turned to the Baron and asked, "Did you hear a sound, sir?"

The Baron had not heard anything.

"But I was sure I did," said Erik. "A ghostly sound."

The Baron gargled, "Ghostly? Absurd!"

"Oh, no, sir," said Erik seriously. "Hanssonborg is haunted."

Then Erik told him a legend which some of the peasants believed. The spirit of a warrior maiden was supposed to dwell in the walls of the old castle. Her battle cry was often heard at the dead of night.

"And that is why," continued Erik, as he watched the Baron's pasty face grow paler in the moonlight, "no one will marry Greta. For, you see, every time a suitor comes, he is driven away by

these ghostly cries."

The Baron tried to utter a brave laugh, but it turned into a cracked cackle, like tin cans clinking together. Erik had an idea that the Baron's knees were clinking together, too.

"Absurd!" he repeated.

"Oh, no, it is not, sir," said Erik. He leaned closer and whispered, "It is a warning to those who try to win Greta from the one who loves her."

Before the Baron could answer, Erik heard Greta returning through the forest. So he called, "Good-bye," and ran off.

He was pleased with his plan. He had prepared his enemy for the ghost, and the ghost would cry tonight. He would see to that. Afterwards, he felt sure, the Baron would leave Hanssonborg forever.

He walked toward the back of the house. Erik's favorite room, whether in his mother's hut or in Fru Hansson's castle, was the kitchen. Especially at Christmas time, a Swedish kitchen was a joy to a boy's heart – or rather, to his stomach.

Ever since the middle of November, preparations had been going on – preparations which had to do with the salting and smoking of meat and the curing of fish.

"Good evening, Fru Svenson," said Erik, entering the kitchen and bowing low, while delightedly eying a platter of freshly baked buns.

The cook was his friend, and a very valuable one. She had the figure of a washtub, but her face was kind. She was drinking

coffee at the kitchen table. Everybody is always drinking coffee in Sweden, whether it is in the kitchen or in the drawing-room.

"Will you have a spiced bun?" she asked Erik.

He answered, "tack," which means something like "thanks," and helped himself to two.

"Greedy little one!" laughed Fru Svenson. "Now you shall sing twice for me instead of once."

The cook loved music, and she never tired of hearing Erik's sweet voice. So when he had finished his two buns, he stood in the center of the huge room and began to sing.

This kitchen was a combination of the old and the new. Its cooking range had been built over an old oven. Modern electric lights gleamed upon ancient copper pots. In the pantry could be seen flat bread disks with holes in their centers, hanging upon poles from the ceiling. Everything was clean and neat. Everything shone.

Erik watched Fru Svenson's head nodding as he sang a soft little lullaby, and after he had sung another one, she was fast asleep. Now this was exactly what Erik wanted, and he tiptoed quietly out of the room.

Carefully he made his way through the big house that had once been a castle, through the hall, with its stone floor and whitewashed walls. A fire crackled in the grate. It threw weird light upon the suits of armor which glittered in the corners. They looked like live knights.

Erik hurried up the stairs and hid himself in an empty room.

He waited there until the household was asleep, and then he crept out upon the roof.

Nearly every room had its own fireplace, and there were two huge chimneys. Erik knew Hanssonborg well. He knew which chimney led down into Baron Karl's bedroom. He began to sing into it.

He sang one of the wildest songs that has ever been written. It is called "The Cry of the Valkyries" (vål-kir'is) and it is from an opera, based upon a Norse myth.

The Valkyries were warrior maidens who guarded Valhalla (vål-hål'á), the home of the gods. They rode through the sky crying, "Hoyotoho!"; and that is the song Erik now sang.

Greta had taught it to him, because Greta loved all the wonderful operas of Richard Wagner. She had seen and heard them performed at the Stockholm Opera House.

"Hoyotoho!" shrieked Erik in his shrill, boyish voice. "Hoyotoho!"

It must have sounded ghostly. When he thought that he had been a Valkyrie long enough, he stopped and let himself into the house again.

He hoped that nobody had heard him, except, of course, the Baron. The Baron could not have helped hearing him. But suppose Fru Hansson had been awakened and were to catch him as he made his way out of the house. That was a dreadful thought.

All at once, he heard a noise. Someone was up. Someone was after him. Had Erik been a Valkyrie, riding on the fleetest steed

in all Valhalla, he could not have sped out of that house any faster than he did.

CHAPTER III

THE PLAN

Greta and her mother sat together in one of the downstairs sitting rooms. A fire burned in a fine old porcelain stove. Bright-colored, woven mats covered the wooden floor, which shone with a good scrubbing. Morning light filtered through the high windows.

Fru Hansson's white brows were drawn together in worried lines. She was deeply troubled. For though Fru Hansson lived in a castle, she was really poor. She was finding it more and more difficult to run her large estate.

Many of her neighbors had been forced to give up their lands because they could not afford to keep them. But Fru Hansson could not bear to think of giving up Hanssonborg.

That was why she hoped Baron Karl would ask Greta to marry him. Baron Karl was wealthy, and his money could save Hanssonborg.

It was not so much for her sake that she wished to keep it as for the sake of the tenants who lived on the land. They depended upon it for their living.

Greta was gazing out of the window. The oak trees in the courtyard were covered with snow. Their bare, black arms stuck out like chopsticks in a bowl of rice.

A knock sounded on the door. Fru Hansson said, "Come in," and the Baron came in. He wore heavy, warm clothing and had a muffler wrapped about his throat. He looked peevish.

"Good morning," said Fru Hansson. "I hope Baron Karl rested well."

The Baron frowned. "I did not rest at all," he replied. "Is breakfast ready?"

At the breakfast table, Greta watched the Baron's servant pour out his medicine. He took medicine before and after every meal, and Greta felt sorry for him. It was unpleasant to be ill.

Yet Greta could not help comparing the Baron to Nils, just as Erik had done last night. Nils was so very different – big and strong and fearless!

"The doctor says – " whined Karl's voice.

Always the doctor, thought Greta. He should marry a pill box or a bottle of castor oil!

" – I must have perfect quiet," continued Karl, "and so I'm afraid I shall have to leave Hanssonborg."

Fru Hansson gave a start. "But what has happened to Baron Karl?" she asked. "Has he been disturbed?"

The Baron balanced a herring on his fork and nervously blinked his watery eyes. "Yes," he answered. "In the middle of the night and by the most horrible noises!"

"Noises?" Fru Hansson looked astonished. "I heard nothing at all."

Neither had Greta; and the Baron began to wonder whether

he had merely imagined those ghostly cries.

He coughed. "Er – well," he said, "it might have been the wind. Every sound upsets me so. The doctor says – "

"There was no wind last night," said Greta, and the Baron dropped a herring on the floor. One of the dogs gobbled it up.

The Baron's face turned red, but Fru Hansson laughed and said, "Ah, but Baron Karl really must stay – at least until after the Christmas celebration. I am sure there will be no more noises. Hanssonborg is extremely quiet."

The Baron toyed with a potato. He hesitated. Then he looked up and fastened his gaze upon Greta. Her hair was golden and her lovely eyes were as blue as Swedish lakes in summer. He did not want to go away from Hanssonborg and leave Greta.

"Very well," he said. "I shall stay. But if I should hear that horrible noise again, I shall leave, because the doctor says – "

The doctor again! Karl looked like a smacked pussycat. Greta speared a fried egg.

In the kitchen Fru Svenson told Erik what the butler had heard at the breakfast table. "So Fru Hansson persuaded the Baron to stay," she said, setting a pot of sausages on the stove. "And he will, too, unless he should be disturbed again."

"And what disturbed him, Fru Svenson?" asked Erik, his eyes upon the pot.

"A terrible racket in the night, it seems," she replied. "Though what it could have been I'm sure I can't imagine."

"A ghost, perhaps, Fru Svenson?" asked Erik innocently,

moving closer to the stove.

"Certainly not," she scoffed, "because there are no ghosts. And take your hands out of that pot."

Erik, full of sausages, returned to his cottage on the edge of the forest, his mind full of a new plan. If the Baron intended to remain at Hanssonborg unless he heard the ghost again, well, then he should certainly hear it.

Erik would repeat his song, and that would put the final scare into the Baron. Hanssonborg would then be rid of him forever.

Christmas Eve would be a good time, thought Erik. On Christmas Eve the peasants were invited to the big house. Erik would slip away from the crowd of children and conceal himself in the house as he had done before. When all was still, he would become a Valkyrie and cry down the chimney.

He had his scheme nicely laid out. But there is a poem about "the best-laid schemes of mice and men" often going wrong; and Erik's went wrong.

This is how it happened. Upon St. Lucy's Day, according to the custom, a little girl awakened the household at an early hour. She wore a white nightgown and a wreath with seven candles in it round her head. She served coffee and buns.

She was one of Fru Hansson's guests and came from Falun (få' lûn) in the province of Dalecarlia (dä' lë-kär' liä). Her father was head of a big factory, for Falun is an important factory town, in which is located the oldest copper mining company in the world.

The little girl was sweet and pretty, but when she sang, it

sounded like a shrill whistle in one of her father's factories. Greta thought of Erik and of how beautifully he could sing.

Greta was proud of Erik. She had taught him all he knew. So that afternoon she asked him to sing for the guests on Christmas Eve.

Erik was shocked. This was going to spoil his whole plan, because if he sang in the drawing-room after dinner, the Baron might recognize his voice. Then he would not be frightened any more by the ghost.

"But I – I had expected to sing on Christmas Eve," stammered Erik, and Greta looked astonished. So he quickly added, "No, no, not to entertain the guests, but – " Then under his breath he mumbled, "To drive one of them away!"

Greta laughed and mussed his hair. But a sad, little thought showed on her face in spite of the laugh, and Erik knew that she wished the same thing, though she dared not say so.

However, something told Erik to keep silent about his plans. If she found out, Greta might think it her duty to stop him. She was really a grown-up, though he could sometimes forget it because she played so well.

He promised to sing for her guests. How could he refuse her? However, he decided that he would have to make his call to the roof of Hanssonborg before Christmas Eve.

The next days were very busy ones. More guests arrived. Everybody living on the estate received presents of pigs and cows and chickens. Even the animals, tame and wild, must have extra

meals.

Erik assisted his father. Every day his mother went over to the big house to sew. She also helped to stir the Christmas porridge. It had to be stirred for ten hours, and several women took turns doing it.

Every night she would say to Erik, "Early to bed!"

She would see that he climbed into his little shelf, said his prayers, and went to sleep.

So he found it impossible to play ghost. And the Baron remained at Hanssonborg, with his nerves undisturbed and his mind almost made up to ask Greta to marry him.

As Christmas Eve approached, poor Erik grew more and more anxious. He must sing at the celebration. And what would happen to him if the Baron recognized his voice?

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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