



Ririro

READ ANYWHERE, ANYTIME

Linda Branca And Her Mask

Elsie Spicer Eells

Long ago there lived a girl who was so pretty she grew tired of being beautiful and longed to be ugly. She was so attractive that all the young men in the whole city wanted to marry her. Every night the street in front of her house was full of youths who came to sing beneath her balcony.

Linda Branca, that was the girl's name, grew tired of being kept awake nights. It is well enough for a little while to hear songs about one's pearly teeth and snowy arms, one's flashing eyes and waving hair, one's rosebud mouth and fairylike feet; but a steady diet of it becomes decidedly wearing.

"I wish I were as homely as that girl who is passing by," she remarked one day. "Then I could sleep nights." "If I were as ugly looking as that I'd have a chance to select a really good husband perhaps. With so many to choose from it is terribly confusing. I'll never be able to make any choice at all as things are now. I'm afraid I'll die unwedded," she added as she carefully surveyed the girl's coarse hair, her large feet and hands, her ugly big mouth and ears and small red-lidded eyes. "That girl has a much better chance of a successful marriage than I have, with all this tiresome crowd of suitors to drive me distracted!"

The girl in the street heard her words and looked up. When she saw how lovely Linda Branca was she was amazed indeed at the words she had heard. She thought that she must have made a mistake and asked Linda Branca to say it all over again.

"You can be exactly as homely as I am," declared the girl when at last she had sufficiently recovered from her surprise to find her tongue. "I am an artist. I can prepare a mask for you which will make you just as ugly as I am."

"Go on and make it as soon as you can!" cried Linda Branca, clapping her little hands in joy.

That evening the suitors in the street under the balcony thought that the lovely Linda Branca had become very gracious. She was frequently to be seen on the balcony looking eagerly up and down the street as if she were expecting some one. Her dark eyes were sparkling and her fair cheek had a rosy flush upon it which they had never seen before.

"The beautiful Linda Branca is more charming than ever," was the burden of

their songs that night.

Linda Branca was so excited about her new mask that she could not have slept even if there had been no suitors to disturb her with their songs. When at last she fell asleep towards morning it was only to dream that the new mask had the face of a donkey.

It was not until the next week that the mask finally arrived. Linda Branca had grown very impatient and was almost in despair lest she should never receive it. When at last the girl brought it one could easily see why it had taken a whole week to prepare it. So like a human face it was that it was plain that the making of it had called forth great patience and skill as well as necessary time.

"It is even uglier than I had hoped it would be!" cried Linda Branca in delight when she saw it.

Surely, when she tried it on no one of her suitors would ever have recognized the fair Linda Branca of their songs.

Now Linda Branca had no mother, and her father was away on business, so it was an easy matter to prepare for her departure.

Linda Branca's father was a man of wealth who spared no money in giving his daughter beautiful gowns to enhance her rare beauty. She had one dress of blue trimmed with silver and another of blue embroidered in gold. As she packed up a few belongings to take with her, she decided to add these two favorite garments.

"Who knows but I may need them sometime?" she mused as she rolled them up carefully.

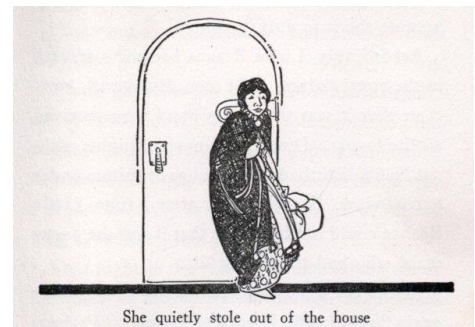
With the ugly mask upon her face, and dressed in a long dark cloak, she quietly stole out of the house. She went to the king's palace in a neighboring city and inquired if they were in need of a maid.

"Ask my son. It is he who rules here," said the king's mother.

The king looked at Linda Branca with a critical eye.

"I hired my last servant because she was so pretty," he remarked. "I think I'll hire this one because she is so ugly."

Accordingly, Linda Branca became a servant in the royal palace. She soon discovered, however, that it was the pretty maid who received all the favors. It was good to sleep nights without being disturbed by the songs of suitors under



her window. Nevertheless, after a time, Linda Branca could not fail to see that it was the pretty maid who had the happy life.

"I believe I'd almost be willing to be pretty again," said Linda Branca to herself. "Perhaps it has some advantages."

She knew very well that the pretty maid was not as tired as she that night.

The next day there was to be a great feast which was to last for two days. Linda Branca asked the queen if she might be allowed to attend.

"Ask my son," said the queen. "It is he who rules here."

"May I go to the feast?" asked Linda Branca when she was blacking the king's boots.

"Look out or I'll throw my boot at you," said the king.

That night when the feast had already begun, she dressed herself carefully in the robe of blue trimmed with silver. It was indeed a pleasure to remove the ugly mask and find that she was still just as lovely as when the crowds of suitors sang about her great beauty.

That night at the feast every one talked about the beauty of the mysterious stranger in the dress of blue trimmed with silver. The king himself danced with her. He was completely captivated by her charm.

"Where do you come from, lovely lady?" he asked.

"I come from the land of the boot," replied Linda Branca with a gay laugh.

The king was completely mystified, for he did not know where the land of the boot was. He asked the queen and all the wisemen of the court, but there was not a single one of them who had ever heard of that country. The next day they hunted through all the books and all the maps, but there was no book or map which mentioned it.

"She is the most beautiful maiden I have ever seen!" cried the king. "I'd like to marry her, but how can I ever see her again if I can't find out the location of the land she comes from!"

He was in deep despair, and every one in the royal palace was nearly distracted. It was decidedly embarrassing to have the king fall in love with a stranger from a country nobody could find on a map or in a book.

When the king returned from the feast he saw the ugly little maid he had hired busy at her work about the palace. The next day she again asked the queen's permission to go to the feast that night.

"Ask my son," was the queen's reply.

When Linda Branca asked the king's permission, he replied: "Look out or I'll hit you with my hairbrush."

That night Linda Branca again removed her ugly mask and dressed herself in the beautiful gown of blue embroidered in gold. She was even lovelier than the night before.

When she entered the grand ball room the king was almost wild with joy. He ran to her side at once and kept dancing with her the entire evening.

"What country do you come from?" he asked again.

"I'm from the land of the hairbrush," replied Linda Branca.

"Where is that land?" asked the king, but Linda Branca would not tell him.

"Where is the land of the hairbrush?" asked the king of the queen mother, and of all the wise men of the court.

Nobody could tell him, and nobody could find the land of the hairbrush upon any map or in any book.

"Stupid ones!" cried the king. "I don't believe you have half tried to find it!"

He looked through all the maps and books himself and at last he grew ill from so much studying. His friends all gathered about him in the royal bedchamber and sought to console him. However he refused consolation.

"I do not care whether I live or die!" he cried. "I care for nothing except the beautiful stranger who came to my feast."

Linda Branca knew that the king was ill, and when these words were reported to her she quickly dressed herself in the robe of blue trimmed with silver, which she had worn the first night of the feast. When she took off her ugly mask and looked at herself in the glass she was really pleased with her reflection.

"It is not so bad after all to be pretty," she said as she smiled.

Linda Branca stole out of the palace and peeped into the window of the royal bedchamber. One of the king's counsellors saw her.

"Whose lovely face is that at the window?" he asked.

"It is surely the beautiful stranger from the land of the boot," said one.

"It is the charming maiden from the land of the hairbrush," disputed another.

By the time the king himself had reached the window there was no one to be seen. He called for the queen, his mother.

"Tell me, mother, who was outside my window a moment ago?" he asked.

"No one unless a masquerader," replied the queen.

The poor queen was nearly worn out with worry over her son. She was afraid he was so sick that he was going to die.

The next day the king had in truth grown most decidedly worse. The court physicians went about with anxious faces and the whole palace had become a place of deepest gloom.

Linda Branca put on her dress of blue embroidered with gold and again peeped into the window of the royal bedchamber.

Now the king had lain upon his richly carved bed with his eyes fixed every moment upon the window where the face had appeared. He did not close his eyes at all.

"He can't live long if this keeps up," one court physician whispered to another.

He had just finished saying these words when the king gave a loud cry and sprang from his bed. He ran to the window and reached it just in time to catch a piece of the skirt of blue embroidered in gold. He held it tight.

"Masquerader, unmask!" he cried.

Linda Branca had hastily put on the mask which she had brought with her, and now she looked up at the king with the face of the little servant he had hired. She took off the mask and smiled into his eyes.

"Now at last I know who is the beautiful stranger from the land of the boot and the land of the hairbrush!" cried the king.

When Linda Branca had told the king, the queen mother and all the courtiers her whole story everybody laughed.

"Who ever before heard of a maiden who wanted to be less beautiful than Nature had made her!" cried the wise men.

"I always knew that when my son saw fit to select his bride he would choose a rare woman," said the queen mother proudly.

The king himself did not say a single word, but gazed and gazed at the lovely face of Linda Branca with such joy in his eyes that she knew in her heart that at last she was glad to be beautiful.

"Stay pretty," is a parting greeting between women in the Azores. Perhaps it was Linda Branca herself who began saying it in the beginning.

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