

Aslauga's Knight

Friedrich de la Motte Fouque

Table of Contents

<u>Aslauga's Knight</u>	1
<u>Friedrich de la Motte Fouque</u>	2
<u>CHAPTER I</u>	3
<u>CHAPTER II</u>	6
<u>CHAPTER III</u>	8
<u>CHAPTER IV</u>	11
<u>CHAPTER V</u>	13
<u>CHAPTER VI</u>	16
<u>CHAPTER VII</u>	19
<u>CHAPTER VIII</u>	21
<u>CHAPTER IX</u>	23

Aslauga's Knight

Friedrich de la Motte Fouque

This page copyright © 2001 Blackmask Online.
<http://www.blackmask.com>

- CHAPTER I.
 - CHAPTER II.
 - CHAPTER III.
 - CHAPTER IV.
 - CHAPTER V.
 - CHAPTER VI.
 - CHAPTER VII.
 - CHAPTER VIII.
 - CHAPTER IX.
-

This text of "Aslauga's Knight,"
by Friedrich de La Motte-Fouque was scanned and proofed
by Sandra Laythorpe, slaythorpe@cwcom.net.

CHAPTER I.

Many years ago there lived in the island of Fuhnen a noble knight, called Froda, the friend of the Skalds, who was so named because he not only offered free hospitality in his fair castle to every renowned and noble bard, but likewise strove with all his might to discover those ancient songs, and tales, and legends which, in Runic writings or elsewhere, were still to be found; he had even made some voyages to Iceland in search of them, and had fought many a hard battle with the pirates of those seas—for he was also a right valiant knight, and he followed his great ancestors not only in their love of song, but also in their bold deeds of arms. Although he was still scarcely beyond the prime of youth, yet all the other nobles in the island willingly submitted themselves to him, whether in council or in war; nay, his renown had even been carried ere now over the sea to the neighbouring land of Germany.

One bright autumn evening this honour-loving knight sat before his castle, as he was often wont to do, that he might look far and wide over land and sea, and that he might invite any travellers who were passing by, as was his custom, to share in his noble hospitality.

But on this day he saw little of all that he was accustomed to look upon; for on his knees there lay an ancient book with skilfully and richly painted characters, which a learned Icelander had just sent to him across the sea: it was the history of Aslauga, the fair daughter of Sigurd, who at first, concealing her high birth, kept goats among the simple peasants of the land, clothed in mean attire; then, in the golden veil of her flowing hair, won the love of King Ragnar Lodbrog; and at last shone brightly on the Danish throne as his glorious queen, till the day of her death.

To the Knight Froda it seemed as though the gracious Lady Aslauga rose in life and birth before him, so that his calm and steadfast heart, true indeed to ladies' service, but never yet devoted to one particular female image, burst forth in a clear flame of love for the fair daughter of Sigurd. "What matters it," thought he to himself, "that it is more than a hundred years since she disappeared from earth? She sees so clearly into this heart of mine—and what more can a knight desire? wherefore she shall henceforth be my honoured love, and shall inspire me in battle and in song." And therewith he sang a lay on his new love, which ran in the following manner:

"They ride over hill and dale apace
To seek for their love the fairest face--
They search through city and forest-glade
To find for their love the gentlest maid--
They climb wherever a path may lead
To seek the wisest dame for their meed.
Ride on, ye knights: but ye never may see
What the light of song has shown to me:
Loveliest, gentlest, and wisest of all,
Bold be the deeds that her name shall recall;
What though she ne'er bless my earthly sight?
Yet death shall reveal her countenance bright.
Fair world, good night! Good day, sweet love!
Who seeks here in faith shall find above."

"Such purpose may come to good," said a hollow voice near the knight; and when he looked round, he saw the form of a poor peasant woman, so closely wrapped in a grey mantle that he could not discern any part of her countenance. She looked over his shoulder on the book, and said, with a deep sigh, "I know that story well; and it fares no better with me than with the princess of whom it tells." Froda looked at her with astonishment. "Yes, yes," pursued she, with strange becks and nods; "I am the descendant of the mighty Rolf, to whom the fairest castles and forests and fields of this island once belonged; your castle and your domains, Froda, amongst others, were his. We are now cast down to poverty; and because I am not so fair as Aslauga there is no hope that my possessions will be restored to me; and therefore I am fain to veil my poor face from every eye." It seemed that

Aslauga's Knight

she shed warm tears beneath her mantle. At this Froda was greatly moved, and begged her, for God's sake, to let him know how he could help her, for that he was a descendant of the famous northern heroes of the olden time; and perhaps yet something more than they—namely, a good Christian. "I almost think," murmured she from beneath her covering, "that you are that very Froda whom men call the Good, and the friend of the Skalds, and of whose generosity and mildness such wonderful stories are told. If it be so, there may be help for me. You need only give up to me the half of your fields and meadows, and I should be in a condition to live in some measure such a life as befits the descendant of the mighty Rolf." Then Froda looked thoughtfully on the ground; partly because she had asked for so very much; partly, also, because he was considering whether she could really be descended from the powerful Rolf. But the veiled form said, after a pause, "I must have been mistaken, and you are not indeed that renowned, gentle-hearted Froda: for how could he have doubted so long about such a trifle? But I will try the utmost means. See now! for the sake of the fair Aslauga, of whom you have both read and sang—for the sake of the honoured daughter of Sigurd, grant my request!" Then Froda started up eagerly, and cried, "Let it be as you have said!" and gave her his knightly hand to confirm his words. But he could not grasp the hand of the peasant-woman, although her dark form remained close before him. A secret shudder began to run through his limbs, whilst suddenly a light seemed to shine forth from the apparition—a golden light—in which she became wholly wrapped; so that he felt as though Aslauga stood before him in the flowing veil of her golden hair, and smiling graciously on him. Transported and dazzled, he sank on his knees. When he rose up once more he only saw a cloudy mist of autumn spreading over the meadow, fringed at its edges with lingering evening lights, and then vanishing far over the waves. The knight scarcely knew what had happened to him. He returned to his chamber buried in thought, and sometimes feeling sure that he had beheld Aslauga, sometimes, again, that some goblin had risen before him with deceitful tricks, mocking in spiteful wise the service which he had vowed to his dead mistress. But henceforth, wherever he roved, over valley or forest or heath, or whether he sailed upon the waves of the sea, the like appearances met him. Once he found a lute lying in a wood, and drove a wolf away from it, and when sounds burst from the lute without its being touched a fair child rose up from it, as of old Aslauga herself had done. At another time he would see goats clambering among the highest cliffs by the sea-shore, and it was a golden form who tended them. Then, again, a bright queen, resplendent in a dazzling bark, would seem to glide past him, and salute him graciously,—and if he strove to approach any of those he found nothing but cloud, and mist, and vapour. Of all this many a lay might be sung. But so much he learnt from them all—that the fair Lady Aslauga accepted his service, and that he was now indeed and in truth become her knight.

Meanwhile the winter had come and gone. In northern lands this season never fails to bring to those who understand and love it many an image full of beauty and meaning, with which a child of man might well be satisfied, so far as earthly happiness can satisfy, through all his time on earth. But when the spring came glancing forth with its opening buds and flowing waters there came also bright and sunny tidings from the land of Germany to Fuhnen.

There stood on the rich banks of the Maine, where it pours its waters through the fertile land of Franconia, a castle of almost royal magnificence, whose orphan-mistress was a relation of the German emperor. She was named Hildegardis; and was acknowledged far and wide as the fairest of maidens. Therefore her imperial uncle wished that she should wed none but the bravest knight who could anywhere be met with. Accordingly he followed the example of many a noble lord in such a case, and proclaimed a tournament, at which the chief prize should be the hand of the peerless Hildegardis, unless the victor already bore in his heart a lady wedded or betrothed to him; for the lists were not to be closed to any brave warrior of equal birth, that the contest of strength and courage might be so much the richer in competitors.

Now the renowned Froda had tidings of this from his German brethren-in-arms; and he prepared himself to appear at the festival. Before all things, he forged for himself a splendid suit of armour; as, indeed, he was the most excellent armourer of the north, far-famed as it is for skill in that art. He worked the helmet out of pure gold, and formed it so that it seemed to be covered with bright flowing locks, which called to mind Aslauga's tresses. He also fashioned, on the breastplate of his armour, overlaid with silver, a golden image in half relief, which represented Aslauga in her veil of flowing locks, that he might make known, even at the beginning of the tournament—"This knight, bearing the image of a lady upon his breast, fights not for the hand of the beautiful Hildegardis, but only for the joy of battle and for knightly fame." Then he took out of his stables a beautiful Danish steed, embarked it carefully on board a vessel, and sailed prosperously to the opposite shore.

Aslauga's Knight

CHAPTER II.

In one of those fair beech-woods which abound in the fertile land of Germany he fell in with a young and courteous knight of delicate form, who asked the noble northman to share the meal which he had invitingly spread out upon the greensward, under the shade of the pleasantest boughs. Whilst the two knights sat peacefully together at their repast they felt drawn towards each other and rejoiced when on rising from it, they observed that they were about to follow the same road. They had not come to this good understanding by means of many words; for the young knight Edwald was of a silent nature, and would sit for hours with a quiet smile upon his lips without opening them to speak. But even in that quiet smile there lay a gentle, winning grace; and when from time to time a few simple words of deep meaning sprang to his lips they seemed like a gift deserving of thanks. It was the same with the little songs which he sang ever and anon: they were ended almost as soon as begun; but in each short couplet there dwelt a deep and winning spirit, whether it called forth a kindly sigh or a peaceful smile. It seemed to the noble Froda as if a younger brother rode beside him, or even a tender, blooming son. They travelled thus many days together; and it appeared as if their path were marked out for them in inseparable union; and much as they rejoiced at this, yet they looked sadly at each other whenever they set out afresh, or where cross-roads met, on finding that neither took a different direction: nay, it seemed at times as if a tear gathered in Edwald's downcast eye.

It happened on a time, that at their hostelry they met an arrogant, overbearing knight, of gigantic stature and powerful frame, whose speech and carriage proved him to be not of German but foreign birth. He appeared to come from the land of Bohemia. He cast a contemptuous smile on Froda, who, as usual, had opened the ancient book of Aslauga's history, and was attentively reading in it. "You must be a ghostly knight?" he said, inquiringly; and it appeared as if a whole train of unseemly jests were ready to follow. But Froda answered so firmly and seriously with a negative that the Bohemian stopped short suddenly; as when the beasts, after venturing to mock their king, the lion, are subdued to quietness by one glance of his eye. But not so easily was the Bohemian knight subdued; rather the more did he begin to mock young Edwald for his delicate form and for his silence—all which he bore for some time with great patience; but when at last the stranger used an unbecoming phrase, he arose, girded on his sword, and bowing gracefully, he said, "I thank you, Sir Knight, that you have given me this opportunity of proving that I am neither a slothful nor unpractised knight; for only thus can your behaviour be excused, which otherwise must be deemed most unmannerly. Are you ready?"

With these words he moved towards the door; the Bohemian knight followed, smiling scornfully; while Froda was full of care for his young and slender companion, although his honour was so dear to him that he could in no way interpose.

But it soon appeared how needless were the northman's fears. With equal vigour and address did Edwald assault his gigantic adversary, so that to look upon, it was almost like one of those combats between a knight and some monster of the forest, of which ancient legends tell. The issue, too, was not unlike. While the Bohemian was collecting himself for a decisive stroke Edwald rushed in upon him, and, with the force of a wrestler, cast him to the ground. But he spared his conquered foe, helped him courteously to rise, and then turned to mount his own steed. Soon after he and Froda left the hostelry, and once more their journey led them on the same path as before.

"From henceforth this gives me pleasure," said Froda, pointing with satisfaction to their common road. "I must own to you, Edchen"—he had accustomed himself, in loving confidence, to call his young friend by that childlike name—"I must own to you that hitherto, when I have thought that you might perhaps be journeying with me to the tournament held in honour of the fair Hildegardis, a heaviness came over my heart. Your noble knightly spirit I well knew, but I feared lest the strength of your slender limbs might not be equal to it. Now I have learned to know you as a warrior who may long seek his match; and God be praised if we still hold on in the same path, and welcome our earliest meeting in the lists!"

But Edwald looked at him sorrowfully, and said, "What can my skill and strength avail if they be tried against you, and for the greatest earthly prize, which one of us alone can win? Alas! I have long foreboded with a heavy heart the sad truth, that you also are journeying to the tournament of the fair Hildegardis."

Aslauga's Knight

"Edchen," answered Froda, with a smile, "my gentle, loving youth, see you not that I already wear on my breastplate the image of a liege lady? I strive but for renown in arms, and not for your fair Hildegardis!"

"MY fair Hildegardis!" answered Edwald, with a sigh. "That she is not, nor ever will be—or should she, ah! Froda, it would pierce your heart. I know well the northland faith is deep-rooted as your rocks, and hard to dissolve as their summits of snow; but let no man think that he can look unscathed into the eyes of Hildegardis. Has not she, the haughty, the too haughty maiden, so bewitched my tranquil, lowly mind, that I forget the gulf which lies between us, and still pursue her; and would rather perish than renounce the daring hope to win that eagle spirit for my own?"

"I will help you to it, Edchen," answered Froda, smiling still. "Would that I knew how this all-conquering lady looks! She must resemble the Valkyrien of our heathen forefathers, since so many mighty warriors are overcome by her."

Edwald solemnly drew forth a picture from beneath his breastplate, and held it before him. Fixed, and as if enchanted, Froda gazed upon it, with glowing cheeks and sparkling eyes; the smile passed away from his countenance, as the sunlight fades away from the meadows before the coming darkness of the storm.

"See you not now, my noble comrade," whispered Edwald, "that for one of us two, or perhaps for both, the joy of life is gone?"

"Not yet," replied Froda, with a powerful effort; "but hide your magic picture, and let us rest beneath this shade. You must be somewhat spent with your late encounter, and a strange weariness oppresses me with leaden weight." They dismounted from their steeds, and stretched themselves upon the ground.

The noble Froda had no thought of sleep; but he wished to be undisturbed whilst he wrestled strongly with himself, and strove, if it might be, to drive from his mind that image of fearful beauty. It seemed as if this new influence had already become a part of his very life, and at last a restless dreamy sleep did indeed overshadow the exhausted warrior. He fancied himself engaged in combat with many knights, whilst Hildegardis looked on smiling from a richly-adorned balcony; and just as he thought he had gained the victory the bleeding Edwald lay groaning beneath his horse's feet. Then again it seemed as if Hildegardis stood by his side in a church, and they were about to receive the marriage-blessing. He knew well that this was not right, and the "yes," which he was to utter, he pressed back with resolute effort into his heart, and forthwith his eyes were moistened with burning tears. >From yet stranger and more bewildering visions the voice of Edwald at last awoke him. He raised himself up, and heard his young companion saying courteously, as he looked towards a neighbouring thicket, "Only return, noble maiden; I will surely help you if I can; and I had no wish to scare you away, but that the slumbers of my brother in arms might not be disturbed by you." A golden gleam shone through the branches as it vanished.

"For heaven's sake", my faithful comrade," cried Froda, "to whom are you speaking, and who has been here by me?"

"I cannot myself rightly understand," said Edwald. "Hardly had you dropped asleep when a figure came forth from the forest, closely wrapped in a dark mantle. At first I took her for a peasant. She seated herself at your head; and though I could see nothing of her countenance, I could well observe that she was sorely troubled, and even shedding tears. I made signs to her to depart, lest she should disturb your sleep; and would have offered her a piece of gold, supposing that poverty must be the cause of her deep distress. But my hand seemed powerless, and a shudder passed through me, as if I had entertained such a purpose towards a queen. Immediately glittering locks of gold waved here and there between the folds of her close-wrapped mantle, and the thicket began almost to shine in the light which they shed. 'Poor youth,' said she then, 'you love truly, and can well understand how a lofty woman's heart burns in keenest sorrow when a noble knight, who vowed himself to be her own, withdraws his heart, and, like a weak bondman, is led away to meaner hopes.' Hereupon she arose, and, sighing, disappeared in yonder thicket. It almost seemed to me, Froda, as though she uttered your name."

"Yes, it was me she named," answered Froda; "and not in vain she named me. Aslauga, thy knight comes, and enters the lists, and all for thee and thy reward alone! At the same time, my Edchen, we will win for you your haughty bride." With this he sprang upon his steed, full of the proud joy of former times; and when the magic of Hildegardis' beauty, dazzling and bewildering, would rise up before him, he said, smiling, "Aslauga!" and the sun of his inner life shone forth again cloudless and serene.

CHAPTER III.

From a balcony of her castle on the Maine Hildegardis was wont to refresh herself in the cool of the evening by gazing on the rich landscape below, but gazing more eagerly on the glitter of arms, which often came in sight from many a distant road; for knights were approaching singly, or with a train of followers, all eager to prove their courage and their strength in striving for the high prize of the tournament. She was in truth a proud and high-minded maiden—perhaps more so than became even her dazzling beauty and her princely rank. As she now gazed with a proud smile on the glittering roads a damsel of her train began the following lay:—

"The joyous song of birds in spring
Upon the wing
Doth echo far through wood and dell,
And freely tell
Their treasures sweet of love and mirth,
Too gladsome for this lowly earth.

"The gentle breath of flowers in May,
O'er meadows gay,
Doth fill the pure and balmy air
With perfume rare;
Still floating round each slender form,
Though scorched by sun, or torn by storm.

"But every high and glorious aim,
And the pure flame
That deep abiding in my heart
Can ne'er depart,
Too lofty for my falt'ring tongue,
Must die with me, unknown, unsung."

"Wherefore do you sing that song, and at this moment?" said Hildegardis, striving to appear scornful and proud, though a deep and secret sadness was plainly enough seen to overshadow her countenance. "It came into my head unawares," replied the damsel, "as I looked upon the road by which the gentle Edwald with his pleasant lays first approached us; for it was from him I learnt it. But seems it not to you, my gracious lady, and to you too, my companions, as if Edwald himself were again riding that way towards the castle?" "Dreamer!" said Hildegardis, scornfully—and yet could not for some space withdraw her eyes from the knight, till at length, with an effort, she turned them on Froda, who rode beside him, saying: "Yes, truly, that knight is Edwald; but what can you find to notice in the meek-spirited, silent boy? Here, fix your eyes, my maidens, on this majestic figure, if you would behold a knight indeed." She was silent. A voice within her, as though of prophecy, said, "Now the victor of the tournament rides into the courtyard;" and she, who had never feared the presence of any human being, now felt humbled, and almost painfully awed, when she beheld the northern knight.

At the evening meal the two newly-arrived knights were placed opposite to the royal Hildegardis. As Froda, after the northern fashion, remained in full armour, the golden image of Aslauga gleamed from his silver breast-plate full before the eyes of the haughty lady. She smiled scornfully, as if conscious that it depended on her will to drive that image from the breast and from the heart of the stranger-knight. Then suddenly a clear golden light passed through the hall, so that Hildegardis said, "O, the keen lightning!" and covered her eyes with both her hands. But Froda looked into the dazzling radiance with a joyful gaze of welcome. At this Hildegardis feared him yet more, though at the same time she thought, "This loftiest and most mysterious of men must be born for me alone." Yet could she not forbear, almost against her will, to look from time to time in friendly tenderness on the poor Edwald, who sat there silent, and with a sweet smile seemed to pity and to mock his own suffering

Aslauga's Knight

and his own vain hopes.

"When the two knights were alone in their sleeping-chamber Edwald looked for a long time in silence into the dewy, balmy night. Then he sang to his lute:

"A hero wise and brave,
A lowly, tender youth,
Are wandering through the land
In steadfast love and truth.

"The hero, by his deeds,
Both bliss and fame had won,
And still, with heartfelt joy,
The faithful child looked on."

But Froda took the lute from his hands, and said, "No, Edchen, I will teach you another song; listen!—

"'There's a gleam in the hall, and like morning's light
Hath shone upon all her presence bright.
Suitors watch as she passes by--
She may gladden their hearts by one glance of her eye:
But coldly she gazeth upon the throng,
And they that have sought her may seek her long.
She turns her away from the richly clad knight,
She heeds not the words of the learned wight;
The prince is before her in all his pride,
But other the visions around her that glide.
Then tell me, in all the wide world's space,
Who may e'er win that lady's grace?
In sorrowful love there sits apart
The gentle squire who hath her heart;
They all are deceived by fancies vain,
And he knows it not who the prize shall gain.'"

Edwald thrilled. "As God wills," said he, softly to himself. "But I cannot understand how such a thing could be." "As God wills," repeated Froda. The two friends embraced each other, and soon after fell into a peaceful slumber.

Some days afterwards Froda sat in a secluded bower of the castle garden, and was reading in the ancient book of his lovely mistress Aslauga. It happened at that very time that Hildegardis passed by. She stood still, and said, thoughtfully, "Strange union that you are of knight and sage, how comes it that you bring forth so little out of the deep treasures of your knowledge? And yet I think you must have many a choice history at your command, even such as that which now lies open before you; for I see rich and bright pictures of knights and ladies painted amongst the letters."

"It is, indeed, the most surpassing and enchanting history in all the world," said Froda; "but you have neither patience nor thoughtfulness to listen to our wonderful legends of the north."

"Why think you so?" answered Hildegardis, with that pride which she rejoiced to display towards Froda, when she could find courage to do so; and, placing herself on a stone seat opposite, she commanded him at once to read something to her out of that fair book.

Froda began, and in the very effort which he made to change the old heroic speech of Iceland into the German tongue, his heart and mind were stirred more fervently and solemnly. As he looked up from time to time, he beheld the countenance of Hildegardis beaming in ever-growing beauty with joy, wonder, and interest; and the thought passed through his mind whether this could indeed be his destined bride, to whom Aslauga herself was

Aslauga's Knight

guiding him.

Then suddenly the characters became strangely confused; it seemed as if the pictures began to move, so that he was obliged to stop. While he fixed his eyes with a strong effort upon the book, endeavouring to drive away this strange confusion, he heard a well-known sweetly solemn voice, which said, "Leave a little space for me, fair lady. The history which that knight is reading to you relates to me; and I hear it gladly."

Before the eyes of Froda, as he raised them from his book, sat Aslauga in all the glory of her flowing golden locks beside Hildegardis, on the seat. With tears of affright in her eyes, the maiden sank back and fainted. Solemnly, yet graciously, Aslauga warned her knight with a motion of her fair right hand, and vanished.

"What have I done to you?" said Hildegardis when recovered from her swoon by his care, "what have I done to you, evil-minded knight, that you call up your northern spectres before me, and well-nigh destroy me through terror of your magic arts?" "Lady," answered Froda, "may God help me, as I have not called hither the wondrous lady who but now appeared to us. But now her will is known to me, and I commend you to God's keeping."

With that he walked thoughtfully out of the bower. Hildegardis fled in terror from the gloomy shade, and, rushing out on the opposite side, reached a fair open grass-plot, where Edwald, in the soft glow of twilight, was gathering flowers, and, meeting her with a courteous smile, offered her a nosegay of narcissus and pansies.

CHAPTER IV.

At length the day fixed for the tournament arrived, and a distinguished noble, appointed by the German emperor, arranged all things in the most magnificent and sumptuous guise for the solemn festival. The field of combat opened wide, and fair, and level, thickly strewn with the finest sand, so that, both man and horse might find sure footing; and, like a pure field of snow, it shone forth from the midst of the flowery plain. Rich hangings of silk from Arabia, curiously embroidered with Indian gold, adorned with their various colours the lists enclosing the space, and hung from the lofty galleries which had been erected for the ladies and the nobles who were to behold the combat. At the upper end, under a canopy of majestic arches richly wrought in gold, was the place of the Lady Hildegardis. Green wreaths and garlands waved gracefully between the glittering pillars in the soft breezes of July. And with impatient eyes the multitude, who crowded beyond the lists, gazed upwards, expecting the appearance of the fairest maiden of Germany, and were only at times drawn to another part by the stately approach of the combatants. Oh, how many a bright suit of armour, many a silken richly-embroidered mantle, how many a lofty waving plume was here to be seen! The splendid troop of knights moved within the lists, greeting and conversing with each other, as a bed of flowers stirred by a breath of wind; but the flower-stems had grown to lofty trees, the yellow and white flower-leaves had changed to gold and silver, and the dew-drops to pearls and diamonds. For whatever was most fair and costly, most varied and full of meaning, had these noble knights collected in honour of this day. Many an eye was turned on Froda, who, without scarf, plume, or mantle, with his shining silver breastplate, on which appeared the golden image of Aslauga, and with his well-wrought helmet of golden locks, shone, in the midst of the crowd, like polished brass. Others, again, there were, who took pleasure in looking at the young Edwald; his whole armour was covered by a mantle of white silk, embroidered in azure and silver, as his whole helmet was concealed by a waving plume of white feathers. He was arrayed with almost feminine elegance, and yet the conscious power with which he controlled his fiery, snow-white steed made known the victorious strength and manliness of the warlike stripling.

In strange contrast appeared the tall and almost gigantic figure of a knight clothed in a mantle of black glossy bearskin, bordered with costly fur, but without any ornament of shining metal. His very helmet was covered with dark bearskin, and, instead of plumes, a mass of blood-red horsehair hung like a flowing mane profusely on every side. Well did Froda and Edwald remember that dark knight, for he was the uncourteous guest of the hostelry. He also seemed to remark the two knights, for he turned his unruly steed suddenly round, forced his way through the crowd of warriors, and, after he had spoken over the enclosure to a hideous bronze-coloured woman, sprang with a wild leap across the lists, and, with the speed of an arrow, vanished out of sight. The old woman looked after him with a friendly nod. The assembled people laughed as at a strange masquing device; but Edwald and Froda had their own almost shuddering thoughts concerning it, which, however, neither imparted to the other.

The kettle-drums rolled, the trumpets sounded, and led by the aged duke, Hildegardis advanced, richly apparelled, but more dazzling through the brightness of her own beauty. She stepped forward beneath the arches of the golden bower, and bowed to the assembly. The knights bent low, and the feeling rushed into many a heart, "There is no man on earth who can deserve a bride so queenly." When Froda bowed his head, it seemed to him as if the golden radiance of Aslauga's tresses floated before his sight; and his spirit rose in joy and pride that his lady held him worthy to be so often reminded of her.

And now the tournament began. At first the knights strove with blunted swords and battle-axes; then they ran their course with lances man to man; but at last they divided into two equal parties, and a general assault began, in which every one was allowed to use at his own will either sword or lance. Froda and Edwald equally surpassed their antagonists, as (measuring each his own strength and that of his friend) they had foreseen. And now it must be decided by a single combat with lances to whom the highest prize of victory should belong. Before this trial began, they rode slowly together into the middle of the course, and consulted where each should take his place. "Keep you your guiding-star still before your sight," said Froda, with a smile; "the like gracious help will not be wanting to me." Edwald looked round astonished for the lady of whom his friend seemed to speak, but Froda went on, "I have done wrong in hiding aught from you, but after the tournament you shall know all. Now lay aside

Aslauga's Knight

all needless thoughts of wonder, dear Edchen, and sit firm in your saddle, for I warn you that I shall run this course with all my might. Not my honour alone is at stake, but the far higher honour of my lady."

"So also do I purpose to demean myself," said Edwald, with a friendly smile. They shook each other by the hand, and rode to their places.

Amidst the sound of trumpets they met again, running their course with lightning speed; the lances shivered with a crash, the horses staggered, the knights, firm in their saddles, pulled them up, and rode back to their places. But as they prepared for another course, Edwald's white steed snorted in wild affright, and Froda's powerful chestnut reared up foaming.

It was plain that the two noble animals shrunk from a second hard encounter, but their riders held them fast with spur and bit, and, firm and obedient, they again dashed forward at the second call of the trumpet. Edwald, who by one deep, ardent gaze on the beauty of his mistress had stamped it afresh on his soul, cried aloud at the moment of encounter, "Hildegardis!" and so mightily did his lance strike his valiant adversary, that Froda sank backwards on his steed, with difficulty keeping his seat in his saddle, or holding firm in his stirrups, whilst Edwald flew by unshaken, lowered his spear to salute Hildegardis as he passed her bower, and then, amidst the loud applause of the multitude, rushed to his place, ready for the third course. And, ah! Hildegardis herself, overcome by surprise, had greeted him with a blush and a look of kindness; it seemed to him as if the overwhelming joy of victory were already gained. But it was not so, for the valiant Froda, burning with noble shame, had again tamed his affrighted steed, and, chastising him sharply with the spur for his share in this mischance, said in a low voice, "Beautiful and beloved lady, show thyself to me—the honour of thy name is at stake." To every other eye it seemed as if a golden rosy-tinted summer's cloud was passing over the deep-blue sky, but Froda beheld the heavenly countenance of his lady, felt the waving of her golden tresses, and cried, "Aslauga!" The two rushed together, and Edwald was hurled from his saddle far upon the dusty plain.

Froda remained for a time motionless, according to the laws of chivalry, as though waiting to see whether any one would dispute his victory, and appearing on his mailed steed like some lofty statue of brass. All around stood the multitude in silent wonderment. When at length they burst forth into shouts of triumph, he beckoned earnestly with his hand, and all were again silent. He then sprang lightly from his saddle, and hastened to the spot where the fallen Edwald was striving to rise. He pressed him closely to his breast, led his snow-white steed towards him, and would not be denied holding the stirrups of the youth whilst he mounted. Then he bestrode his own steed, and rode by Edwald's side towards the golden bower of Hildegardis, where, with lowered spear and open vizor, he thus spoke: "Fairest of all living ladies, I bring you here Edwald, your knightly bridegroom, before whose lance and sword all the knights of this tournament have fallen away, I only excepted, who can make no claim to the choicest prize of victory, since I, as the image on my breastplate may show, already serve another mistress."

The duke was even now advancing towards the two warriors, to lead them into the golden bower, but Hildegardis restrained him with a look of displeasure, saying immediately, while her cheeks glowed with anger, "Then you seem, Sir Froda, the Danish knight, to serve your lady ill; for even now you openly styled me the fairest of living ladies."

"That did I," answered Froda, bending courteously, "because my fair mistress belongs to the dead."

A slight shudder passed at these words through the assembly, and through the heart of Hildegardis; but soon the anger of the maiden blazed forth again, and the more because the most wonderful and excellent knight she knew had scorned her for the sake of a dead mistress.

"I make known to all," she said, with solemn earnestness, "that according to the just decree of my imperial uncle, this hand can never belong to a vanquished knight, however noble and honourable he may otherwise have proved himself. As the conqueror of this tournament, therefore, is bound to another service, this combat concerns me not; and I depart hence as I came, a free and unbetrothed maiden."

The duke seemed about to reply, but she turned haughtily away, and left the bower. Suddenly a gust of wind shook the green wreaths and garlands, and they fell untwined and rustling behind her. In this the people, displeased with the pride of Hildegardis, thought they beheld an omen of punishment, and with jeering words noticed it as they departed.

CHAPTER V.

The two knights had returned to their apartments in deep silence. When they arrived there, Edwald caused himself to be disarmed, and laid every piece of his fair shining armour together with a kind of tender care, almost as if he were burying the corpse of a beloved friend. Then he beckoned to his squires to leave the chamber, took his lute on his arm, and sang the following song to its notes:—

"Bury them, bury them out of sight,
For hope and fame are fled;
And peaceful resting and quiet night
Are all now left for the dead."

"You will stir up my anger against your lute," said Froda. "You had accustomed it to more joyful songs than this. It is too good for a passing-bell, and you too good to toll it. I tell you yet, my young hero, all will end gloriously."

Edwald looked a while with wonder in his face, and he answered kindly: "Beloved Froda, if it displeases you, I will surely sing no more." But at the same time he struck a few sad chords, which sounded infinitely sweet and tender. Then the northern knight, much moved, clasped him in his arms, and said: "Dear Edchen, sing and say and do whatever pleases you; it shall ever rejoice me. But you may well believe me, for I speak not this without a spirit of presage—your sorrow shall change, whether to death or life I know not, but great and overpowering joy awaits you." Edwald rose firmly and cheerfully from his seat, seized his companion's arm with a strong grasp, and walked forth with him through the blooming alleys of the garden into the balmy air.

At that very hour an aged woman, muffled in many a covering, was led secretly to the apartment of the Lady Hildegardis. The appearance of the dark-complexioned stranger was mysterious, and she had gathered round her for some time, by many feats of jugglery, a part of the multitude returning home from the tournament, but had dispersed them at last in wild affright. Before this happened, the tire-woman of Hildegardis had hastened to her mistress, to entertain her with an account of the rare and pleasant feats of the bronze-coloured woman. The maidens in attendance, seeing their lady deeply moved, and wishing to banish her melancholy, bade the tire-woman bring the old stranger hither. Hildegardis forbade it not, hoping that she should thus divert the attention of her maidens, while she gave herself up more deeply and earnestly to the varying imaginations which flitted through her mind.

The messenger found the place already deserted; and the strange old woman alone in the midst, laughing immoderately. When questioned by her, she did not deny that she had all at once taken the form of a monstrous owl, announcing to the spectators in a screeching voice that she was the Devil—and that every one upon this rushed screaming home.

The tire-woman trembled at the fearful jest, but durst not return to ask again the pleasure of Hildegardis, whose discontented mood she had already remarked. She gave strict charge to the old woman, with many a threat and promise, to demean herself discreetly in the castle: after which she brought her in by the most secret way, that none of those whom she had terrified might see her enter.

The aged crone now stood before Hildegardis, and winked to her, in the midst of her low and humble salutation, in a strangely familiar manner, as though there were some secret between them. The lady felt an involuntary shudder, and could not withdraw her gaze from the features of that hideous countenance, hateful as it was to her. The curiosity which had led the rest to desire a sight of the strange woman was by no means gratified, for she performed none but the most common tricks of jugglery, and related only well-known tales, so that the tire-woman felt wearied and indifferent and, ashamed of having brought the stranger, she stole away unnoticed. Several other maidens followed her example, and, as these withdrew, the old crone twisted her mouth into a smile, and repeated the same hideous confidential wink towards the lady. Hildegardis could not understand what

Aslauga's Knight

attracted her in the jests and tales of the bronze-coloured woman; but so it was, that in her whole life she had never bestowed such attention on the words of any one. Still the old woman went on and on, and already the night looked dark without the windows, but the attendants who still remained with Hildegardis had sunk into a deep sleep, and had lighted none of the wax tapers in the apartment.

Then, in the dusky gloom, the dark old crone rose from the low seat on which she had been sitting, as if she now felt herself well at ease, advanced towards Hildegardis, who sat as if spell-bound with terror, placed herself beside her on the purple couch, and embracing her in her long dry arms with a hateful caress, whispered a few words in her ear. It seemed to the lady as if she uttered the names of Froda and Edwald, and from them came the sound of a flute, which, clear and silvery as were its tones, seemed to lull her into a trance. She could indeed move her limbs, but only to follow those sounds, which, like a silver network, floated round the hideous form of the old woman. She moved from the chamber, and Hildegardis followed her through all her slumbering maidens, still singing softly as she went, "Ye maidens, ye maidens, I wander by night."

Without the castle, accompanied by squire and groom, stood the gigantic Bohemian warrior; he laid on the shoulders of the crone a bag of gold so heavy that she sank half whimpering, half laughing, on the ground; then lifted the entranced Hildegardis on his steed, and galloped with her silently into the ever-deepening gloom of night.

"All ye noble lords and knights, who yesterday contended gallantly for the prize of victory and the hand of the peerless Hildegardis, arise, arise! saddle your steeds, and to the rescue! The peerless Hildegardis is carried away!"

Thus proclaimed many a herald through castle and town in the bright red dawn of the following day; and on all sides rose the dust from the tread of knights and noble squires along those roads by which so lately, in the evening twilight, Hildegardis in proud repose had gazed on her approaching suitors.

Two of them, well known to us, remained inseparably together, but they knew as little as the others whether they had taken the right direction, for how and when the adored lady could have disappeared from her apartments was still to the whole castle a fearful and mysterious secret.

Edwald and Froda rode as long as the sun moved over their heads, unwearied as he; and now, when he sank in the waves of the river, they thought to win the race from him, and still spurred on their jaded steeds. But the noble animals staggered and panted, and the knights were constrained to grant them some little refreshment in a grassy meadow. Secure of bringing them back at their first call, their masters removed both bit and curb, that they might be refreshed with the green pasture, and with the deep blue waters of the Maine, while they themselves reposed under the shade of a neighbouring thicket of alders. And deep in the cool, dark shade, there shone, as it were, a mild but clear sparkling light, and checked the speech of Froda, who at that moment was beginning to tell his friend the tale of his knightly service to his sovereign lady, which had been delayed hitherto, first by Edwald's sadness, and then by the haste of their journey. Ah, well did Froda know that lovely golden light! "Let us follow it, Edchen," said he in a low tone, "and leave the horses a while to their pasture." Edwald in silence followed his companion's advice. A secret voice, half sweet, half fearful, seemed to tell him that here was the path, the only right path to Hildegardis. Once only he said in astonishment, "Never before have I seen the evening glow shine on the leaves so brightly." Froda shook his head with a smile, and they pursued in silence their unknown track.

When they came forth on the other side of the alder-thicket upon the bank of the Maine, which almost wound round it, Edwald saw well that another glow than that of evening was shining on them, for dark clouds of night already covered the heavens, and the guiding light stood fixed on the shore of the river. It lit up the waves, so that they could see a high woody island in the midst of the stream, and a boat on the hither side of the shore fast bound to a stake. But on approaching, the knights saw much more; a troop of horsemen of strange and foreign appearance were all asleep, and in the midst of them, slumbering on cushions, a female form in white garments.

"Hildegardis!" murmured Edwald to himself, with a smile, and at the same time he drew his sword in readiness for the combat as soon as the robbers should awake, and beckoned to Froda to raise the sleeping lady, and convey her to a place of safety. But at this moment something like an owl passed whizzing over the dark squadron, and they all started up with clattering arms and hideous outcries. A wild unequal combat arose in the darkness of night, for that beaming light had disappeared. Freda and Edwald were driven asunder, and only at a distance heard each other's mighty war-cry. Hildegardis, startled from her magic sleep, uncertain whether she were waking or dreaming, fled bewildered and weeping bitterly into the deep shades of the alder-thicket.

CHAPTER VI.

Froda felt his arm grow weary, and the warm blood was flowing from two wounds in his shoulder; he wished so to lie down in death that he might rise up with honour from his bloody grave to the exalted lady whom he served. He cast his shield behind him, grasped his sword-hilt with both hands, and rushed wildly, with a loud war-cry, upon the affrighted foe. Instantly he heard some voices cry, "It is the rage of the northern heroes which has come upon him." And the whole troop were scattered in dismay, while the exhausted knight remained wounded and alone in the darkness.

Then the golden hair of Aslauga gleamed once more in the alder-shade; and Froda said, leaning, through weariness, on his sword, "I think not that I am wounded to death; but whenever that time shall come, O beloved lady, wilt thou not indeed appear to me in all thy loveliness and brightness?" A soft "Yes" breathed against his cheek, and the golden light vanished.

But now Hildegardis came forth from the thicket, half fainting with terror, and said feebly, "Within is the fair and frightful spectre of the north—without is the battle. Oh, merciful heaven! whither shall I go?"

Then Froda approached to sooth the affrighted one, to speak some words of comfort to her, and to inquire after Edwald; but wild shouts and the rattling of armour announced the return of the Bohemian warriors. With haste Froda led the maiden to the boat, pushed off from the shore, and rowed her with the last effort of his failing strength towards the island which he had observed in the midst of the stream. But the pursuers had already kindled torches, and waved them sparkling here and there. By this light they soon discovered the boat; they saw that the dreaded Danish knight was bleeding, and gained fresh courage for their pursuit. Hardly had Froda pushed the boat to the shore of the island, before he perceived a Bohemian on the other side in another skiff, and soon afterwards the greater number of the enemy embarked to row towards the island. "To the wood, fair maiden," he whispered, as soon as he had landed Hildegardis on the shore; "there conceal yourself, whilst I endeavour to prevent the landing of the robbers." But Hildegardis, clinging to his arm, whispered again, "Do I not see that you are pale and bleeding? and would you have me expire with terror in the dark and lonely clefts of this rock? Ah! and if your northern gold-haired spectre were to appear again and seat herself beside me! Think you that I do not see her there now, shining through the thicket!"

"She shines!" echoed Froda, and new strength and hope ran through every vein. He climbed the hill, following the gracious gleam; and Hildegardis, though trembling at the sight, went readily with her companion, saying only from time to time, in a low voice "Ah, Sir Knight!—my noble wondrous knight—leave me not here alone; that would be my death." The knight, soothing her courteously, stepped ever onwards through the darkness of dell and forest, for already he heard the sound of the Bohemians landing on the shore of the island. Suddenly he stood before a cave thick-covered with underwood, and the gleam disappeared. "Here, then," he whispered, endeavouring to hold the branches asunder. For a moment she paused, and said, "If you should but let the branches close again behind me, and I were to remain alone with spectres in this cave! But, Froda, you will surely follow me—a trembling, hunted child as I am? Will you not?" Without more misgivings she passed through the branches; and the knight, who would willingly have remained without as a guard, followed her. Earnestly he listened through the stillness of the night, whilst Hildegardis hardly dared to draw her breath. Then was heard the tramp of an armed man, coming ever nearer and nearer, and now close to the entrance of the cave. In vain did Froda strive to free himself from the trembling maiden. Already the branches before the entrance were cracking and breaking, and Froda sighed deeply. "Must I, then, fall like a lurking fugitive, entangled in a woman's garments? It is a base death to die. But can I cast this half-fainting creature away from me on the dark, hard earth, perhaps into some deep abyss? Come, then, what will, thou, Lady Aslauga, knowest that I die an honourable death!"

"Froda! Hildegardis!" breathed a gentle, well-known voice at the entrance, and recognising Edwald, Froda bore the lady towards him into the starlight, saying, "She will die of terror in our sight in this deep cavern. Is the foe near at hand?" "Most of them lie lifeless on the shore, or swim bleeding through the waves," said Edwald. "Set your mind at rest, and repose yourself. Are you wounded, beloved Froda?" He gave this short account to his

Aslauga's Knight

astonished companions—how, in the darkness, he had mixed with the Bohemians and pressed into the skiff, and that it had been easy to him on landing to disperse the robbers entirely, who supposed that they were attacked by one of their own crew, and thought themselves bewitched. "They began at last to fall on one another"—so he ended his history; "and we have only now to wait for the morning to conduct the lady home, for those who are wandering about of that owl-squadron will doubtless hide themselves from the eye of day." While speaking, he had skilfully and carefully arranged a couch of twigs and moss for Hildegardis, and when the wearied one, after uttering some gentle words of gratitude, had sunk into a slumber, he began, as well as the darkness would allow, to bind up the wounds of his friend. During this anxious task, while the dark boughs of the trees murmured over their heads, and the rippling of the stream was heard from afar, Froda, in a low voice, made known to his brother-in-arms to the service of what lady he was bound. Edwald listened with deep attention, but at last he said tenderly, "Trust me, the noble Princess Aslauga will not resent it, if you pledge yourself to this earthly beauty in faithful love. Ah! even now doubtless you are sinning in the dreams of Hildegardis, richly-gifted and happy knight! I will not stand in your way with my vain wishes; I see now clearly that she can never, never love me. Therefore I will this very day hasten to the war which so many valiant knights of Germany are waging in the heathen land of Prussia, and the black cross, which distinguishes them for warriors of the Church, I will lay as the best balm on my throbbing heart. Take, then, dear Froda, that fair hand which you have won in battle, and live henceforth a life of surpassing happiness and joy."

"Edwald," said Froda, gravely, "this is the first time that I ever heard one word from your lips which a true knight could not fulfil. Do as it pleases you towards the fair and haughty Hildegardis, but Aslauga remains my mistress ever, and no other do I desire in life or death." The youth was startled by these stern words, and made no reply. Both, without saying more to each other, watched through the night in solemn thought.

The next morning, when the rising sun shone brightly over the flowery plains around the Castle of Hildegardis, the watchman on the tower blew a joyful blast from his horn, for his keen eye had distinguished far in the distance his fair lady, who was riding from the forest between her two deliverers; and from castle, town, and hamlet, came forth many a rejoicing train to assure themselves with their own eyes of the happy news.

Hildegardis turned to Edwald with eyes sparkling through tears, and said, "Were it not for you, young knight, they might have sought long and vainly before they found the lost maiden or the noble Froda, who would now be lying in that dark cavern a bleeding and lifeless corpse." Edwald bowed lowly in reply, but persevered in his wonted silence. It even seemed as though an unusual grief restrained the smile which erewhile answered so readily, in childlike sweetness, to every friendly word.

The noble guardian of Hildegardis had, in the overflowing joy of his heart, prepared a sumptuous banquet, and invited all the knights and ladies present to attend it. Whilst Froda and Edwald, in all the brightness of their glory, were ascending the steps in the train of their rescued lady, Edwald said to his friend, "Noble, steadfast knight, you can never love me more!" And as Froda looked in astonishment, he continued— "Thus it is when children presume to counsel heroes, however well they may mean it. Now have I offended grievously against you, and yet more against the noble Lady Aslauga." "Because you would have plucked every flower of your own garden to gladden me with them?" said Froda. "No; you are my gentle brother-in-arms now, as heretofore, dear Edchen, and are perhaps become yet dearer to me."

Then Edwald smiled again in silent contentment, like a flower after the morning showers of May.

The eyes of Hildegardis glanced mildly and kindly on him, and she often conversed graciously with him, while, on the other hand, since yesterday, a reverential awe seemed to separate her from Froda. But Edwald also was much altered. However he welcomed with modest joy the favour of his lady, it yet seemed as if some barrier were between them which forbade him to entertain the most distant hope of successful love.

It chanced that a noble count, from the court of the Emperor, was announced, who being bound on an important embassy, had wished to pay his respects to the Lady Hildegardis by the way. She received him gladly, and as soon as the first salutations were over, he said, looking at her and at Edwald, "I know not if my good fortune may not have brought me hither to a very joyful festivity. That would be right welcome news to the Emperor my master." Hildegardis and Edwald were lovely to look upon in their blushes and confusion, but the count, perceiving at once that he had been too hasty, inclined himself respectfully towards the young knight, and said, "Pardon me, noble Duke Edwald, my too great forwardness, but I know the wish of my sovereign, and the hope to find it already fulfilled prompted my tongue to speak." All eyes were fixed inquiringly on the young hero,

Aslauga's Knight

who answered, in graceful confusion, "It is true; the Emperor, when I was last in his camp, through his undeserved favour, raised me to the rank of a duke. It was my good fortune, that in an encounter, some of the enemy's horse, who had dared to assault the sacred person of the Emperor, dispersed and fled on my approach." The count then, at the request of Hildegardis, related every circumstance of the heroic deed; and it appeared that Edwald had not only rescued the Emperor from the most imminent peril, but also, with the cool and daring skill of a general, had gained the victory which decided the event of the war.

Surprise at first sealed the lips of all; and even before their congratulations could begin, Hildegardis had turned towards Edwald, and said in a low voice, which yet, in that silence, was clearly heard by all, "The noble count has made known the wish of my imperial uncle, and I conceal it no longer, my own heart's wish is the same—I am Duke Edwald's bride." And with that she extended to him her fair right hand, and all present waited only till he should take it, before they burst into a shout of congratulation. But Edwald forbore to do so; he only sunk on one knee before his lady, saying, "God forbid that the lofty Hildegardis should ever recall a word spoken solemnly to noble knights and dames. 'To no vanquished knight,' you said, 'might the hand of the Emperor's niece belong'—and behold there Froda, the noble Danish knight, my conqueror." Hildegardis, with a slight blush, turned hastily away, hiding her eyes, and as Edwald arose, it seemed as though there were a tear upon his cheek.

In his clanging armour Froda advanced to the middle of the hall, exclaiming, "I declare my late victory over Duke Edwald to have been the chance of fortune, and I challenge the noble knight to meet me again to-morrow in the lists."

At the same time he threw his iron gauntlet ringing on the pavement.

But Edwald moved not to take it up. On the contrary, a glow of lofty anger was on his cheeks, and his eyes sparkled with indignation, so that his friend would hardly have recognised him; and after a silence he spoke—

"Noble Sir Froda, if I have ever offended you, we are now even. How durst you, a warrior gloriously wounded by two sword-strokes, challenge a man unhurt into the lists to-morrow, if you did not despise him?"

"Forgive me, Duke Edwald," answered Froda, somewhat abashed, but with cheerfulness, "I have spoken too boldly. Not till I am completely cured do I call you to the field."

Then Edwald took up the gauntlet joyfully. He knelt once more before Hildegardis, who, turning away her face, gave him her fair hand to kiss, and walked, with his arm in that of his noble Danish friend, out of the hall.

CHAPTER VII.

While Froda's wounds were healing Edwald would sometimes wander, when the shades of evening fell dark and silent around, on the flowery terraces beneath the windows of Hildegardis, and sing pleasant little songs; amongst others the following:—

"Heal fast, heal fast, ye hero-wounds;
O knight, be quickly strong;
Beloved strife
For fame and life,
O tarry not too long!"

But that one which the maidens of the castle loved best to learn from him was this, and it was perhaps the longest song that Edwald had ever sung in his whole life:—

"Would I on earth were lying,
By noble hero slain;
So that love's gentle sighing
Breathed me to life again!

"Would I an emperor were,
Of wealth and power!
Would I were gathering twigs
In woodland bower!

"Would that in lone seclusion
I lived a hermit's life!
Would, amid wild confusion,
I led the battle-strife!

"O would the lot were mine,
In bower or field,
To which my lady fair
Her smile would yield!"

At this time it happened that a man who held himself to be very wise, and who filled the office of secretary to the aged guardian of Hildegardis, came to the two knightly friends to propose a scheme to them. His proposal, in few words, was this, that as Froda could gain no advantage from his victory, he might in the approaching combat suffer himself to be thrown from his steed, and thus secure the lady for his comrade, at the same time fulfilling the wish of the Emperor, which might turn to his advantage hereafter in many ways.

At this the two friends at first laughed heartily; but then Froda advanced gravely towards the secretary, and said, "Thou trifler, doubtless the old duke would drive thee from his service did he know of thy folly, and teach thee to talk of the Emperor. Good-night, worthy sir, and trust me that when Edwald and I meet each other, it will be with all our heart and strength."

The secretary hastened out of the room with all speed, and was seen next morning to look unusually pale.

Soon after this Froda recovered from his wounds; the course was again prepared as before, but crowded by a still greater number of spectators; and in the freshness of a dewy morning the two knights advanced solemnly together to the combat.

"Beloved Edwald," said Froda, in a low voice, as they went, "take good heed to yourself, for neither this time

Aslauga's Knight

can the victory be yours—on that rose-coloured cloud appears Aslauga."

"It may be so," answered Edwald, with a quiet smile; "but under the arches of that golden bower shines Hildegardis, and this time she has not been waited for."

The knights took their places—the trumpets sounded, the course began, and Froda's prophecy seemed to be near its fulfilment, for Edwald staggered under the stroke of his lance, so that he let go the bridle, seized the mane with both hands, and thus hardly recovered his seat, whilst his high-mettled snow-white steed bore him wildly around the lists without control. Hildegardis also seemed to shrink at this sight, but the youth at length reined—in his steed, and the second course was run.

Froda shot like lightning along the plain, and it seemed as if the success of the young duke were now hopeless; but in the shock of their meeting, the bold Danish steed reared, starting aside as if in fear; the rider staggered, his stroke passed harmless by, and both steed and knight fell clanging to the ground before the steadfast spear of Edwald, and lay motionless upon the field.

Edwald did now as Froda had done before. In knightly wise he stood still a while upon the spot, as if waiting to see whether any other adversary were there to dispute his victory; then he sprang from his steed, and flew to the assistance of his fallen friend.

He strove with all his might to release him from the weight of his horse, and presently Froda came to himself, rose on his feet, and raised up his charger also. Then he lifted up his vizor, and greeted his conqueror with a friendly smile, though his countenance was pale. The victor bowed humbly, almost timidly, and said, "You, my knight, overthrown—and by me! I understand it not."

"It was her own will," answered Froda, smiling. "Come now to your gentle bride."

The multitude around shouted aloud, each lady and knight bowed low, when the aged duke pointed out to them the lovely pair, and at his bidding, the betrothed, with soft blushes, embraced each other beneath the green garlands of the golden bower.

That very day were they solemnly united in the chapel of the castle, for so had Froda earnestly desired. A journey into a far-distant land, he said, lay before him, and much he wished to celebrate the marriage of his friend before his departure.

CHAPTER VIII.

The torches were burning clear in the vaulted halls of the castle, Hildegardis had just left the arm of her lover to begin a stately dance of ceremony with the aged duke, when Edwald beckoned to his companion, and they went forth together into the moonlit gardens of the castle.

"Ah, Froda, my noble, lofty hero," exclaimed Edwald, after a silence, "were you as happy as I am! But your eyes rest gravely and thoughtfully on the ground, or kindle almost impatiently heavenwards. It would be dreadful, indeed, had the secret wish of your heart been to win Hildegardis—and I, foolish boy, so strangely favoured, had stood in your way."

"Be at rest, Edchen," answered, the Danish hero, with a smile. "On the word of a knight, my thoughts and yearnings concern not your fair Hildegardis. Far brighter than ever does Aslauga's radiant image shine into my heart: but now hear what I am going to relate to you.

"At the very moment when we met together in the course—oh, had I words to express it to you!—I was enraptured, encircled, dazzled, by Aslauga's golden tresses, which were waving all around me. Even my noble steed must have beheld the apparition, for I felt him start and rear under me. I saw you no more—the world no more—I saw only the angel-face of Aslauga close before me, smiling, blooming like a flower in a sea of sunshine which floated round her. My senses failed me. Not till you raised me from beneath my horse did my consciousness return, and then I knew, with exceeding joy, that her own gracious pleasure had struck me down. But I felt a strange weariness, far greater than my fall alone could have caused, and I felt assured at the same time that my lady was about to send me on a far-distant mission. I hastened to repose myself in my chamber, and a deep sleep immediately fell upon me. Then came Aslauga in a dream to me, more royally adorned than ever; she placed herself at the head of my couch, and said, 'Haste to array thyself in all the splendour of thy silver armour, for thou art not the wedding-guest alone, thou art also the—'

"And before she could speak the word my dream had melted away, and I felt a longing desire to fulfil her gracious command, and rejoiced in my heart. But in the midst of the festival I seemed to myself more lonely than in all my life before, and I cannot cease to ponder what that unspoken word of my lady could be intended to announce."

"You are of a far loftier spirit than I am, Froda," said Edwald, after a silence, "and I cannot soar with you into the sphere of your joys. But tell me, has it never awakened a deep pang within you that you serve a lady so withdrawn from you—alas! a lady who is almost ever invisible?"

"No, Edwald, not so," answered Froda, his eyes sparkling with happiness. "For well I know that she scorns not my service; she has even deigned sometimes to appear to me. Oh, I am in truth a happy knight and minstrel!"

"And yet your silence to-day—your troubled yearnings?"

"Not troubled, dear Edchen; only so heartfelt, so fervent in the depth of my heart—and so strangely mysterious to myself withal. But this, with all belonging to me, springs alike from the words and commands of Aslauga. How, then, can it be otherwise than something good and fair, and tending to a high and noble aim?"

A squire, who had hastened after them, announced that the knightly bridegroom was expected for the torch-dance, and as they returned, Edwald entreated his friend to take his place in the solemn dance next to him and Hildegardis. Froda inclined his head in token of friendly assent.

The horns and hautboys had already sounded their solemn invitation; Edwald hastened to give his hand to his fair bride; and while he advanced with her to the midst of the stately hall, Froda offered his hand for the torch-dance to a noble lady who stood the nearest to him, without farther observing her, and took with her the next place to the wedded pair.

But how was it when a light began to beam from his companion, before which the torch in his left hand lost all its brightness? Hardly dared he, in sweet and trembling hope, to raise his eyes to the lady; and when at last he ventured, all his boldest wishes and longings were fulfilled. Adorned with a radiant bridal crown of emeralds, Aslauga moved in solemn loveliness beside him, and beamed on him from amid the sunny light of her golden hair, blessing him with her heavenly countenance. The amazed spectators could not withdraw their eyes from the

Aslauga's Knight

mysterious pair—the knight in his light silver mail, with the torch raised on high in his hand, earnest and joyful, moving with a measured step, as if engaged in a ceremony of deep and mysterious meaning. His lady beside him, rather floating than dancing, beaming light from her golden hair, so that you would have thought the day was shining into the night; and when a look could reach through all the surrounding splendour to her face, rejoicing heart and sense with the unspeakably sweet smile of her eyes and lips.

Near the end of the dance she inclined towards Froda, and whispered to him with an air of tender confidence, and with the last sound of the horns and hautboys she had disappeared.

The most curious spectator dared not question Froda about his partner. Hildegardis did not seem to have been conscious of her presence, but shortly before the end of the festival Edwald approached his friend, and asked in a whisper, "Was it?"

"Yes, dear youth," answered Froda; "your marriage-dance has been honoured by the presence of the most exalted beauty which has been ever beheld in any land. Ah! and if I rightly understood her meaning, you will never more see me stand sighing and gazing upon the ground. But hardly dare I hope it. Now good-night, dear Edchen, good-night. As soon as I may I will tell you all."

CHAPTER IX.

The light and joyous dreams of morning still played round Edwald's head when it seemed as though a clear light encompassed him. He remembered Aslauga, but it was Froda, the golden locks of whose helmet shone now with no less sunny brightness than the flowing hair of his lady. "Ah!" thought Edwald in his dream, "how beautiful has my brother-in-arms become!" And Froda said to him, "I will sing something to you, Edchen; but softly, softly, so that it may not awaken Hildegardis. Listen to me.

'She glided in, bright as the day,
There where her knight in slumber lay;
And in her lily hand was seen
A band that seemed of the moonlight sheen.
"We are one," she sang, as about his hair
She twined it, and over her tresses fair.
Beneath them the world lay dark and drear:
But he felt the touch of her hand so dear,
Uplifting him far above mortals' sight,
While around him were shed her locks of light,
Till a garden fair lay about him spread--
And this was Paradise, angels said.'

"Never in your life did you sing so sweetly," said the dreaming Edwald.

"That may well be, Edchen," said Froda, with a smile, and vanished.

But Edwald dreamed on and on, and many other visions passed before him, all of a pleasing kind, although he could not recall them when, in the full light of morning, he unclosed his eyes with a smile. Froda alone, and his mysterious song, stood clear in his memory. He now knew full well that his friend was dead; but the thought gave him no pain, for he felt sure that the pure spirit of that minstrel-warrior could only find its proper joy in the gardens of Paradise, and in blissful solace with the lofty spirits of the ancient times. He glided softly from the side of the sleeping Hildegardis to the chamber of the departed. He lay upon his bed of rest, almost as beautiful as he had appeared in the dream, and his golden helmet was entwined with a wondrously-shining lock of hair. Then Edwald made a fair and shady grave in consecrated ground, summoned the chaplain of the castle, and with his assistance laid his beloved Froda therein.

He came back just as Hildegardis awoke; she beheld, with wonder and humility, his mien of chastened joy, and asked him whither he had been so early, to which he replied, with a smile, "I have just buried the corpse of my dearly-loved Froda, who, this very night, has passed away to his golden-haired mistress." Then he related the whole history of Aslauga's Knight, and lived on in subdued, unruffled happiness, though for some time he was even more silent and thoughtful than before. He was often found sitting on the grave of his friend, and singing the following song to his lute:—

"Listening to celestial lays,
Bending thy unclouded gaze
On the pure and living light,
Thou art blest, Aslauga'a Knight!

"Send us from thy bower on high
Many an angel-melody,
Many a vision soft and bright,
Aslauga's dear and faithful Knight!"