

FRIEDRICH HEINRICH
MOTTE-FOUQUÉ

ASLAUGA'S KNIGHT

Friedrich Heinrich Karl
de La Motte-Fouqué
Aslauga's Knight

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Fredrich de la Motte-Fouque

Aslauga's Knight

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 Iclander 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 need.
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 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.

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.”

“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."

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