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MOTTE-FOUQUÉ

UNDINE

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Undine

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Friedrich de la Motte Fouquée

Undine

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Undine is the name of the water maiden whose story you will read as you turn the leaves of this little book.

Undine is beautiful as the dawn stealing across the waters, beautiful as the spray of the crystal waves.

Yet when she comes to earth she comes to seek for that without which her beauty will be forever cold, cold and chill as the surge of the salt, salt sea.

Look deep into her blue eyes and you will see why her beauty is so cold, so chill.

In the eyes of every mortal you may see a soul. In the gay blue eyes of Undine, look you long and never so deep, no soul will look forth to meet your gaze.

Love, joy, sorrow, these are the pearls that shine in the eyes of every mortal. But in the eyes of the water maiden there is no gleam of love, no sparkle of joy, no tear of sorrow.

Undine has come to earth to seek for a soul. Without one she may never know the golden gifts God has given to each mortal, gifts these of love, joy, sorrow.

You will read in this little book how Undine, the water maiden, won for herself a human soul.

MARY MACGREGOR.

CHAPTER I

THE FISHERMAN AND THE KNIGHT

A fisherman brought a stool to the doorway of his home and, sitting down, he began to mend his nets.

His cottage stood in the midst of green meadows, and his eyes grew glad as he looked at the green grass. After the heat of the fair summer's day it was so cool, so refreshing.

At the foot of the meadows lay a large lake of clear blue water. The fisherman knew it well. It was there his work was done, through sunshine or through storm.

To-day, as his gaze wandered from the green meadows to the blue lake, he thought he saw the waters stretch out soft arms, until slowly they drew the fair meadows, the little cottage into a loving embrace.

The fisherman, his wife and their foster-child lived very quietly on this pleasant spot. It was but seldom that any one passed their door, for between the beautiful meadows and the nearest town lay a wood. So wild and gloomy was the wood, so tangled its pathway, that no one cared to enter it.

Moreover, it was said that there were strange beings lurking amid the gloom—ugly goblins, misshapen gnomes; and there were shadowy spirits too, which flitted through the branches of the strongest trees, and these even the bravest would not wish to see.

Through this dark and haunted wood the old fisherman had often to journey.

It was true that he entered the dreaded shades with fear, yet no spectre ever crossed his path. But perhaps that was because the thoughts of the old man were pure, or perhaps because he never entered the forest without singing a hymn in a clear brave voice.

As the fisherman sat mending his nets on this fair summer eve he began to move restlessly, to glance around uneasily.

Then a sudden terror fell upon him as he heard a noise in the forest behind.

Ah, how the trees rustled and how the grass was being trampled underfoot! Could it be a horseman who made haste to escape from some terrible foe?

And now, although he was wide awake, the fisherman seemed to see a figure, which he had seen before only in his dreams.

He saw the figure of a tall, strong, snow-white man, who came with slow steps toward him, and at each step he took, the figure nodded his great white head.

The fisherman rubbed his eyes as he glanced toward the wood. At the same moment the wind seemed to blow the leaves aside to make room for the snow-white man, whose head never ceased to nod.

'Well,' said the fisherman to himself, 'I have ever passed through the forest unharmed, why should I fear that evil will befall me here?' and he began to repeat aloud a verse of the Bible.

At the sound of his own voice courage crept back into the heart of the fisherman, moreover the words of the Holy Book rebuked his fears. Nor was it long before he was able even to laugh and to see how foolish he had been.

For listen! The white nodding man was after all only a stream which the fisherman knew very well, a stream which ran and bubbled out of the forest and fell into the lake. As for the rustling noise, the fisherman saw what had caused that, as a gaily clad knight rode forth from the forest shadows toward the little cottage.

This was no spectre or spirit of the wood, this stranger who wore the garments of a knight of high degree. He rode a white horse, which stepped softly, so that the flowers in the meadows lifted their delicate heads uninjured by his tread.

The fisherman raised his cap as the stranger drew near, and then quietly went on mending his nets.

Now when the knight saw the old man's face it was welcome to him, as indeed any human face would have been after the terrors of the forest. There he had seen strange mocking faces peering at him whichever way he turned, there he had been followed by strange shadowy forms from which escape had been wellnigh impossible; here at length was a kind and friendly mortal. He would ask him for the food and shelter of which both he and his steed stood in need.

'Dear sir,' answered the fisherman when he had listened to the knight's request, 'dear sir, if you will deign to enter our lonely cottage, you will find a welcome with the food and shelter we offer. As for your horse, can it have a better stable than this tree-shaded meadow, or more delicious fodder than this green grass?'

Well pleased with this answer, the knight dismounted, and together he and the fisherman freed the white horse from its saddle and bridle, and turned it loose into the waving meadow.

Then the old man led the stranger into the cottage.

Here, by the light of the kitchen fire, sat the fisherman's wife. She rose, with a kind greeting for the unexpected guest. Then seating herself again in her armchair, she pointed to an old stool with a broken leg. 'Sit there, good knight,' she said; 'only you must sit still, lest the broken leg prove too weak to bear you.'

Carrying the stool over beside the old woman, the knight placed it carefully on the floor and seated himself as he was bidden. As he sat there talking with the good old fisherman and his wife, it seemed to him almost as though he were their son, who had come home again after journeying in a distant land.

It was only when the knight began to speak of the wood that the fisherman grew restless and refused to listen.

'It were wiser, Sir Knight,' he said, 'not to talk of the wood at nightfall, or indeed to say much of it at any time.'

And then the old couple told their guest how simply they lived in the little cottage by the lake, and they in their turn listened eagerly while the knight told them of himself. He was named Sir Huldbrand, and he dwelt in his castle of Ringstetten, which stood near the source of the river Danube.

Now, as he talked or listened to the quiet tales of the old fisherman, the knight heard a strange sound that seemed to come from the direction of the window. Again and again it came, a strange sound as of water being dashed against the window-panes.

It was plain that the fisherman heard it too, for at each splash a frown crossed his good-natured face.

A louder splash, and a shower of water streamed through the loosely built window-frame into the kitchen.

Then the old man could sit still no longer. He hastened to the window, and opening it called out in an angry voice, 'Undine, cease these childish tricks. A stranger, and he a knight, is in our cottage.'

A low laugh answered him. Hearing it, the old man shut the window and sat down again, saying to his guest, 'Sir Knight, forgive this rude behaviour. Undine my foster-daughter is still only a child, although she is now nearly eighteen years of age. Yet her tricks are harmless, and she herself is full of kindness.'

'Ah,' said the old woman to her husband, 'to you, who are not with her save when the day's work is over, her pranks may seem harmless. But you would not talk so lightly of her ways were she by your side all day. Ever I must watch her, lest she spoil my baking, or undo my spinning or burn the soup. Nay—'

'It is true,' said the old man, interrupting his wife with a smile, 'it is true that you have the maiden by your side throughout the livelong day, while I have but the sea. Yet when the sea is rough

and breaks down my dykes I do not love it the less. Even so do you love the little one no less for all her tricks and tiresome ways.'

The old woman turned to her guest. 'Indeed, Sir Knight, he speaks truly. It is not possible to be angry with the maiden long.'

At that moment the door flew open, and she, the maiden of whom they spoke, entered the little kitchen. She was fairer far than any one the knight had ever seen.

'Father,' she cried, 'where is he, the stranger guest?'

Even as she spoke her eyes fell on the knight, who had sprung to his feet as she entered the cottage. He stood gazing in wonder at the marvellous beauty of the maiden.

But before he could greet her, she was at his side, trustingly looking up into his face. Then kneeling before him, she seized his hand and made him seat himself again on the broken old stool.

'You are beautiful, Sir Knight,' she said, 'but how did you come to this little cottage? Have you looked for us long before you could find us? Have you had to pass through the terrible forest ere you could reach us, Sir Knight?'

The knight would have told the maiden the story of his adventures in the wood, but Undine's foster-mother was already speaking, and her tones were loud and angry.

'Go, maiden, go get you to work, and trouble not the stranger with your questions.'

Then Undine, unashamed, drew a little footstool near to Huldbrand, and sitting down to her spinning, cried, 'I shall work here, close to the beautiful knight.'

The old fisherman took no notice of the wilful maiden, and began to speak of other things, hoping that the guest would forget his foster-daughter's questions.

But even had the knight been able to forget, Undine did not mean to sit there quietly, her questions unanswered.

Her sweet voice broke upon the silence. 'Our beautiful guest has not yet told me how he reached our cottage,' she said.

'It is even as you thought,' answered the knight. 'I journeyed through the haunted wood ere I found this safe and hospitable shelter.'

'Then tell me of your wonderful adventures,' demanded the maiden, 'for without these no one may pass through the forest.'

Huldbrand shuddered as he remembered the strange beings who had startled him as he rode through the wood. He glanced distrustfully toward the window. Were the grim figures there, peering at him through the window-pane? No, he could see nothing save the dim night light, which now closed them in.

The knight drew himself up, ashamed of his foolish fears, and turning toward the maiden, he was beginning to tell her of the wonders which had befallen him, when the fisherman hurriedly interrupted.

'Nay, now, Sir Knight,' he cried, 'tell not your tale until the hours of dark have passed.'

At her foster-father's words Undine sprang angrily from the footstool and stood before him. Her eyes flashed and grew larger, colder.

'You say to the stranger not to tell his tale, father,' she cried, 'you say to him not to answer me. But he shall speak, he shall, he shall!' And in her anger she stamped her little feet.

The knight wellnigh smiled as he watched the maiden's wrath, but the old man was grieved that the stranger should see the wayward behaviour of his foster-child, and he reproved her for her anger. The old woman also muttered her displeasure.

Then Undine slipped quickly toward the door of the little cottage. She did not choose to listen to these rebukes.

'I will not stay with you, for you do nothing but scold me, and you will not do anything that I wish,' she cried, and before they could reach her she had opened the door, and was away and out, out into the dark night.

CHAPTER II

UNDINE IS LOST

Huldbrand and the fisherman sprang after the maiden, but when they reached the door of the cottage and looked out into the night she was nowhere to be seen, nor could they catch the sound of her tiny feet to guide them whither she had fled.

The knight looked in astonishment at his host. Was the beautiful maiden only another of the wonderful beings who had bewildered him in the forest? Was she some lovely elf or sprite who had come but to vex them with her pranks?

But as he looked at the old man standing by his side, and saw the tears streaming from his eyes, he knew it was for no spirit of the wood that he thus grieved.

'Alas,' sighed the fisherman, 'this is not the first time that the maiden has treated us thus. It may be she will not return the livelong night, and until she returns it is not possible that we should close our eyes. For what terror may not seize upon her as she wanders hither and thither in the darkness.'

'We must follow her, father, follow her without delay!' cried the young knight.

'Nay,' answered the fisherman, 'my limbs are stiff. Though I knew whither she had fled, I could never follow with speed enough to reach her. Ever she would vanish as I drew near, for she is fleet, fleet as an arrow from the bow.'

'If we may not follow her, at least let us call and entreat her to return,' said the young knight, and without waiting for an answer he called, 'Undine! Undine!'

But the old man shook his head. 'It is useless to call,' he said, 'the little one will not heed your voice.' Yet still the knight's cry rang out into the night, 'Undine, dear Undine, I pray you return!'

No answer came back from the darkness, and at length Huldbrand returned with the fisherman to the cottage.

The old woman, who seemed little troubled by Undine's flight, had gone to bed and the fire was wellnigh out. But the fisherman, drawing the ashes together, placed wood on the top of them, and soon the fire blazed brightly.

Then in the light of the flames they sat and talked, yet they thought only of Undine. The window rattled. They raised their heads to listen. The rain fell in heavy drops, pitter, patter. They thought it was the tread of tiny feet.

'It is she, it is Undine!' they would cry, yet still the maiden did not come. Then they shook their heads sadly, but as they went on talking they listened still.

'It was fifteen years ago, on such a night of wind and rain, that she came,' murmured the old man. 'Our home was sad and desolate, for we had lost our own little child.'

'Ah,' said the knight, 'tell me how the beautiful maiden came to your little cottage.'

Now this is the story the fisherman told to the knight.

'It is fifteen years ago,' began the old man, 'since I went through the forest, hoping to sell my fish in the city beyond. I was alone, for my wife was at home watching our little babe. Our little babe was dear to us and very fair.

'In the evening, having sold all my fish, I went home through the haunted forest, nor did I fear its gloom, for the Lord was at my right hand.

'But no sooner had I left the wood than I saw my wife running toward me, while tears streamed from her eyes. She had dressed herself, I noticed, in black garments, and this she was not used to do. I felt sure that trouble had befallen us.

'"Where is our child, our little one?" I cried, though even as I spoke my voice was choked with sobs.

'"Our child is with God, the great Father," answered my wife.

'Then in the midst of her tears the poor mother told her sad tale.

"I took our child down to the edge of the lake, and there we played together, so happy, so merry. Suddenly the little one bent forward as though she saw something beautiful in the water. Then she smiled, and stretched out her tiny hands, and even as she did so, she slipped from my arms into the lake, and I saw her no more."

'That evening,' said the fisherman, 'my wife and I sat by our hearth in silence, we were too sad for words. Suddenly the door of our cottage flew open, and there before us, on the threshold, stood a little maiden, three or four years of age. Her eyes were blue and her hair was gold and she was clothed in beautiful garments.

'We gazed in wonder at the tiny vision. Who was she? From whence had she come? Was she only a magic child come to mock us in our loneliness, or was she a real, a living child?

'Then as we looked we saw that water trickled from her golden hair and that little streams were gathering at her tiny feet, as the water dripped and dripped from her beautiful clothing.

"She must have fallen into the lake," I said to my wife, "and in some strange way have wandered into our cottage. We have lost our own dear child, let us now do all we can to help this little one." Thus it came to pass that the little stranger slept in the cot in which until now our own babe had lain.

'When morning dawned my wife fed our tiny guest with bread and milk, and the little one looked upon us, and her blue eyes danced merrily, but never a word did she say.

'We asked her where her father and mother dwelt and how she had come to our cottage. But her only answer was some childish talk of crystal palaces and shining pearls. Even now indeed she speaks of things so marvellous that we know not what to think.

'After some days we asked her once again from whence she came. She told us that she had been on the sea with her mother, and had fallen from her arms into the water, nor had she known more until she awoke under the trees, close to our cottage, so well pleased with the fair shore that she felt no fear.

'Then we said, "Let us keep the little stranger, and care for her as we would have cared for our own lost child." We sent for a priest, who baptized her, giving her the name by which she called herself, though indeed it seemed no name for a Christian child.

"Undine," said the priest as he performed the holy rite, while she, the little one, stood before him gentle and sweet. No sooner, however, was the service ended than she grew wild, wilful as was her way. For it is true that my wife has had much trouble with the maiden—'

At that moment the knight interrupted the fisherman.

'Listen,' he cried, 'how the stream roars as it dashes past the window!'

Together they sprang to the door. The moon had risen, and the knight and the fisherman saw that the stream which ran from the wood had burst its banks. It was now rushing wildly along, carrying with it stones and roots of trees. As they looked, the clouds grew dark and crept across the face of the moon, the wind rose and lashed the water of the lake into great waves.

'Undine! Undine!' cried the two men together, but no answer reached them save the shrieking of the wind among the trees of the forest.

Then, careless of the storm, the fisherman and the knight rushed from the cottage in search of the maiden.

CHAPTER III

UNDINE IS FOUND

As Huldbrand rushed out into the night, followed by the fisherman, the storm seemed to rage yet more fiercely. The old man was soon left far behind in the search for the lost maiden.

The knight, battling bravely with the storm, hastened hither and thither, but all his efforts were vain. Undine was nowhere to be found.

And now, as the rain dashed down upon him and the wind hustled him, Huldbrand grew bewildered. The storm seemed to have changed the peaceful meadows into a weary wilderness, and even the maiden herself seemed to flit before him as a phantom spirit of the wind.

Could it all have been but a dream? Had the cottage, the fisherman and his wife been as unreal as the figures that had followed him in the haunted forest? No, that he would not believe, for even yet in the distance he could hear the faint echo of the fisherman's voice as he called out pitifully, 'Undine! Undine!' Now in his search the knight had reached the edge of the stream. The stream, as you know, had already overflowed its bank, and as the moon suddenly shone through the dark clouds, Huldbrand saw that the water was rushing back toward the forest. In this way the little bit of meadowland on which the fisherman's cottage stood was turned into an island.

A terrible thought struck the knight. Had Undine strayed into the fearful forest she could not now return to the cottage, save across the raging stream, nay, she might even now be surrounded by the spirits of the wood. She would be among them alone, helpless.

At once Huldbrand made up his mind to cross the torrent. He plunged into the water, and even as he did so he seemed to see on the other shore the figure of a tall white man, who nodded his head and mocked him as he struggled on. Huldbrand knew the tall white figure only too well. It was the one that had followed him as he journeyed through the forest.

Now; in his haste to find Undine, the knight was leaping from stone to stone, sometimes slipping into the water, then with a struggle placing his feet once again upon the stones. These, tossed by the rushing stream, gave no firm foothold to the knight, and he was forced to seize the branch of a fir-tree to help him across the dangerous passage.

While he was still in the midst of the current, he heard a sweet voice crying, 'Trust not the stream, trust it not, for it is full of craft!'

The knight knew the voice. It was that of the maiden for whom he sought. Yet though he peered eagerly through the gloom he could see no trace of her.

'See! you can find me now, Sir Knight, for the moon is shining clear,' cried the voice he longed to hear, and looking around him Huldbrand saw where Undine had found a shelter. It was on a little island, beneath the branches of a great tree, that the maiden sat. There was no terror of the storm in her eyes. She was even smiling happily as she nestled amid the sweet scented grass, safe from the fury of the storm.

A few quick strides and the knight had crossed the stream and stood by the side of the maiden. She bade him sit down on the grass, and then, whispering low, she said, 'You shall tell me your story here, Sir Knight, on this quiet island here, where no cross old people will disturb us, and where we are sheltered from the storm that rages beyond.'

Then Huldbrand forgot all about the old man who was still seeking for his child, forgot too all about the old woman who was alone in the little cottage by the lake, and he sat down to tell his tale as the maiden wished.

Meanwhile the fisherman had reached the brink of the stream, and great was his surprise to see the knight seated by the side of his lost child.

'You have found her, you have found my little one!' he cried reproachfully. 'Why did you not hasten to tell me she was found, Sir Knight?'

Then Huldbrand was ashamed, though, as he told the old man, it was but a little while since his search had ceased.

'Bring her without more delay to the mainland!' shouted the fisherman, when he had listened to the sorry excuse which was all the knight could offer.

But Undine had no wish to go home. She would rather stay with the knight in the forest than go back to the cottage, for there, so she said, no one would do as she wished.

Then, flinging her arms around the knight, she clung to him and begged him to stay with her in the forest.

The old fisherman wept as he heard her words, yet Undine did not seem to notice his tears. But the knight could not help seeing the old man's grief, and he was troubled.

'Undine,' he cried, 'the tears of your foster-father have touched my heart. We will return to him.'

The blue eyes of the maiden opened wide with surprise, yet she answered gently, 'Sir Knight, if this is indeed your will, we shall return to the mainland. There you must make the old man promise to listen in silence to all that you saw as you journeyed through the forest.'

'Only come, and you shall do all that you wish!' cried the fisherman, and he stretched out his arms and nodded his head, to show to the maiden how glad he was that she should do as she wished. But the knight shuddered as his eyes fell upon the fisherman. The nodding head, the white hair reminded him once again of the tall white man of the forest.

Shaking off his fears he lifted Undine in his arms and bore her across the stream. Already the storm was wellnigh over and the waters flowed more quietly. It now seemed to the knight only a few steps from the grassy plot where he had found the maiden to the green meadows among which the cottage stood.

'Now will I hear the brave knight's story,' cried the maiden, and the old people smiled and said they too would hear the tale.

And the sun rose slowly over the lake and the birds sang merrily on the wet and leafy trees, as the knight began his tale.

CHAPTER IV

THE KNIGHT'S STORY

'It must be about eight days ago now,' said the knight, 'since I left my castle of Ringstetten, and journeyed toward the city which lies beyond the haunted forest.

'The city was gay with lords and ladies who had come thither for the tournament which was then being held.

'I at once entered the lists, for my steed was strong and I myself was eager for the fray. Once, as I rested from the combat, my eyes fell upon a lady who was wondrous fair. She was looking down from a gallery upon the tournament.

'Bertalda was the name of the beautiful maiden, and she was the foster-child of a great duke. I knew that, as I again seized my lance, the lady's eyes followed me into the lists, and I fought even more bravely than before.

'In the evening a great festival was held, and here I met Bertalda, and danced with her; indeed, evening after evening we were together until the tournament drew to a close.'

As Huldbrand spoke these words he felt a sharp pain in his left hand. It was hanging by his side, and as he looked down to see what had caused the pain, he found that Undine had fastened in it her little pearly teeth.

The knight could see that the maiden's face was no longer smiling. She looked up at him, and there was sorrow in her large blue eyes as she whispered, 'Sir Knight, it is your own fault that I hurt you. I would not have you praise the lady Bertalda.' Then quickly, as though ashamed of her words, she hid her face in her hands.

As the knight went on with his story, his face was grave.

'It is true,' he said, 'that Bertalda was a lovely maiden, yet as I knew her better I found her ways were cold and proud. She pleased me less as the days passed by, though, as she looked upon me with favour, I begged that as a token of it she would give me a glove.

"You shall have it," answered she, "if you will go alone through the forest which men say is haunted, and bring me tidings of all that happens to you."

'I cared little for her glove, but I would not tarry to be asked a second time to go through the forest, lest the maiden should doubt my courage.'

'I thought Bertalda had loved you,' cried Undine, 'yet then had she not driven you from her into the haunted forest.'

The knight smiled at the maiden's words and went on with his tale.

'It was but yesterday morning that I set forth on my adventure. The sun shone bright, so bright that it was not easy to believe that evil was lurking in the shadows beneath the rustling leaves. "I shall soon return," I said to myself, as I plunged into the green shade.

'But amid the maze of trees it was not long ere I lost sight of the path by which I had entered the wood.

"It may be that I shall lose myself in this mighty forest," I thought, "but no other danger threatens me."

'I gazed up toward the sun, which had risen higher now than when first I entered the wood, and as I gazed I saw a black thing among the branches of a leafy oak.

'Was it a bear, I wondered, and my hand felt for the sword that hung by my side.

'But it was no bear, for ere long I heard a voice mocking me with rough and cruel words. "Aha, Sir Wiseacre," said the voice, "I am breaking twigs off these tall trees, so that at midnight I may light a fire in which to roast you." Then, before I could answer, the black thing grinned at me and rustled the branches, until my steed grew restless and at length galloped away.'

Undine looked at the knight, her blue eyes sparkling as she cried, 'But indeed the wicked creature did not dare to roast you, Sir Knight!'

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