

Sir Huldbrand's Wife

From "Undine,"

By the Baron de la Motte Fouqué

Undine is a beautiful maiden whose parentage is wrapped in mystery. She has been reared and cherished by a kind old couple before whose door she was found lying, a helpless waif, in her infancy. She dwells with these on a small peninsula amid the streams of a lonely forest.

At length a knight, Sir Huldbrand, is driven by a storm to seek refuge with Undine's foster-parents. He is hospitably entertained, and falls in love with Undine. They are united by a holy father who has also sought an asylum in the cottage. The day after the wedding, Undine asks her husband to carry her across to an islet, and there gives the following account of herself:—

"You must know, my loved lord, that there are beings in the elements that bear great resemblance to you, and yet but rarely appear before you. Wondrous salamanders play and glitter in the flames; meagre malicious gnomes dwell in the recesses of the earth; the sylphs inhabit the air, and dwell in the hidden shades of the dark grove; and water-spirits—an extensive race—are dispersed in the rivers, brooks, lakes, and oceans. Delightful is it to dwell in resounding arbours of crystal, to which the sun, the moon, and the stars convey the glorious light of heaven; under the umbrage of lofty trees of coral, bearing fruit of the most beautiful blue and red colour, which grow in those gardens; or to roam on the pure sand of the ocean, over beautiful shells, and to contemplate things grand and beautiful, which the ancient world possessed, and which the present is no longer worthy to enjoy—lofty and stately monuments that the floods have covered with their veil of silver, and bedewed with limpid waters, extracting from them moss-flowers and tufted reeds. Those that dwell there are benign and fair, mostly fairer than human beings. They that ply upon the water have frequently been so fortunate as to surprise some beautiful inhabitant of those regions when such a one rose above the wave and filled the air with the charming sound of her voice; and those men have been lavish in their reports. The inhabitants of those fair regions are known by the name of Undines, and you, my honoured lord, are now beholding a real Undine."

The knight would have persuaded himself his lovely wife was again indulging in one of her frolicsome humours, and that she took pleasure in bantering him with some singular and fanciful tale. Yet, strongly as he endeavoured to believe this, he found his effort unsuccessful. A thrilling emotion pervaded him, and, unable to utter a word, he continued to gaze, full of wonder and with unaverted eye, on the fair narrator. She, full of dejection, shook her head, heaved a deep sigh, and continued as follows

"We should be better off than you other human beings—for human beings we call ourselves, as indeed, in our outward appearance and shape, we are; but one great evil is coupled with our lot. We, and those of our kin in other elements, pass away and moulder into dust—the spirit as well as the body—so that not a vestige of us remains; and when you awake to a purer life, we shall have passed away as the waving flame, or the wind and the billow of the deep. This is because we are not endowed with a soul. The element that moves us, and frequently obeys us while we live always scatters our dust when we die, and we are thoughtlessly gay, like the nightingale, the goldfish, and other happy and beautiful creatures in Nature.

"But all strive to rise higher in their scale of being. Thus, my father, who is a potent prince of the waters in the Mediterranean, desired that his only daughter should imbibe a soul, even if it

should fall to her lot to have her share of the afflictions that are incident to those so highly blessed. But a soul can be obtained by one of our race only by means of being intimately connected by the bands of love with a mortal. I have gained it, and to you, my most honoured and beloved lord, I am indebted for the inestimable benefit; and I shall remain indebted to you, even if you make me wretched for the rest of my life. Alas! what would be my hapless condition, were you to shun and spurn me? Yet, by duplicity, I do not wish to hold you. If, then, it be your intention to reject me, do it now, and return alone to the other bank. I shall plunge into this brook, who is my uncle, and who, like an anchorite, delights in dwelling here in this forest, separated from his other relatives. But he is powerful, and dear to many great streams; and as he conducted me, a young and smiling child, to yonder cottage, so he will re-conduct me hence to my parents, an affectionate and enduring wife, endowed with an immortal soul.”

She would have said more, but Huldbrand embraced her with the tenderest emotion, and bore her back to the other bank. Then, first, amid tears and a thousand kisses, he swore that he would never forsake her, and accounted himself happier in possessing her than Pygmalion, the Grecian sculptor, when Venus, in pity, animated the fair damsel that himself had cut out of the stone. In unbounded trust Undine leaned on his arm, and wandered back to the cottage, feeling how little occasion she had to regret the crystal palaces of her father.

[At first Huldbrand and Undine live most happily together; but ere long they meet an old lady-love of Huldbrand’s, who sows dispeace. This maiden, Bertalda, has been brought up by a noble couple, but is, in reality, the child of the old people who reared Undine. Undine discovers this, and thinking to cause great joy, announces the fact. Bertalda is furious at her lowly parentage being proclaimed, and behaves so arrogantly that she disgusts her noble foster-parents by her conduct, and is turned out of doors by them. Undine takes pity on her, and invites her to stay at Ringstetten, Huldbrand’s castle. There Huldbrand falls in love with Bertalda, and neglects his wife more and more. Undine’s kindred are ever on the watch to avenge her wrongs; but their only mode of ingress is the castle well, and this Undine causes to be built up. At last, on a sailing expedition, the knight, annoyed at the molestation of Bertalda by the water-spirits, exclaims to Undine, in a burst of passion, “Confine yourself to their company in the fiend’s name, and do not longer molest us human beings, juggling sorceress that you are!” Undine vanishes, entreating her husband to remain faithful to her memory, that she may retain the power of protecting him from injury. The knight, at first, feels remorse, but ere long is consoled, and on the eve of marriage with Bertalda.]

Were I to offer a description of the nuptial festival at Castle Ringstetten you would think you beheld a joyous show covered with a pall of mourning—less a merry-making than a satire on the nothingness of human joy. It was not the fear of ghostly visitants, for they, as we know, had been secured against by Undine’s care. It was a curious gloom, caused by the absence of the gracious lady who ought really to have been presiding. Whenever a door opened, the eyes of all involuntarily turned in that direction, and if it chanced to be only a servant with a fresh supply of dainties, or the cup-bearer with a draught of still more costly wine, all again would look dejectedly to the ground, and the spark of mirth and jollity that would sometimes appear, were quickly extinguished in the falling tears of mournful recollection. The bride was, of all, the most thoughtless, and, consequently, the most contented. Yet, even to her, it appeared sometimes singular that she, with the wealth of myrtle and in richly embroidered attire, occupied the first place at the board, while Undine, stiff and cold, was lying on the ground of the Danube, or being borne by its current to the ocean.

Night was scarcely set in when the company dispersed—chased away by joyless depression and a boding sense of some impending evil. Bertalda retired with her maids, Huldbrand with his servants, to undress. . . .

Bertalda was intent on rallying her spirits, and to this effect caused a rich casket of jewels Huldbrand had given her, together with rich dresses and veils, to be spread before her, in order to choose from them the gayest and most costly one to wear on the following day. Her maids were glad of the opportunity to say pleasing things to their young mistress, and more especially to praise her beauty in the brightest colours imaginable. They became more and more animated in these contemplations, till at last Bertalda, casting a look in the mirror, sighed: “Ah, but do you see how the sun has injured my complexion here at the side of my neck!” They looked, and found it was as their fair mistress had said, but they called it a beautiful mole that tended to enhance the whiteness of her skin. Bertalda shook her head, and was of opinion that it must still be considered a blemish. “And this,” she said, sighing, “I might get rid of were not the castle well, from which I had such purifying water, unreasonably closed. If I had but a flask of it to-night.”

“Is that all?” said one of her attendants, and disappeared from the chamber. “Surely,” said Bertalda, agreeably surprised, “she will not take it into her head to have the stone removed this evening.” But the tread of men was already heard across the court, and from the window she saw the complaisant waiting-maid leading them straight to the well, the levers and other implements they carried on their shoulders showing plainly enough what they were going to do. “It is indeed my wish,” said Bertalda, smiling, “if only it does not occupy them too long.” And pleased at the thought that the least hint from her was now sufficient to obtain what formerly had been so sternly denied to her, she observed from her window the progress of their labour in the moonlit court.

The men pulled at the huge block, and one of them sighed, reflecting that they were destroying the work of their late mistress, who was still so dear to their remembrance.

But the matter was not nearly so difficult as they had expected. It was as though some power from within the well assisted them to remove the ponderous weight.

“One would imagine,” said the workmen, “that the water was really mounting in the well.”

The stone continued to rise, and with almost no exertion from the labourers, rolled, with a sullen sound, upon the pavement. But from the well a large column of water ascended with slow majestic motion, which, while they gazed, acquired the form and properties of a female figure clad in white, with a veil of the same colour depending from its head. It sobbed aloud, and clasped its hands with the most piteous action, and with lingering, unwilling steps, advanced towards the castle. The workmen fled terrified from the well, while the bride remained in horror at the window with her servants. When the figure came beneath her chamber, it looked upwards with melancholy gesture, and she seemed to recognise beneath the veil the features of Undine. Its gaze was but momentary; it passed on, yet slowly and reluctantly, as if dreading the limit of its travel. Bertalda called out to her attendants to wake Huldbrand, but not one dared to move from the spot, and even the bride herself was silent—alarmed by the very sound of her own voice.

While all stood thus at the window, motionless as statues, the strange wanderer had reached the castle gates. Onwards she went, up the well-known steps, through the familiar halls, always silent and always weeping. Alas! how different was her wandering through the castle once!

The knight had dismissed his servants—he stood half undressed before a large glass, with sad recollections of the past, and sadder forebodings of the future—the tapers burnt red and dim—there was a light tapping without upon the door as with a finger.

“It was thus,” he whispered to himself, “Undine once used playfully to announce her coming, but it is all phantasy; I must to the wedding chamber.”

“You must indeed, but into a dark and cold one,” said a soft, thrilling voice.

As he looked in the glass he saw the door gently open—the figure in white entered—and the bolts of the lock shot back again into their fastenings.

“They have opened the well,” it murmured; “and now I am here—and now you must die!”

His heart beat high, his breath came thick and short, he felt that it could not but be so; and covering his eyes, he exclaimed, “Make me not mad with terror in my dying hour—if you hide a countenance of terror beneath that veil, let me not see it—judge me without my looking on your face.”

“Alas!” replied Undine, “will you not look on me yet once again? I am now as when you first saw me in the cottage.”

“Oh, if it were so,” sighed Huldbrand, “and I could die upon your bosom—in your kisses.”

“It shall be so, my beloved,” she replied, and her veil fell back, and she smiled in all her beauty. Trembling with love and the fear of approaching death, he bent towards her. She kissed him with a heavenly kiss; but she loosed him no more from her embrace. She wept as she would weep away her soul. He dropped from her arms a lifeless corse.

[Undine, clad in white, and closely veiled, mingles with the funeral procession.]

The last prayer was prayed, the last handful of earth was heaped upon the grave. They arose, and the stranger was no longer there, but where she had knelt a silver spring burst from the sward, that gently flowed and flowed till it surrounded the tomb.