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ASLAUGA'S KNIGHT.

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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-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 colors the lists inclosing 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. O how many a bright suit or armor, how 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-stem 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 honor 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 armor 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 bear-skin, bordered with costly fur, but without any ornament of shining metal. His very helmet was covered with dark bear-skin, and instead of plumes, a mass of blood-red horse-hair 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 around, forced his way through the crowd of warriors, and, after he had spoken over the inclosure to hideous, bronze-colored 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 appareled, 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 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 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 honor alone is at stake, but the far higher honor of my lady."

"So also do I propose 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 the 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 honor 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 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, lead 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 of my breast-plate 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 honorable 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 armor 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 note:

"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 awhile 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-colored 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 attracted her in the jests and tales of the bronze-colored 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; 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 net-work 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-whispering, half-laughing, on the ground; then lifted the entranced Hildegardis on his steed, and galloped with her silently into the ever-deepening shades 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 graze them a 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 neighboring 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 awhile 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 rise 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.—Froda 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 was 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 honor 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 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 specter of the foe of the north—without is the battle: O merciful Heaven! whither shall I go!"

Then Froda approached to soothe the affrighted one, to speak some words of comfort to her, and to inquire after Edwald; but wild shouts, and the rattling of armor, 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. Luckily 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, while I endeavor 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 specter 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 under-wood; and the gleam disappeared. "Here, then," he whispered, endeavoring 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 specters 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, while Hildegardis hardly dared to draw her breath. Then was heard the tramp of an armed man, coming 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. 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 honorable 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 loe 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 astonished companion—how, in the darkness, he had mixed with the Bohemians and passed 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 skillfully and carefully arranged a couch of twigs and moss for Hildegardis; and when the wearied one, after uttering some gentle words of gratitude, had