

Absalom's Hair

By

Bjornstjerne Bjornson

Web-Books.Com

Absalom's Hair

CHAPTER 1	3
CHAPTER 2	18
CHAPTER 3	34
CHAPTER 4	53
CHAPTER 5	66

CHAPTER 1

Harald Kaas was sixty.

He had given up his free, uncriticised bachelor life; his yacht was no longer seen off the coast in summer; his tours to England and the south had ceased; nay, he was rarely to be found even at his club in Christiania. His gigantic figure was never seen in the doorways; he was failing.

Bandy-legged he had always been, but this defect had increased; his herculean back was rounded, and he stooped a little. His forehead, always of the broadest--no one else's hat would fit him--was now one of the highest, that is to say, he had lost all his hair, except a ragged lock over each ear and a thin fringe behind. He was beginning also to lose his teeth, which were strong though small, and blackened by tobacco; and now, instead of "deuce take it" he said "deush take it."

He had always held his hands half closed as though grasping something; now they had stiffened so that he could never open them fully. The little finger of his left hand had been bitten off "in gratitude" by an adversary whom he had knocked down: according to Harald's version of the story, he had compelled the fellow to swallow the piece on the spot.

He was fond of caressing the stump, and it often served as an introduction to the history of his exploits, which became greater and greater as he grew older and quieter.

His small sharp eyes were deep set and looked at one with great intensity. There was power in his individuality, and, besides shrewd sense, he possessed a considerable gift for mechanics. His boundless self-esteem was not devoid of greatness, and the emphasis with which both body and soul proclaimed themselves made him one of the originals of the country.

Why was he nothing more?

He lived on his estate, Hellebergene, whose large woods skirted the coast, while numerous leasehold farms lay along the course of the river. At one time this estate had belonged to the Kurt family, and had now come back to them, in so far as that Harald's father, as every one knew, was not a Kaas at all, but a Kurt; it was he who had got the estate together again; a book might be written about the ways and means that he had employed.

The house looked out over a bay studded with islands; farther out were more islands and the open sea. An immensely long building, raised on an old and massive foundation, its eastern wing barely half furnished, the western inhabited by Harald Kaas, who lived his curious life here.

These wings were connected by two covered galleries, one above the other, with stairs at each end.

Curiously enough, these galleries did not face the sea, that is, the south, but the fields and woods to the north. The portion of the house between the two wings was a neutral territory--namely, a large dining-room with a ballroom above it, neither of which was used in later years.

Harald Kaas's suite of rooms was distinguished from without by a mighty elk's head with its enormous antlers, which was set up over the gallery.

In the gallery itself were heads of bear, wolf, fox and lynx, with stuffed birds from land and sea. Skins and guns hung on the walls of the anteroom, the inner rooms were also full of skins and impregnated with the smell of wild animals and tobacco-smoke. Harald himself called it "Man-smell;" no one who had once put his nose inside could ever forget it.

Valuable and beautiful skins hung on the walls and covered the floors; his very bed was nothing else; Harald Kaas lay, and sat, and walked on skins, and each one of them was a welcome subject of conversation, for he had shot and flayed every single animal himself. To be sure, there were those who hinted that most of the skins had been bought from Brand and Company, of Bergen, and that only the stories were shot and flayed at home.

I for my part think that this was an exaggeration; but be that as it may, the effect was equally thrilling when Harald Kaas, seated in his log chair by the fireside, his feet on the bearskin, opened his shirt to show us the scars on his hairy chest (and what scars they were!) which had been made by the bear's teeth, when he had driven his knife, right up to the haft, into the monster's heart. All the queer tankards, and cupboards, and carved chairs listened with their wonted impassiveness.

Harald Kaas was sixty, when, in the month of July, he sailed into the bay accompanied by four ladies whom he had brought from the steamer--an elderly lady and three young ones, all related to him. They were to stay with him until August.

They occupied the upper storey. From it they could hear him walking about and grunting below them. They began to feel a little nervous. Indeed, three of them had had serious misgivings about accepting the invitation; and these misgivings were not diminished when, next morning, they saw Kaas composedly strolling up from the sea stark naked!

They screamed, and, gathering together, still in their nightgowns, held a council of war as to the advisability of leaving at once; but when one of them cried "You should not have called us, Aunt, and then we should not have seen him," they

could not help laughing, and therewith the whole affair ended. Certainly they were a little stiff at breakfast; but when Harold Kaas began a story about an old black mare of his which was in love with a young brown horse over at the Dean's, and which plunged madly if any other horse came near her, but, on the other hand, put her head coaxingly on one side and whinnied "like a dainty girl" whenever the parson's horse came that way--well, at that they had to give in, as well first as last.

If they had strayed here out of curiosity they must just put up with the "NIGHT side of nature," as Harald Kaas expressed it, with the stress on the first word.

For all that they were nearly frightened out of their wits the very next night, when he discharged his gun right under their windows. The aunt even asserted that he had shot through her open casement. She screamed loudly, and the others, starting from their sleep, were out on the floor before they knew where they were. Then they crouched in the windows and peeped out, although their aunt declared that they would certainly be shot--they really must see what it was.

Yes! there they saw him among the cherry and apple trees, gun in hand, and they could hear him swearing. In the greatest trepidation they crept back into bed again. Next morning they learned that he had shot at some night prowlers, one of whom had got "half the charge in his leg, that he had, Deush take him! It ain't the prowling I mind, but that he should prowl here. We bachelors will have no one poaching on our preserves."

The four ladies sat as stiff as four church candles, till at length one of them sprang up with a scream, the others joining in chorus.

The visitors were not bored; Harald Kaas dealt too much in the unexpected for that. There was a charm, too, in the great woods, where there had been no felling since he had come into the property, and there were merry walks by the riverside and plenty of fish in the river.

They bathed, they took delightful sails in the cutter and drives about the neighbourhood, though certainly the turn-out was none of the smartest.

The youngest of the girls, Kristen Ravn, presently became less eager to join in these expeditions. She had fallen in love with the disused east wing of the house, and there she spent many a long hour, alone by the open window, gazing out at the great lime-trees which stood straggling, gaunt, and mysterious.

"You ought to build a balcony here, out towards the sea," she said. "Look how the water glitters between the limes."

When once she had hit upon a plan, Kristen Ravn never relinquished it, and when she had suggested it some four or five times, he promised that it should be done. But on the heels of this scheme came another.

"Below the first balcony there must be another wider one," said she in her soft voice, "and it must have steps at each end down to the lawn--the lawn is so lovely just here."

The unheard-of presumption of her demand inoculated him with the idea, and at length he consented to this as well.

"The rooms must be refurnished," she gravely commanded. "The one next to the balcony which is to be built under here shall be in yellow pine, and the floor must be polished." She pointed with her long delicate hand. "ALL the floors must be polished. I will give you the design for the room above, I have thought it carefully out." And in imagination she papered the walls, arranged the furniture, and hung up curtains of wondrous patterns.

"I know, too, how the other rooms are to be done," she added. And she went from one to the other, remaining a little while in each. He followed, like an old horse led by the bridle.

Before their visit was half over he most coolly neglected three out of his four guests.

His deep-set eyes twinkled with the liveliest admiration whenever she approached. He sought in the faces of the others the admiration which he himself felt: he would amble round her like an old photographic camera which had the power of setting itself up.

But from the day when she took down from his bookshelf a French work on mechanics, a subject with which she was evidently acquainted and for which she declared that she had a natural aptitude, it was all over with him. From that day forward, if she were present, he effaced himself both in word and action.

In the mornings when he met her in one of her characteristic costumes he laughed softly, or gazed and gazed at her, and then glanced towards the others. She did not talk much, but every word that she uttered aroused his admiration. But he was most of all captivated when she sat quietly apart, heedless of every one: at such times he resembled an old parrot expectant of sugar.

His linen had always been snowy white, but beyond this he had taken no special pains with his toilet; but now he strutted about in a Tussock silk coat, which he had bought in Algiers, but had at once put aside because it was too tight--he looked like a clipped hedge in it.

Now, who was this lion-tamer of twenty-one, who, without in the least wishing to do so, unconsciously even (she was the quietest of the party), had made the monarch of the forest crouch at her feet and gaze at her in abject humility?

Look at her, as she sits there, with her loose shining hair of the prettiest shade of dark red; look at her broad forehead and prominent nose, but more than all at those large wondering eyes; look at her throat and neck, her tall slight figure; notice especially the Renaissance dress which she wears, its style and colour, and your curiosity will still remain unsatisfied, for she has an individuality all her own.

Kristen Ravn had lost her mother at her birth and her father when she was five years old. The latter left her a handsome fortune, with the express condition that the investments should not be changed, and that the income should be for her own use whether she married or not. He hoped by this means to form her character. She was brought up by three different members of her wide-branching family, a family which might more properly be termed a clan, although they had no common characteristics beyond a desire to go their own way.

When two Ravens meet they, as a rule, differ on every subject; but as a race they hold religiously together--indeed, in their eyes there is no other family which is "amusing," the favourite adjective of the Ravens.

Kristen had a receptive nature; she read everything, and remembered what she read; that is say, she had a logical mind, for a retentive memory implies an orderly brain. She was consequently NUMBER ONE in everything which she took up. This, coupled with the fact that she lived among those who regarded her somewhat as a speculation, and consequently flattered her, had early made an impression on her nature, quite as great, indeed, as the possession of money.

She was by no means proud, it was not in the Ravn nature to be so; but at ten years old she had left off playing; she preferred to wander in the woods and compose ballads. At twelve she insisted on wearing silk dresses, and, in the teeth of an aunt all curls and lace and with a terrible flow of words, she carried her point. She held herself erect and prim in her silks, and still remained NUMBER ONE. She composed verses about Sir Adge and Maid Else, about birds and flowers and sad things.

On reaching the age at which other girls, who have the means, begin to wear silk dresses, she left them off. She was tired, she said, of the "smooth and glossy."

She now grew enthusiastic for fine wool and expensive velvet of every shade. Dresses in the Renaissance style became her favourites, and the subject of her studies. She puffed out her bodices like those in Leonardo's and Rafael's portraits of women, and tried in other ways as well to resemble them.

She left off writing verses, and wrote stories instead; the style was good, though they were anything rather than spontaneous.

They were short, with a more or less clear point. Stories by a girl of eighteen do not as a general rule make a sensation, but these were particularly audacious. It was evident that their only object was to scandalise. Instead of her own name she used the nom-de-plume of "Puss." This, however, was only to postpone the announcement that the author who scandalised her readers most, and that at a time when every author strove to do so, was a girl of eighteen belonging to one of the first families in the country.

Soon every one knew that "Puss" was she of the tumbled red locks, "the tall Renaissance figure with the Titian hair."

Her hair was abundant, glossy, and slightly curling; she still wore it hanging loose over her neck and shoulders, as she had done as a child. Her great eyes seemed to look out upon a new world; but one felt that the lower part of her face was scarcely in harmony with the upper. The cheeks fell in a little; the prominent nose made the mouth look smaller than it actually was; her neck seemed only to lead the eye downward to her bosom, which almost appeared to caress her throat, especially when her head was bent forward, as was generally the case. And very beautiful the throat was, delicate in colour, superb in contour, and admirably set upon the bust. For this reason she could never find in her heart to hide this full white neck, but always kept it uncovered. Her finely moulded bust surmounting a slender waist and small hips, her rounded arms, her long hands, her graceful carriage, in her tightly-fitting dress, formed such a striking picture that one did more than look--one was obliged to study her, When the elegance and beauty of her dress were taken into account, one realised how much intelligence and artistic taste had here been exercised.

She was friendly in society, natural and composed, always occupied with something, always with that wondering expression. She spoke very little, but her words were always well chosen.

All this, and her general disposition, made people chary of opposing her, more especially those who knew how intelligent she was and how much knowledge she possessed.

She had no friends of her own, but her innumerable relations supplied her with society, gossip, and flattery, and were at once her friends and body-guard. She would have had to go abroad to be alone.

Among these relations she was a princess: they not only paid her homage, but had sworn by "Life and Death" that she must marry without more ado, which was absolutely against her wish.

From her childhood she had been laying by money, but the amount of her savings was far less than her relations supposed. This rather mythical fortune contributed not a little to the fact that "every one" was in love with her. Not only the bachelors of the family, that was a matter of course, but artists and amateurs, even the most blase, swarmed round her, *la jeunesse doree* (which is homely enough in Norway), without an exception. A living work of art, worth more or less money, piquante and admired, how each longed to carry her home, to gloat over her, to call her his own!

There was surely more intensity of feeling near her than near others, a losing of oneself in one only; that unattainable dream of the world-weary.

With her one could lead a thoroughly stylish life, full of art and taste and comfort. She was highly cultivated, and absolutely emancipated--our little country did not, in those days, possess a more alluring expression.

When face to face with her they were uncertain how to act, whether to approach her diffidently or boldly, smile or look serious, talk or be silent.

What these idle wooers gleaned from her stories, her characteristic dress, her wondering eyes, and her quiet dreaminess, was not the highest, but they expended their energy thereon; so that their unbounded discomfiture may be imagined when, in the autumn, the news spread that Fruken Kristen Ravn was married to Harald Kaas.

They burst into peals of derisive laughter they scoffed, they exclaimed; the only explanation they could offer was that they had too long hesitated to try their fortune.

There were others, who both knew and admired her, who were no less dismayed. They were more than disappointed--the word is too weak; to many of them it seemed simply deplorable. How on earth could it have happened? Every one, herself excepted, knew that it would ruin her life.

On Kristen Ravn's independent position, her strong character, her rare courage, on her knowledge, gifts, and energy, many, especially women, had built up a future for the cause of Woman. Had she not already written fearlessly for it? Her tendency towards eccentricity and paradox would soon have worn off, they thought, as the struggle carried her forward, and at last she might have become one of the first champions of the cause. All that was noblest and best in Kristen must predominate in the end.

And now the few who seek to explain life's perplexities rather than to condemn them discovered--Some of them, that the defiant tone of her writings and her love of opposition bespoke a degree of vanity sufficient to have led her into fallacy. Others maintained that hers was essentially a romantic nature which might cause her to form a false estimate both of her own powers and of the circumstances of life. Others, again, had heard something of how this husband and wife lived, one in each wing of the house, with different staffs of servants, and with separate incomes; that she had furnished her side in her own way, at her own expense, and had apparently conceived the idea of a new kind of married life. Some people declared that the great lime-trees near the mansion at Hellebergene were alone responsible for the marriage. They sougled so wondrously in the summer evenings, and the sea beneath their branches told such enthralling stories. Those grand old woods, the like of which were hardly to be found in impoverished Norway, were far dearer to her than was her husband. Her imagination had been taken captive by the trees, and thus Harald Kaas had taken HER. The estate, the climate, the exclusive possession of her part of the

Thank You for previewing this eBook

You can read the full version of this eBook in different formats:

- HTML (Free /Available to everyone)
- PDF / TXT (Available to V.I.P. members. Free Standard members can access up to 5 PDF/TXT eBooks per month each month)
- Epub & Mobipocket (Exclusive to V.I.P. members)

To download this full book, simply select the format you desire below

