

Undine

By

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Dedication

Undine, thou image fair and blest,
Since first thy strange mysterious glance,
Shone on me from some old romance,
How hast thou sung my heart to rest!

How hast thou clung to me and smiled,
And wouldest, whispering in my ear,
Give vent to all thy miseries drear,
A little half-spoiled timorous child!

Yet hath my zither caught the sound,
And breathed from out its gates of gold,
Each gentle word thy lips have told,
Until their fame is spread around.

And many a heart has loved thee well,
In spite of every wayward deed,
And many a one will gladly read,
The pages which thy history tell.

I catch the whispered hope expressed,
That thou should'st once again appear;
So cast aside each doubt and fear,
And come, Undine! thou spirit blest!

Greet every noble in the hall,
And greet 'fore all, with trusting air,
The beauteous women gathered there;
I know that thou art loved by all.

And if one ask thee after me,
Say: he's a true and noble knight,
Fair woman's slave in song and fight
And in all deeds of chivalry.

UNDINE.

1. How The Knight Came To The Fisherman

There was once, it may be now many hundred years ago, a good old fisherman, who was sitting one fine evening before his door, mending his nets. The part of the country in which he lived was extremely pretty. The greensward, on which his cottage stood, ran far into the lake, and it seemed as if it was from love for the blue clear waters that the tongue of land had stretched itself out into them, while with an equally fond embrace the lake had encircled the green pasture rich with waving grass and flowers, and the refreshing shade of trees. The one welcomed the other, and it was just this that made each so beautiful. There were indeed few human beings, or rather none at all, to be met with on this pleasant spot, except the fisherman and his family. For at the back of this little promontory there lay a very wild forest, which, both from its gloom and pathless solitude as well as from the wonderful creatures and illusions with which it was said to abound, was avoided by most people except in cases of necessity.

The pious old fisherman, however, passed through it many a time undisturbed, when he was taking the choice fish, which he had caught at his beautiful home, to a large town situated not far from the confines of the forest. The principal reason why it was so easy for him to pass through this forest was because the tone of his thoughts was almost entirely of a religious character, and besides this, whenever he set foot upon the evil reputed shades, he was wont to sing some holy song, with a clear voice and a sincere heart.

While sitting over his nets this evening, unsuspecting of any evil, a sudden fear came upon him, at the sound of a rustling in the gloom of the forest, as of a horse and rider, the noise approaching nearer and nearer to the little promontory. All that he had dreamed, in many a stormy night, of the mysteries of the forest, now flashed at once through his mind; foremost of all, the image of a gigantic snow-white man, who kept unceasingly nodding his head in a portentous manner. Indeed, when he raised his eyes toward the wood it seemed to him as if he actually saw the nodding man approaching through the dense foliage. He soon, however, reassured himself, reflecting that nothing serious had ever befallen him even in the forest itself, and that upon this open tongue of land the evil spirit would be still less daring in the exercise of his power. At the same time he repeated aloud a text from the Bible with all his heart, and this so inspired him with courage that he almost smiled at the illusion he had allowed to possess him. The white nodding man was suddenly transformed into a brook long familiar to him, which ran foaming from the forest and discharged itself into the lake. The noise, however, which he had heard, was caused by a knight beautifully apparelled, who, emerging from the deep shadows of the wood, came riding toward the cottage. A scarlet mantle was thrown over his purple gold-embroidered doublet; a red and violet plume waved from his golden-colored head-gear; and a beautifully and richly ornamented sword flashed from his shoulder-belt. The white steed that bore the knight was more slenderly formed than war-horses generally are, and

he stepped so lightly over the turf that this green and flowery carpet seemed scarcely to receive the slightest injury from his tread.

The old fisherman did not, however, feel perfectly secure in his mind, although he tried to convince himself that no evil was to be feared from so graceful an apparition; and therefore he politely took off his hat as the knight approached, and remained quietly with his nets.

Presently the stranger drew up, and inquired whether he and his horse could have shelter and care for the night. "As regards your horse, good sir," replied the fisherman. "I can assign him no better stable than this shady pasture, and no better provender than the grass growing on it. Yourself, however, I will gladly welcome to my small cottage, and give you supper and lodging as good as we have." The knight was well satisfied with this; he alighted from his horse, and, with the assistance of the fisherman, he relieved it from saddle and bridle, and turned it loose upon the flowery green. Then addressing his host, he said: "Even had I found you less hospitable and kindly disposed, my worthy old fisherman, you would nevertheless scarcely have got rid of me to-day, for, as I see, a broad lake lies before us, and to ride back into that mysterious wood, with the shades of evening coming on, heaven keep me from it!"

"We will not talk too much of that," said the fisherman, and he led his guest into the cottage.

There, beside the hearth, from which a scanty fire shed a dim light through the cleanly-kept room, sat the fisherman's aged wife in a capacious chair. At the entrance of the noble guest she rose to give him a kindly welcome, but resumed her seat of honor without offering it to the stranger. Upon this the fisherman said with a smile: "You must not take it amiss of her, young sir, that she has not given up to you the most comfortable seat in the house; it is a custom among poor people, that it should belong exclusively to the aged."

"Why, husband," said the wife, with a quiet smile, "what can you be thinking of? Our guest belongs no doubt to Christian men, and how could it come into the head of the good young blood to drive old people from their chairs? Take a seat, my young master," she continued, turning toward the knight; "over there, there is a right pretty little chair, only you must not move about on it too roughly, for one of its legs is no longer of the firmest." The knight fetched the chair carefully, sat down upon it good-humoredly, and it seemed to him as if he were related to this little household, and had just returned from abroad.

The three worthy people now began to talk together in the most friendly and familiar manner. With regard to the forest, about which the knight made some inquiries, the old man was not inclined to be communicative; he felt it was not a subject suited to approaching night, but the aged couple spoke freely of their home and former life, and listened also gladly when the knight recounted to them his travels, and told them that he had a castle near the source of the Danube, and that his name was Sir Huldbrand of Ringstetten. During the conversation, the stranger had already occasionally heard a splash

against the little low window, as if some one were sprinkling water against it. Every time the noise occurred, the old man knit his brow with displeasure; but when at last a whole shower was dashed against the panes, and bubbled into the room through the decayed casement, he rose angrily, and called threateningly from the window: "Undine! will you for once leave off these childish tricks? and to-day, besides, there is a stranger knight with us in the cottage." All was silent without, only a suppressed laugh was audible, and the fisherman said as he returned: "You must pardon it in her, my honored guest, and perhaps many a naughty trick besides; but she means no harm by it. It is our foster-child, Undine, and she will not wean herself from this childishness, although she has already entered her eighteenth year. But, as I said, at heart she is thoroughly good."

"You may well talk," replied the old woman, shaking her head; "when you come home from fishing or from a journey, her frolics may then be very delightful, but to have her about one the whole day long, and never to hear a sensible word, and instead of finding her a help in the housekeeping as she grows older, always to be obliged to be taking care that her follies do not completely ruin us, that is quite another thing, and the patience of a saint would be worn out at last."

"Well, well," said her husband with a smile, "you have your troubles with Undine, and I have mine with the lake. It often breaks away my dams, and tears my nets to pieces, but for all that, I have an affection for it, and so have you for the pretty child, in spite of all your crosses and vexations. Isn't it so?"

"One can't be very angry with her, certainly," said the old woman, and she smiled approvingly.

Just then the door flew open, and a beautiful, fair girl glided laughing into the room, and said "You have only been jesting, father, for where is your guest?"

At the same moment, however, she perceived the knight, and stood fixed with astonishment before the handsome youth, Huldbrand was struck with her charming appearance, and dwelt the more earnestly on her lovely features, as he imagined it was only her surprise that gave him this brief enjoyment, and that she would presently turn from his gaze with increased bashfulness. It was, however, quite otherwise; for after having looked at him for some time, she drew near him confidingly, knelt down before him, and said, as she played with a gold medal which he wore on his breast, suspended from a rich chain: "Why, you handsome, kind guest, how have you come to our poor cottage at last? Have you been obliged then to wander through the world for years, before you could find your way to us? Do you come out of that wild forest, my beautiful knight?" The old woman's reproof allowed him no time for reply. She admonished the girl to stand up and behave herself and to go to her work. Undine, however, without making any answer drew a little footstool close to Huldbrand's chair, sat down upon it with her spinning, and said pleasantly: "I will work here." The old man did as parents are wont to do with spoiled children. He affected to observe nothing of Undine's naughtiness and was beginning to talk of something else. But this the girl would not let him do; she

said: "I have asked our charming guest whence he comes, and he has not yet answered me."

"I come from the forest, you beautiful little vision," returned Huldbrand; and she went on to say:--

"Then you must tell me how you came there, for it is usually so feared, and what marvellous adventures you met with in it, for it is impossible to escape without something of the sort."

Huldbrand felt a slight shudder at this remembrance, and looked involuntarily toward the window, for it seemed to him as if one of the strange figures he had encountered in the forest were grinning in there; but he saw nothing but the deep dark night, which had now shrouded everything without. Upon this he composed himself and was on the point of beginning his little history, when the old man interrupted him by saying: "Not so, sir knight! this is no fit hour for such things." Undine, however, sprang angrily from her little stool, and standing straight before the fisherman with her fair arms fixed in her sides, she exclaimed: "He shall not tell his story, father? He shall not? but it is my will. He shall! He shall in spite of you!" and thus saying she stamped her pretty little foot vehemently on the floor, but she did it all with such a comically graceful air that Huldbrand now felt his gaze almost more riveted upon her in her anger than before in her gentleness.

The restrained wrath of the old man, on the contrary, burst forth violently. He severely reproved Undine's disobedience and unbecoming behavior to the stranger, and his good old wife joined with him heartily. Undine quickly retorted: "If you want to chide me, and won't do what I wish, then sleep alone in your old smoky hut!" and swift as an arrow she flew from the room, and fled into the dark night.

2. In What Way Undine Had Come To The Fisherman

Huldbrand and the fisherman sprang from their seats and were on the point of following the angry girl. Before they reached the cottage door, however, Undine had long vanished in the shadowy darkness without, and not even the sound of her light footstep betrayed the direction of her flight. Huldbrand looked inquiringly at his host; it almost seemed to him as if the whole sweet apparition, which had suddenly merged again into the night, were nothing else than one of that band of the wonderful forms which had, but a short time since, carried on their pranks with him in the forest. But the old man murmured between his teeth: "This is not the first time that she has treated us in this way. Now we have aching hearts and sleepless eyes the whole night through; for who knows, that she may not some day come to harm, if she is thus out alone in the dark until daylight."

"Then let us for God's sake follow her," cried Huldbrand, anxiously.

"What would be the good of it?" replied the old man. "It would be a sin were I to allow you, all alone, to follow the foolish girl in the solitary night, and my old limbs would not overtake the wild runaway, even if we knew in what direction she had gone."

"We had better at any rate call after her, and beg her to come back," said Huldbrand; and he began to call in the most earnest manner: "Undine! Undine! Pray come back!" The old man shook his head, saying, that all that shouting would help but little, for the knight had no idea how self-willed the little truant was. But still he could not forbear often calling out with him in the dark night: "Undine! Ah! dear Undine, I beg you to come back--only this once!"

It turned out, however, as the fisherman had said. No Undine was to be heard or seen, and as the old man would on no account consent that Huldbrand should go in search of the fugitive, they were at last both obliged to return to the cottage. Here they found the fire on the hearth almost gone out, and the old wife, who took Undine's flight and danger far less to heart than her husband, had already retired to rest. The old man blew up the fire, laid some dry wood on it, and by the light of the flame sought out a tankard of wine, which he placed between himself and his guest. "You, sir knight," said he, "are also anxious about that silly girl, and we would both rather chatter and drink away a part of the night than keep turning round on our rush mats trying in vain to sleep. Is it not so?" Huldbrand was well satisfied with the plan; the fisherman obliged him to take the seat of honor vacated by the good old housewife, and both drank and talked together in a manner becoming two honest and trusting men. It is true, as often as the slightest thing moved before the windows, or even at times when nothing was moving, one of the two would look up and say: "She is coming!" Then they would be silent for a moment or two, and as nothing appeared, they would shake their heads and sigh and go on with their talk.

As, however, neither could think of anything but of Undine, they knew of nothing better to do than that the old fisherman should tell the story, and the knight should hear, in what manner Undine had first come to the cottage. He therefore began as follows:--

"It is now about fifteen years ago that I was one day crossing the wild forest with my goods, on my way to the city. My wife had stayed at home, as her wont is, and at this particular time for a very good reason, for God had given us, in our tolerably advanced age, a wonderfully beautiful child. It was a little girl; and a question already arose between us, whether for the sake of the new-comer, we would not leave our lovely home that we might better bring up this dear gift of heaven in some more habitable place. Poor people indeed cannot do in such cases as you may think they ought, sir knight, but, with God's blessing, every one must do what he can. Well, the matter was tolerably in my head as I went along. This slip of land was so dear to me, and I shuddered when, amid the noise and brawls of the city, I thought to myself, 'In such scenes as these, or in one not much more quiet, thou wilt also soon make thy abode!' But at the same time I did not murmur against the good God; on the contrary, I thanked him in secret for the new-born babe; I should be telling a lie, too, were I to say, that on my journey through the wood, going or returning, anything befell me out of the common way, and at that time I had never seen any of its fearful wonders. The Lord was ever with me in those mysterious shades."

As he spoke he took his little cap from his bald head, and remained for a time occupied with prayerful thoughts; he then covered himself again, and continued:--

"On this side the forest, alas! a sorrow awaited me. My wife came to meet me with tearful eyes and clad in mourning. 'Oh! Good God!' I groaned, 'where is our dear child? speak!--' 'With him on whom you have called, dear husband,' she replied; and we now entered the cottage together weeping silently. I looked around for the little corpse, and it was then only that I learned how it had all happened."

"My wife had been sitting with the child on the edge of the lake, and as she was playing with it, free of all fear and full of happiness, the little one suddenly bent forward, as if attracted by something very beautiful in the water. My wife saw her laugh, the dear angel, and stretch out her little hands; but in a moment she had sprung out of her mother's arms, and had sunk beneath the watery mirror. I sought long for our little lost one; but it was all in vain; there was no trace of her to be found."

"The same evening we, childless parents, were sitting silently together in the cottage; neither of us had any desire to talk, even had our tears allowed us. We sat gazing into the fire on the hearth. Presently, we heard something rustling outside the door: it flew open, and a beautiful little girl three or four years old, richly dressed, stood on the threshold smiling at us. We were quite dumb with astonishment, and I knew not at first whether it were a vision or a reality. But I saw the water dripping from her golden hair and rich garments, and I perceived that the pretty child had been lying in the water, and needed help. 'Wife,' said I, 'no one has been able to save our dear child; yet let us at any rate do for others what would have made us so blessed.' We undressed the little one, put her to

bed, and gave her something warm; at all this she spoke not a word, and only fixed her eyes, that reflected the blue of the lake and of the sky, smilingly upon us. Next morning we quickly perceived that she had taken no harm from her wetting, and I now inquired about her parents, and how she had come here. But she gave a confused and strange account. She must have been born far from here, not only because for these fifteen years I have not been able to find out anything of her parentage, but because she then spoke, and at times still speaks, of such singular things that such as we are cannot tell but that she may have dropped upon us from the moon. She talks of golden castles, of crystal domes, and heaven knows what besides. The story that she told with most distinctness was, that she was out in a boat with her mother on the great lake, and fell into the water, and that she only recovered her senses here under the trees where she felt herself quite happy on the merry shore. We had still a great misgiving and perplexity weighing on our heart. We had, indeed, soon decided to keep the child we had found and to bring her up in the place of our lost darling; but who could tell us whether she had been baptized or not? She herself could give us no information on the matter. She generally answered our questions by saying that she well knew she was created for Gods praise and glory, and that she was ready to let us do with her whatever would tend to His honor and glory."

"My wife and I thought that if she were not baptized, there was no time for delay, and that if she were, a good thing could not be repeated too often. And in pursuance of this idea, we reflected upon a good name for the child, for we now were often at a loss to know what to call her. We agreed at last that Dorothea would be the most suitable for her, for I once heard that it meant a gift of God, and she had surely been sent to us by God as a gift and comfort in our misery. She, on the other hand, would not hear of this, and told us that she thought she had been called Undine by her parents, and that Undine she wished still to be called. Now this appeared to me a heathenish name, not to be found in any calendar, and I took counsel therefore of a priest in the city. He also would not hear of the name of Undine, but at my earnest request he came with me through the mysterious forest in order to perform the rite of baptism here in my cottage. The little one stood before us so prettily arrayed and looked so charming that the priest's heart was at once moved within him, and she flattered him so prettily, and braved him so merrily, that at last he could no longer remember the objections he had had ready against the name of Undine. She was therefore baptized 'Undine,' and during the sacred ceremony she behaved with great propriety and sweetness, wild and restless as she invariably was at other times. For my wife was quite right when she said that it has been hard to put up with her. If I were to tell you"--

The knight interrupted the fisherman to draw his attention to a noise, as of a rushing flood of waters, which had caught his ear during the old man's talk, and which now burst against the cottage- window with redoubled fury. Both sprang to the door. There they saw, by the light of the now risen moon, the brook which issued from the wood, widely overflowing its banks, and whirling away stones and branches of trees in its sweeping course. The storm, as if awakened by the tumult, burst forth from the mighty clouds which passed rapidly across the moon; the lake roared under the furious lashing of the wind; the trees of the little peninsula groaned from root to topmost bough, and bent, as if reeling, over the surging waters. "Undine! for Heaven's sake, Undine." cried the two men

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