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By

Jules Verne

CHAPTER I.

"What time is it?" inquired Dame Hansen, shaking the ashes from her pipe, the last curling rings from which were slowly disappearing between the stained rafters overhead.

"Eight o'clock, mother," replied Hulda.

"It isn't likely that any travelers will come to-night. The weather is too stormy."

"I agree with you. At all events, the rooms are in readiness, and if any one comes, I shall be sure to hear them."

"Has your brother returned?"

"Not yet."

"Didn't he say he would be back to-night?"

"No, mother. Joel went to take a traveler to Lake Tinn, and as he didn't start until very late, I do not think he can get back to Dal before to-morrow."

"Then he will spend the night at Moel, probably."

"Yes; unless he should take it into his head to go on to Bamble to see Farmer Helmboe."

"And his daughter Siegfrid."

"Yes. Siegfrid, my best friend, whom I love like a sister!" replied the young girl, smiling.

"All, well, Hulda, shut up the house, and let's go to bed."

"You are not ill, are you, mother?"

"No; but I want to be up bright and early to-morrow morning. I must go to Moel."

"What for?"

"Why, we must be laying in our stock of provisions for the coming summer, and--"

"And I suppose the agent from Christiania has come down with his wagon of wines and provisions."

"Yes; Lengling, the foreman at the saw-mill, met him this afternoon, and informed me of the fact as he passed. We have very little left in

the way of ham and smoked salmon, and I don't want to run any risk of being caught with an empty larder. Tourists are likely to begin their excursions to the Telemark almost any day now; especially, if the weather should become settled, and our establishment must be in a condition to receive them. Do you realize that this is the fifteenth of April?"

"The fifteenth of April!" repeated the young girl, thoughtfully.

"Yes, so to-morrow I must attend to these matters," continued Dame Hansen. "I can make all my purchases in two hours, and I will return with Joel in the kariol."

"In case you should meet the postman, don't forget to ask him if there is a letter for us--"

"And especially for you. That is quite likely, for it is a month since you heard from Ole."

"Yes, a month--a whole month."

"Still, you should not worry, child. The delay is not at all surprising. Besides, if the Moel postman has nothing for you, that which didn't come by the way of Christiania may come by the way of Bergen, may it not?"

"Yes, mother," replied Hulda. "But how can I help worrying, when I think how far it is from here to the Newfoundland fishing banks. The whole broad Atlantic to cross, while the weather continues so bad. It is almost a year since my poor Ole left me, and who can say when we shall see him again in Dal?"

"And whether we shall be here when he returns," sighed Dame Hansen, but so softly that her daughter did not hear the words.

Hulda went to close the front door of the inn which stood on the Vesfjorddal road; but she did not take the trouble to turn the key in the lock. In hospitable Norway, such precautions are unnecessary. It is customary for travelers to enter these country inns either by night or by day without calling any one to open the door; and even the loneliest habitations are safe from the depredations of thieves or assassins, for no criminal attempts against life or property ever disturb the peace of this primitive land.

The mother and daughter occupied two front rooms on the second story of the inn--two neat and airy, though plainly furnished rooms. Above them, directly under the sloping roof, was Joel's chamber, lighted by a window incased in a tastefully carved frame-work of pine.

From this window, the eye, after roaming over the grand mountain horizon, returned with delight to the narrow valley through which flowed the Maan, which is half river, half torrent.

A wooden staircase, with heavy balusters and highly polished steps, led from the lower hall to the floors above, and nothing could be more neat and attractive than the whole aspect of this establishment, in which the travelers found a comfort that is rare in Norwegian inns.

Hulda and her mother were in the habit of retiring early when they were alone, and Dame Hansen had already lighted her candle, and was on her way upstairs, when a loud knocking at the door made them both start.

"Dame Hansen! Dame Hansen!" cried a voice.

Dame Hansen paused on the stairs.

"Who can have come so late?" she exclaimed.

"Can it be that Joel has met with an accident?" returned Hulda, quickly.

And she hastened toward the door.

She found a lad there--one of the young rascals known as skydskarl, that make a living by clinging to the back of kariols, and taking the horse back when the journey is ended.

"What do you want here at this hour?" asked Hulda.

"First of all to bid you good-evening," replied the boy, mischievously.

"Is that all?"

"No; that isn't all; but a boy oughtn't to forget his manners, ought he?"

"You are right. But who sent you?"

"Your brother Joel."

"And what for?" asked Dame Hansen, advancing to the door with the slow and measured tread that is a characteristic of the inhabitants of Norway. There is quicksilver in the veins of their soil, but little or none in the veins of their bodies.

The reply had evidently caused the mother some anxiety, however, for she added hastily:

"Has anything happened to my son?"

"No, but the Christiania postman gave him a letter, and--"

"A letter from Drammen?" repeated Dame Hansen, in a lower tone.

"I don't know about that," replied the youth. "All I do know is, that Joel can't get home before to-morrow, and he sent me here to deliver the letter."

"It is important then?"

"I should judge so."

"Hand it here," said Dame Hansen, in a tone that betrayed keen anxiety.

"Here it is, clean and not wrinkled in the least. But the letter is not for you."

Dame Hansen seemed to breathe more freely.

"Then who is it for?" she asked.

"For your daughter."

"For me!" cried Hulda. "It is a letter from Ole! I am sure it is--a letter that came by way of Christiania. My brother did not want me to be kept waiting."

Hulda had snatched the letter from the boy's hand, and now taking it to the table upon which her mother had deposited the candle, she examined the address.

"Yes, it is from him. It is certainly from him! Heaven grant that he writes to announce the speedy return of the 'Viking!'"

"Won't you come in?" said Dame Hansen, turning to the boy.

"Only for a minute. I must get back home to-night, for I am to go with a kariol to-morrow morning."

"Very well. Tell Joel, from me, that I expect to go to Moel to-morrow, and that he must wait for me there."

"To-morrow evening?"

"No; to-morrow morning, and he must not leave Moel until he sees me. We will return to Dal together."

"Very well, Dame Hansen."

"Won't you take a drop of brandevin?"

"With pleasure."

The boy approached the table, and Dame Hansen handed him a glass of the beverage which is such a powerful protection against the evening fogs. It is needless to say that he drained the glass, then,

"God-aften!" he said.

"God-aften, my son!"

This is the Norwegian good-night. It was simply spoken, without even an inclination of the head, and the lad instantly departed, without seeming to mind in the least the long walk that he had before him. The sound of his footsteps soon died away beneath the trees that border the swiftly flowing river.

Hulda still stood gazing at Ole's letter. Think of it! This frail envelope must have crossed the broad ocean to reach her, the broad ocean in which the rivers of western Norway lose themselves. She examined the different postmarks. Though mailed on the 15th of March, the missive had not reached Dal until the 15th of April. Why! a month had already elapsed since the letter was written! How many things might have happened in a month on the shores of Newfoundland! Was it not still winter, the dangerous season of equinoxes? Are not these fishing banks the most dangerous in the world, swept by terrible gales from the North Pole? A perilous and arduous vocation was this business of fishing which Ole followed! And if he followed it was it not that she, his betrothed, whom he was to marry on his return, might reap the

benefits?

Poor Ole! What did he say in this letter? Doubtless that he loved Hulda as faithfully and truly as Hulda loved him, that they were united in thought, in spite of the distance that separated them, and that he longed for the day of his return to Dal.

Yes, he said all this, Hulda was sure of it. But perhaps he might add that the day of his return was near at hand--that the fishing cruise which had enticed the inhabitants of Bergen so far from their native land, was nearly at an end. Perhaps Ole would tell her that the "Viking" had finished taking aboard her cargo, that she was about to sail, and that the last days of April would not pass without a blissful meeting in the pleasant home at Vesfjorddal. Perhaps, too, he would assure her, at last, that she might safely appoint the day for the pastor to come to Moel to unite them in the little chapel whose steeple rose from a small grove not a hundred yards from Dame Hansen's inn.

To learn all this, it might only be necessary to break the seal, draw out Ole's letter, and read it, through the tears of joy or sorrow that its contents would be sure to bring to Hulda's eyes, and doubtless more than one impatient girl of the south, or even of Denmark or Holland, would already have known all! But Hulda was in a sort of a dream, and dreams terminate only when God chooses to end them, and how often one regrets them, so bitter is the reality.

"Is it really a letter from Ole that your brother has sent you, my daughter?" inquired Dame Hansen.

"Yes; I recognize the handwriting."

"Well, are you going to wait until to-morrow to read it?"

Hulda took one more look at the envelope, then, after slowly breaking the seal, she drew out the carefully written letter, which read as follows:

"Saint-Pierre-Miquelon, March 17th, 1862.

"My Dearest Hulda,--You will hear, with pleasure, that our fishing venture has prospered, and that it will be concluded in a few days. Yes; we are nearing the end of the season, and after a year's absence how glad I shall be to return to Dal and find myself in the midst of the only friends I have in the world--yours and mine.

"My share in the profits of the expedition amounts to quite a handsome sum, which will start us in housekeeping. Messrs. Help Bros., the owners of the ship, have been informed that the 'Viking' will probably return by the 15th or 20th of May; so you may expect to see me at that time; that is to say, in a

few weeks at the very longest.

"My dear Hulda, I trust to find you looking even prettier than at my departure, and in the best of health, you and your mother as well, also that hardy, brave comrade, my cousin Joel, your brother, who asks nothing better than to become mine.

"On receipt of this, give my very best respects to Dame Hansen--I can see her now, sitting in her wooden arm-chair by the old stove in the big hall--and tell her I love her with a twofold love, for she is my aunt as well as your mother.

"Above all, don't take the trouble to come to Bergen to meet me, for it is quite possible that the 'Viking' will arrive at an earlier date than I have mentioned. However that may be, my dear Hulda can count upon seeing me at Dal twenty-four hours after we land. Don't be too much surprised if I should arrive considerably ahead of time.

"We have had a pretty rough time of it, this past winter, the weather having been more severe than any our fishermen have ever encountered; but fortunately fish have been plenty. The 'Viking' brings back nearly five thousand quintals, deliverable at Bergen, and already sold by the efforts of Help Bros. And last, but not least, we have succeeded in selling

at a handsome profit, and I, who have a share in the venture, will realize something quite handsome from it.

"Besides, even if I should not bring a small competence home with me, I have an idea, or rather, I have a presentiment that it is awaiting me on my return. Yes; comparative wealth, to say nothing of happiness! In what way? That is my secret, my dearest Hulda, and you will forgive me for having a secret from you! It is the only one! Besides, I will tell you all about it. When? Well, as soon as an opportunity offers--before our marriage, if it should be delayed by some unforeseen misfortune--afterward, if I return at the appointed time, and you become my wife within a week after my arrival, as I trust you will.

"A hundred fond kisses, my darling Hulda. Kiss Dame Hansen, and Joel, too, for me. In fancy, I imprint another kiss upon your brow, around which the shining crown of the brides of the Telemark will cast a saint-like halo. Once more, farewell, dearest Hulda, farewell!

"Your devoted lover,

"OLE KAMP."

