

CHAPTER III.

Without being very deeply versed in ethnography, one may be strongly inclined to believe, in common with many savants, that a close relationship exists between the leading families of the English aristocracy and the oldest families of Scandinavia. Numerous proofs of this fact, indeed, are to be found in the ancestral names which are identical in both countries. There is no aristocracy in Norway, however; still, though the democracy everywhere rules, that does not prevent it from being aristocratic to the highest degree. All are equals upon an exalted plane instead of a low one. Even in the humblest hut may be found a genealogical tree which has not degenerated in the least because it has sprung up anew in humble soil; and the walls are adorned with the proud blazons of the feudal lords from whom these plain peasants are descended.

So it was with the Hansens of Dal, who were unquestionably related, though rather remotely, to the English peers created after Rollo's invasion of Normandy, and though rank and wealth had both departed they had at least preserved the old pride, or rather dignity, which becomes all social ranks.

It was a matter of very little consequence, however. Whether he had ancestors of lofty lineage or not, Harald Hansen was simply a village inn-keeper. The house had come down to him from his father and from

his grandfather, who were widely known and respected, and after his death his widow continued the business in a way that elicited universal commendation.

Whether or not Harald had made a fortune in the business, no one was able to say; but he had been able to rear his son Joel and his daughter Hulda in comfort; and Ole Kamp, a son of his wife's sister, had also been brought up like one of his own children. But for his uncle Harald, this orphan child would doubtless have been one of those poor creatures who come into the world only to leave it; and Ole Kamp evinced a truly filial devotion toward his parents by adoption. Nothing would ever sever the tie that bound him to the Hansen family, to which his marriage with Hulda was about to bind him still more closely.

Harald Hansen had died about eighteen months before, leaving his wife, in addition to the inn, a small farm on the mountain, a piece of property which yielded very meager returns, if any. This was especially true of late, for the seasons had been remarkably unpropitious, and agriculture of every kind had suffered greatly, even the pastures. There had been many of those "iron nights," as the Norwegian peasants call them--nights of north-easterly gales and ice that kill the corn down to the very root--and that meant ruin to the farmers of the Telemark and the Hardanger.

Still, whatever Dame Hansen might think of the situation of affairs,

she had never said a word to any living soul, not even to her children. Naturally cold and reserved, she was very uncommunicative--a fact that pained Hulda and Joel not a little. But with that respect for the head of the family innate in Northern lands, they made no attempt to break down a reserve which was eminently distasteful to them. Besides, Dame Hansen never asked aid or counsel, being firmly convinced of the infallibility of her own judgment, for she was a true Norwegian in that respect.

Dame Hansen was now about fifty years old. Advancing age had not bowed her tall form, though it had whitened her hair; nor had it dimmed the brightness of her dark-blue eyes, whose azure was reflected in the clear orbs of her daughter; but her complexion had taken on the yellow hue of old parchment, and a few wrinkles were beginning to furrow her forehead.

The madame, as they say in Scandinavia, was invariably attired in a full black skirt, for she had never laid aside her mourning since her husband's death. Below the shoulder-straps of a brown bodice appeared the long full sleeves of an unbleached cotton chemise. On her shoulders she wore a small dark-colored fichu that crossed upon her breast, which was also covered by the large bib of her apron. She always wore as a head-dress a close-fitting black-silk cap that covered almost her entire head, and tied behind, a kind of head-dress that is rarely seen nowadays.

Seated stiffly erect in her wooden arm-chair, the grave hostess neglected her spinning-wheel only to enjoy a small birchwood pipe, whose smoke enveloped her in a faint cloud.

Really, the house would have seemed very gloomy had it not been for the presence of the two children.

A worthy lad was Joel Hansen. Twenty-five years of age, well built, tall, like all Norwegian mountaineers, proud in bearing, though not in the least boastful or conceited. He had fine hair, verging upon chestnut, with blue eyes so dark as to seem almost black. His garb displayed to admirable advantage his powerful shoulders, his broad chest, in which his lungs had full play, and stalwart limbs which never failed him even in the most difficult mountain ascents. His dark-blue jacket, fitting tightly at the waist, was adorned on the shoulders with epaulets, and in the back with designs in colored embroidery similar to those that embellish the vests of the Breton peasantry. His yellow breeches were fastened at the knee by large buckles. Upon his head he wore a broad-brimmed brown hat with a red-and-black band, and his legs were usually incased either in coarse cloth gaiters or in long stout boots without heels.

His vocation was that of a mountain guide in the district of the Telemark, and even in the Hardanger. Always ready to start, and untiring in his exertions, he was a worthy descendant of the Norwegian hero Rollo, the walker, celebrated in the legends of that country.

Between times he accompanied English sportsmen who repair to that region to shoot the riper, a species of ptarmigan, larger than that found in the Hebrides, and the jerpir, a partridge much more delicate in its flavor than the grouse of Scotland. When winter came, the hunting of wolves engrossed his attention, for at that season of the year these fierce animals, emboldened by hunger, not unfrequently venture out upon the surface of the frozen lake. Then there was bear hunting in summer, when that animal, accompanied by her young, comes to secure its feast of fresh grass, and when one must pursue it over plateaus at an altitude of from ten to twelve thousand feet. More than once Joel had owed his life solely to the great strength that enabled him to endure the embraces of these formidable animals, and to the imperturbable coolness which enabled him to eventually dispatch them.

But when there was neither tourist nor hunter to be guided through the valley of the Vesfjorddal, Joel devoted his attention to the soetur, the little mountain farm where a young shepherd kept guard over half a dozen cows and about thirty sheep--a soetur consisting exclusively of pasture land.

Joel, being naturally very pleasant and obliging, was known and loved in every village in the Telemark; but two persons for whom he felt a boundless affection were his cousin Ole and his sister Hulda.

When Ole Kamp left Dal to embark for the last time, how deeply Joel regretted his inability to dower Hulda and thus avert the necessity

for her lover's departure! In fact, if he had been accustomed to the sea, he would certainly have gone in his cousin's place. But money was needed to start them in housekeeping, and as Dame Hansen had offered no assistance, Joel understood only too well that she did not feel inclined to devote any portion of the estate to that purpose, so there was nothing for Ole to do but cross the broad Atlantic.

Joel had accompanied him to the extreme end of the valley on his way to Bergen, and there, after a long embrace, he wished him a pleasant journey and a speedy return, and then returned to console his sister, whom he loved with an affection which was at the same time fraternal and paternal in its character.

Hulda at that time was exactly eighteen years of age. She was not the *piga*, as the servant in a Norwegian inn is called, but rather the *froken*, the young lady of the house, as her mother was the *madame*. What a charming face was hers, framed in a wealth of pale golden hair, under a thin linen cap projecting in the back to give room for the long plaits of hair! What a lovely form incased in this tightly fitting bodice of red stuff, ornamented with green shoulder-straps and surmounted by a snowy chemisette, the sleeves of which were fastened at the wrist by a ribbon bracelet! What grace and perfect symmetry in the waist, encircled by a red belt with clasps of silver filigree which held in place the dark-green skirt, below which appeared the white stocking protected by the dainty pointed toed shoe of the Telemark!

Yes, Ole's betrothed was certainly charming, with the slightly melancholy expression of the daughters of the North softening her smiling face; and on seeing her one instantly thought of Hulda the Fair, whose name she bore, and who figures as the household fairy in Scandinavian mythology.

Nor did the reserve of a chaste and modest maiden mar the grace with which she welcomed the guests who came to the inn. She was well known to the world of tourists; and it was not one of the smallest attractions of the inn to be greeted by that cordial shake of the hand that Hulda bestowed on one and all. And after having said to her, "Tack for mad" (Thanks for the meal), what could be more delightful than to hear her reply in her fresh sonorous voice: "Wed bekomme!" (May it do you good!)