

## CHAPTER V.

Hulda was considerably surprised at the persistency with which Ole alluded in his letters to the fortune that was to be his on his return. Upon what did the young man base his expectations? Hulda could not imagine, and she was very anxious to know. Was this anxiety due solely to an idle curiosity on her part? By no means, for the secret certainly affected her deeply. Not that she was ambitious, this modest and honest young girl; nor did she in looking forward to the future ever aspire to what we call wealth. Ole's affection satisfied, and would always satisfy her. If wealth came, she would welcome it with joy. If it did not come, she would still be content.

This is precisely what Hulda and Joel said to each other the day after Ole's last letter reached Dal. They agreed perfectly upon this subject, as upon all others, by the way. And then Joel added:

"No; it is impossible, little sister. You certainly must be keeping something from me."

"Keeping something from you!"

"Yes; for I can not believe that Ole went away without giving you some clew to his secret."

"Did he say anything to you about it?"

"No; but you and I are not one and the same person."

"Yes, we are, brother."

"I am not Ole's betrothed, at all events."

"Almost," said the young girl; "and if any misfortune should befall him, and he should not return from this voyage, you would be as inconsolable as I would be, and your tears would flow quite as freely as mine."

"Really, little sister. I forbid you to even speak of such a thing," replied Joel. "Ole not return from his last voyage to the great fishing banks! What can have put such an idea into your head? You surely can not mean what you say, Hulda!"

"No, certainly not. And yet, I do not know. I can not drive away certain presentiments--the result, perhaps, of bad dreams."

"Dreams are only dreams."

"True, brother, but where do they come from?"

"From ourselves, not from heaven. You are anxious, and so your fears

haunt you in your slumber. Besides, it is almost always so when one has earnestly desired a thing and the time when one's desires are to be realized is approaching."

"I know it, Joel."

"Really, I thought you were much more sensible, little sister. Yes, and more energetic. Here you have just received a letter from Joel saying that the 'Viking' will return before the end of the month, and it is now the 19th of April, and consequently none too soon for you to begin your preparations for the wedding."

"Do you really think so, Joel?"

"Certainly I think so, Hulda. I even think that we have delayed too long already. Think of it. We must have a wedding that will not only create a sensation in Dal, but in all the neighboring villages. I intend it shall be the grandest one ever known in the district, so I am going to set to work immediately."

An affair of this kind is always a momentous occasion in all the country districts of Norway, particularly in the Telemark, so that every day Joel had a conversation with his mother on the subject. It was only a few moments after Dame Hansen's meeting with the stranger, whose message had so deeply agitated her, and though she had seated herself at her spinning-wheel as usual, it would have been plain to a

close observer that her thoughts were far away.

Even Joel noticed that his mother seemed even more despondent than usual, but as she invariably replied that there was nothing the matter with her when she was questioned on the subject, her son decided to speak only of Hulda's marriage.

"Mother," he began, "you, of course, recollect that Ole announced in his last letter that he should probably return to Dal in a few weeks."

"It is certainly to be hoped that he will," replied Dame Hansen, "and that nothing will occur to occasion any further delay."

"Do you see any objection to our fixing upon the twenty-fifth of May as the day of the marriage?"

"None, whatever, if Hulda is willing."

"Her consent is already given. And now I think I had better ask you, mother, if you do not intend to do the handsome thing on that occasion?"

"What do you mean by the handsome thing?" retorted Dame Hansen, without raising her eyes from her spinning-wheel.

"Why, I am anxious, if you approve, of course, that the wedding should

correspond with the position we hold in the neighborhood. We ought to invite all our friends to it, and if our own house is not large enough to accommodate them, our neighbors, I am sure, will be glad to lodge our guests."

"Who will these guests be, Joel?"

"Why, I think we ought to invite all our friends from Moel, Tiness and Bamble. I will attend to that. I think, too, that the presence of Help Bros., the shipowners, would be an honor to the family, and with your consent, I repeat, I will invite them to spend a day with us at Dal. They are very fine men, and they think a great deal of Ole, so I am almost sure that they will accept the invitation."

"Is it really necessary to make this marriage such an important event?" inquired Dame Hansen, coldly.

"I think so, mother, if only for the sake of our inn, which I am sure has maintained its old reputation since my father's death."

"Yes, Joel, yes."

"And it seems to me that it is our duty to at least keep it up to the standard at which he left it; consequently, I think it would be advisable to give considerable publicity to my sister's marriage."

"So be it, Joel."

"And do you not agree with me in thinking that it is quite time for Hulda to begin her preparations, and what do you say to my suggestion?"

"I think that you and Hulda must do whatever you think necessary," replied Dame Hansen.

Perhaps the reader will think that Joel was in too much of a hurry, and that it would have been much more sensible in him to have waited until Ole's return before appointing the wedding-day, and beginning to prepare for it, but as he said, what was once done would not have to be done over again; besides, the countless details connected with a ceremonial of this kind would serve to divert Hulda's mind from these forebodings for which there seemed to be no foundation.

The first thing to be done was to select the bride's maid of honor. That proved an easy matter, however, for Hulda's choice was already made. The bride-maid, of course, must be Hulda's intimate friend, Farmer Helmboe's daughter. Her father was a prominent man, and the possessor of a very comfortable fortune. For a long time he had fully appreciated Joel's sterling worth, and his daughter Siegfrid's appreciation, though of a rather different nature, was certainly no less profound; so it was quite probable that at no very distant day after Siegfrid had served as Hulda's maid of honor, Hulda, in turn,

would act in the same capacity for her friend. This is the custom in Norway, where these pleasant duties are generally reserved for married women, so it was rather on Joel's account that Siegfrid Helmboe was to serve Hulda Hansen in this capacity.

A question of vital importance to the bride-maid as well as to the bride, is the toilet to be worn on the day of the wedding.

Siegfrid, a pretty blonde of eighteen summers, was firmly resolved to appear to the best possible advantage on the occasion. Warned by a short note from her friend Hulda--Joel had kindly made himself responsible for its safe delivery--she immediately proceeded to devote her closest attention to this important work.

In the first place, an elaborately embroidered bodice must be made to incase Siegfrid's charming figure as if in a coat of enamel. There was also much talk about a skirt composed of a series of jupons which should correspond in number with the wearer's fortune, but in no way detract from her charms of person. As for jewelry, it was no easy matter to select the design of the collar of silver filigree, set with pearls, the heart-shaped ear-rings, the double buttons to fasten the neck of the chemisette, the belt of red silk or woolen stuff from which depend four rows of small chains, the finger-rings studded with tiny bangles that tinkle musically, the bracelets of fretted silver--in short, all the wealth of country finery in which gold appears only in the shape of the thinnest plating, silver in the guise

of tin and pearls, and diamonds in the shape of wax and crystal beads. But what does that matter so long as the tout ensemble is pleasing to the eye? Besides, if necessary, Siegfrid would not hesitate to go to the elegant stores of M. Benett, in Christiania, to make her purchases. Her father would not object--far from it! The kind-hearted man allowed his daughter full liberty in such matters; besides, Siegfrid was sensible enough not to draw too heavily upon her father's purse, though everything else was of secondary importance provided Joel would see her at her very best on that particular day.

As for Hulda, her anxiety on the subject was no less serious, for fashions are pitiless, and give, besides, not a little trouble in the selection of their wedding-toilet.

Hulda would now be obliged to abandon the long plaits tied with bright ribbons, which had heretofore hung from under her coquettish cap, the broad belt with fancy buckles that kept her apron in place upon her scarlet skirt, the girdle to which were appended several small embroidered leather cases containing a silver tea-spoon, knife, fork, needle-case and scissors--articles which a woman makes constant use of in the household.

No, on the fast approaching day of the nuptials, Hulda's hair would be allowed to float down upon her shoulders, and it was so abundant that it would not be necessary for her to have recourse to the jute switches used by Norwegian girls less favored by nature. Indeed,



for her clothing, as well as for her ornaments, Hulda would only be obliged to resort to her mother's big chest. In fact, these articles of clothing are transmitted from marriage to marriage through all the different generations of the same family. So one sees reappearing again and again upon the scene the bodice embroidered in gold, the velvet sash, the skirt of striped silk, the gold chain for the neck, and the crown--the famous Scandinavian crown--carefully preserved in the most secure of all the chests, and made of pasteboard covered with embossed gilt paper, and studded with stars, or garlanded with leaves--that takes the place of the wreath of orange-blossoms worn by brides in other European countries.

In this case the crowned betrothed, as the bride is styled, would certainly do honor to her husband; and he would be worthy of her in his gay wedding suit: a short jacket trimmed with silver buttons, silk-embroidered waistcoat, tight breeches fastened at the knee with a bunch of bright ribbons, a soft felt hat, yellow top-boots, and in his belt the Scandinavian knife--the dolknife--with which the true Norwegian is always provided.

Consequently, there was plenty to occupy the attention of the young ladies for some time to come. Two or three weeks would barely suffice if they wished to have everything in readiness before Ole's return; but even if Ole should arrive sooner than he expected, and Hulda should not be quite ready, she would not be inconsolable, nor would he.

The last weeks of April and the first weeks of May were devoted to these matters. Joel assumed charge of the invitations, taking advantage of the fact that his vocation of guide gave him considerable leisure at this season of the year. One would have supposed that he had a large number of friends in Bamble, for he went there very often. He had already written to Help Bros., inviting them to attend his sister's wedding, and in accordance with his prediction, these worthy shipowners had promptly accepted the invitation.

The fifteenth of May came, and any day now they might expect Ole to alight from his kariol, throw open the door, and shout in his hearty, cheerful voice:

"It is I! Here I am!"

A little patience was all that was needed now, for everything was in readiness, and Siegfried needed only a word to appear before them in all her splendor.

The 16th and 17th passed, and still no Ole, nor did the postman bring any letter from Newfoundland.

"There is no cause for anxiety, little sister," Joel said, again and again. "A sailing-vessel is always subject to delays. It is a long way from St. Pierre-Miquelon to Bergen. How I wish the 'Viking' were

a steamer and I the engine. How I would drive along against wind and tide, even if I should burst my boiler on coming into port."

He said all this because he saw very plainly that Hulda's uneasiness was increasing from day to day.

Just at this time, too, the weather was very bad in the Telemark. Violent gales swept the high table-lands, and these winds, which blew from the west, came from America.

"They ought to have hastened the arrival of the 'Viking,'" the young girl repeated again and again.

"Yes, little sister," replied Joel; "but they are so strong that they may have hindered its progress, and compelled it to face the gale. People can't always do as they like upon the sea."

"So you are not uneasy, Joel?"

"No, Hulda, no. It is annoying, of course, but these delays are very common. No; I am not uneasy, for there is really not the slightest cause for anxiety."

On the 19th a traveler arrived at the inn, and asked for a guide to conduct him over the mountains to the Hardanger, and though Joel did not like the idea of leaving Hulda, he could not refuse his services.

He would only be absent forty-eight hours at the longest, and he felt confident that he should find Ole at Dal on his return, though, to tell the truth, the kind-hearted youth was beginning to feel very uneasy. Still, he started off early the next morning, though with a heavy heart, we must admit.

On the following day, at precisely one o'clock, a loud rap resounded at the door of the inn.

"It is Ole!" cried Hulda.

She ran to the door.

There, in a kariol, sat a man enveloped in a traveling-cloak, a man whose face was unknown to her.