

CHAPTER VI.

"Is this Dame Hansen's inn?" he asked.

"Yes, sir," answered Hulda.

"Is Dame Hansen at home?"

"No; but she will soon return, and if you wish to speak to her--"

"I do not. There is nothing I want to say to her."

"Would you like a room?"

"Yes; the best in the house."

"Shall we prepare dinner for you?"

"As soon as possible, and see to it that everything is of the very best quality."

These remarks were exchanged between Hulda and the traveler before the latter had alighted from the kariol, in which he had journeyed to the heart of the Telemark across the forests, lakes, and valleys of Central Norway.

Every one who has visited Scandinavia is familiar with the kariol, the means of locomotion so dear to the hearts of her people. Two long shafts, between which trots a horse wearing a square wooden collar, painted yellow and striped with black, and guided with a simple rope passed, not through his mouth, but around his nose, two large, slender wheels, whose springless axle supports a small gay-colored, shell-shaped wagon-body, scarcely large enough to hold one person--no covering, no dash-board, no step--but behind, a board upon which the skydskarl perches himself. The whole vehicle strongly reminds one of an enormous spider between two huge cobwebs represented by the wheels of the vehicle.

At a sign from the traveler the skydskarl sprung to the horse's head, and the stranger rose, straightened himself out, and finally alighted, though not without some difficulty, judging from two or three muttered curses.

"Will they put my kariol under shelter?" he asked, curtly, pausing upon the threshold.

"Yes, sir," replied Hulda.

"And find my horse?"

"I will have him put in the stable immediately."

"Have him well cared for."

"Certainly, sir. May I ask if you intend to remain in Dal several days?"

"I don't know yet."

The kariol and horse were taken to a small barn built under the shelter of some trees at the foot of the mountain. It was the only stable connected with the inn, but it sufficed for the requirements of its guests.

In a few moments the traveler was duly installed in the best chamber, where, after removing his cloak, he proceeded to warm himself before the fire he had ordered lighted. In the meantime, Hulda, to satisfy this exacting guest, bade the piga (a sturdy peasant-girl, who helped in the kitchen, and did the rough work of the inn during the summer) prepare the best dinner possible.

A strong, hardy man was this new-comer, though he had already passed his sixtieth year. Thin, slightly round-shouldered, of medium stature, with an angular head, smoothly shaven face, thin, pointed nose, small eyes that looked you through and through from behind large spectacles, a forehead generally contracted by a frown, lips too thin for a pleasant word ever to escape them, and long, crooked fingers, he was

the very personification of an avaricious usurer or miser, and Hulda felt a presentiment that this stranger would bring no good fortune to Dame Hansen's house.

He was a Norwegian unquestionably, but one of the very worst type. His traveling costume consisted of a broad-brimmed, low-crowned hat, a snuff-colored suit, the breeches fastened at the knee with a leather strap, and over all a large brown cloak, lined with sheep-skin to protect its wearer from the chilly night air.

Hulda did not ask him his name, but she would soon learn it, as he would have to enter it upon the inn register.

Just then Dame Hansen returned, and her daughter announced the arrival of a guest who demanded the best room and the best food that the inn afforded, but who vouchsafed no information in regard to the probable length of his stay.

"And he did not give his name?" asked Dame Hansen.

"No, mother."

"Nor say whence he came?"

"No."

"If he is not a tourist, what can have brought him to Dal?" said Dame Hansen to herself rather than to her daughter, and in a tone that indicated some uneasiness.

But Hulda could not answer this question, as the new-comer had acquainted her with none of his plans.

About an hour after his arrival the man came out into the main hall, from which his door opened, but seeing Dame Hansen sitting there, he paused upon the threshold.

Evidently he was as much of a stranger to his hostess as his hostess was to him; but he finally walked toward her, and after a long look at her from over his spectacles:

"You are Dame Hansen, I suppose?" he said, without even touching the hat he had not yet removed from his head.

"Yes, sir."

In the presence of this man the widow, strange to say, experienced, like her daughter, an uneasiness for which she could not account, but which her guest must have noticed.

"So you are really Dame Hansen, of Dal?" he continued.

"Certainly, sir. Have you anything particular to say to me?"

"Nothing; I only wished to make your acquaintance. Am I not your guest? And now I should like you to see that I have my dinner as soon as possible."

"Your dinner is ready," interposed Hulda, "and if you will step into the dining-room--"

"I will."

As he spoke, the stranger directed his steps toward the door indicated, and a moment afterward he was seated near the window in front of a small, neatly spread table.

The dinner was certainly good. The most fastidious traveler could not have found fault with it; nevertheless, this ill-tempered individual was not sparing in his signs and words of dissatisfaction--especially signs, for he did not appear to be very loquacious. One could hardly help wondering whether this fault-finding was due to a poor digestion or a bad temper. The soup of cherries and gooseberries did not suit him, though it was excellent, and he scarcely tasted his salmon and salt-herring. The cold ham, broiled chicken and nicely seasoned vegetables did not seem to please him, and his bottle of claret and his half bottle of champagne seemed to be equally unsatisfactory, though they came from the best cellars in France; and when the repast

was concluded the guest had not even a "tack for mad" for his hostess.

After dinner the old curmudgeon lighted his pipe and went out for a walk along the river bank.

On reaching the stream he turned and fixed his eyes upon the inn. He seemed to be studying it under all its varied aspects, as if trying to form a correct estimate of its value.

He counted every door and window, and finally on his return to the inn he stuck his knife into the horizontal beams at its base, as if to test the quality of the wood and its state of preservation. Could it be that he was trying to find out how much Dame Hansen's inn was really worth? Did he aspire to become the owner of it, though it was not for sale? All this was certainly very strange, especially as he afterward turned his attention to the little yard, the trees and shrubs of which he counted carefully, and finally measured both sides of the inclosure with regular strides, after which the movement of his pencil over a page of his memorandum-book seemed to indicate that he was multiplying one by the other.

All the while Dame Hansen and her daughter were watching him from one of the windows of the inn. What strange creature was this, and what could be the object of his visit? It was greatly to be regretted that all this took place during Joel's absence, especially as the eccentric

individual was going to spend the night at the inn.

"What if he is a madman?" said Hulda.

"A madman? no," replied Dame Hansen. "But he is a very eccentric person, to say the least."

"It is always unpleasant to be ignorant of the name of the person you are entertaining," remarked the young girl.

"Before he re-enters the house, Hulda, be sure that you carry the register into his room. Perhaps he will conclude to write his name in it."

"Yes, mother."

Just at dusk a fine rain began to fall, so the stranger returned to the inn. He asked for a small glass of brandy, then without saying a word, or even bidding any one good-night, he took his wooden candlestick, and entering his room bolted the door behind him, and nothing further was heard from him that night.

The skydskarl had taken refuge in the barn, where he was already sound asleep in company with the sorrel horse.

Dame Hansen and her daughter rose with the sun the next morning, but

no sound came from the room of their guest, who was probably still sleeping. A little after nine o'clock he made his appearance even more glum and ill-tempered than the evening before, complaining that his bed had been hard, and that the noise in the house had kept him awake; then he opened the door and looked out at the sky.

The prospect was not very cheering, certainly, for the wind was blowing a gale, and the stranger concluded not to venture out. Still he did not waste his time. With his pipe in his mouth he walked about the inn as if trying to familiarize himself with the arrangement of the interior. He visited all the different rooms, examined the furniture, and peered into cupboards and sideboards with as much coolness as if he had been in his own house.

Though the man was singular in appearance, his actions were certainly even more singular. Finally he seated himself in the big arm-chair, and proceeded to question Dame Hansen in a curt, almost rude tone. How long had the inn been built? Was it her husband that built it, or did he inherit it? How much land was there around it, and what was the extent of the adjoining souter? Was the inn well patronized, and did it pay well? How many tourists came there on an average during the summer? Did they usually spend one or several days there? etc., etc.

It was evident that the stranger had not looked at the register that had been placed in his room, for that would have given him all the information he desired upon this last point.

In fact, the book was still on the table where Hulda had placed it the evening before, and the traveler's name was not in it.

"I do not understand how and why these matters can interest you, sir," said Dame Hansen at last; "but if you wish to know the state of our business, nothing could be easier. You have only to examine the register, in which you would greatly oblige me by entering your name according to custom."

"My name? I will write my name in it, certainly. I will write it there before I leave, which will be immediately after breakfast, as I am anxious to get back to Drammen by to-morrow evening."

"Drammen!" repeated Dame Hansen, hastily.

"Yes. Will you give me my breakfast as soon as possible?"

"Do you live in Drammen?"

"Yes. May I ask if there is anything astonishing about the fact that I reside in Drammen?"

So, after spending scarcely twenty-four hours in Dal, or rather at the inn, the traveler left without making the slightest effort to see anything of the surrounding country, Gousta, and Rjukanfos, and the

wonders of the valley of the Vesfjorddal were entirely ignored.

It certainly could not have been for pleasure that he left Drammen, so he must have come on business, and the sole object of his visit seemed to have been a careful examination of Dame Hansen's establishment.

It was plain to Hulda that her mother was deeply troubled, for she seated herself in her big arm-chair, and pushing aside her spinning-wheel, remained there silent and motionless.

In the meantime the traveler had gone into the dining-room and seated himself at the table. Though the breakfast was as carefully prepared as the dinner of the evening before, it seemed to give no better satisfaction; and yet the guest eat and drank in the same leisurely fashion. His attention seemed to be chiefly bestowed upon the silver--a luxury highly prized among Norwegian peasants, where the few forks and spoons which are handed down from father to son are carefully preserved with the family jewels.

Meanwhile the skydskarl busied himself with his preparations for departure; and by eleven o'clock the horse and kariol were standing before the door of the inn.

The weather was still threatening; the sky was dull and overcast, and now and then big drops of rain dashed against the window-panes; but this traveler with his heavy cloak lined with sheep-skin was not a man

to worry about the weather.

Breakfast over, he called for one more glass of brandy, lighted his pipe, and put on his coat, then stepping out into the hall he called for his bill.

"I will make it out immediately," replied Hulda, seating herself at a small desk.

"Be quick about it," said the traveler. "And now," he added, "you had better bring me your book so I can write my name in it."

Dame Hansen rose and left the room to get the register, which, on her return, she placed upon the large table.

The stranger picked up a pen and took one more long look at Dame Hansen over his spectacles; then he wrote his name in a large, round hand, and closed the book.

Just at that moment Hulda handed him his bill. He took it, examined each item separately, and then proceeded to add up the figures, grumbling all the while.

"Hum!" he exclaimed. "This is very dear! Seven marks and a half for a night's lodging and two meals!"

"You forget the skydskarl and the horse," remarked Hulda.

"Nevertheless, I think your charge very high. I really don't see how you can expect to prosper if you are so exorbitant in your charges."

"You owe me nothing, sir," said Dame Hansen, in a voice that trembled so that it was scarcely audible.

She had just opened the register and read the name inscribed upon it, and now taking the bill and tearing it up, she repeated:

"You owe me nothing."

"That is exactly my opinion," replied the stranger.

And without bidding them good-bye on his departure any more than he had bidden them good-day on his arrival, he climbed into his kariol, and the skydskarl jumped upon the board behind him. A few seconds later he had disappeared around a turn in the road. When Hulda opened the book she found there only this name--

"Sandgoist, from Drammen."