

## CHAPTER VII.

It was on the afternoon of the following day that Joel was to return home; and Hulda, who knew that her brother would come back by the table-lands of the Gousta and along the left bank of the Maan, went to meet him at the ferry across that impetuous stream. On arriving there she seated herself on the little wharf which serves as a landing-place for the ferry-boat, and abandoned herself to her thoughts.

To the deep uneasiness caused by the non-arrival of the "Viking" was now added another great anxiety. This last was caused by the mysterious visit of Sandgoist, and Dame Hansen's agitation in his presence. Why had she destroyed the bill and declined to accept the money due her as soon as she learned her guest's name? There must be some secret concealed under all this--and a grave one.

Hulda was finally aroused from her reverie by the approach of Joel. She first caught a glimpse of him as he was descending the topmost slope; soon he reappeared in the midst of a narrow clearing between the burned and fallen trees. Then he vanished from sight behind a clump of pines, and at last reached the opposite bank and jumped aboard the ferry-boat. With a few vigorous strokes of the oar he propelled the boat swiftly through the rapids, and then leaped upon the little pier beside his sister.

"Has Ole returned?" he asked, hastily.

It was of Ole that he thought first of all; but his question remained unanswered.

"Have you received no letter from him?"

"Not one."

And Hulda burst into tears.

"Don't cry, little sister," exclaimed Joel, "don't cry. You make me wretched. I can not bear to see you weep. Let me see! You say you have received no letter. The matter is beginning to look a little serious, I must admit, though there is no reason to despair as yet. If you desire it, I will go to Bergen, and make inquiries there. I will call on Help Bros. Possibly they may have some news from Newfoundland. It is quite possible that the 'Viking' may have put into some port for repairs, or on account of bad weather. The wind has been blowing a hurricane for more than a week, and not unfrequently ships from Newfoundland take refuge in Iceland, or at the Faroe Islands. This very thing happened to Ole two years ago, when he was on board the 'Strenna,' you remember. I am only saying what I really think, little sister. Dry your eyes. If you make me lose heart what will become of us?"

"But I can't help it, Joel."

"Hulda! Hulda! do not lose courage. I assure you that I do not despair, not by any means."

"Can I really believe you, Joel?"

"Yes, you can. Now, to reassure you, shall I start for Bergen to-morrow morning, or this very evening?"

"No, no, you must not leave me! No, you must not!" sobbed Hulda, clinging to her brother as if he was the only friend she had left in the world.

They started toward the inn. Joel sheltered his sister from the rain as well as he could, but the wind soon became so violent that they were obliged to take refuge in the hut of the ferryman, which stood a few hundred yards from the bank of the Maan.

There they were obliged to remain until the wind abated a little, and Joel was glad of an opportunity to have a longer conversation with his sister.

"How does mother seem?" he inquired.

"Even more depressed in spirits than usual," replied Hulda.

"Has any one been here during my absence?"

"Yes, one traveler, but he has gone away."

"So there is no tourist at the inn now, and no one has asked for a guide?"

"No, Joel."

"So much the better, for I would much rather not leave you. Besides, if this unpleasant weather continues, it is not likely that many tourists will visit the Telemark this season. But tell me, was it yesterday that your guest left Dal?"

"Yes, yesterday morning."

"Who was he?"

"A man who resides in Drammen, and whose name is Sandgoist."

"Sandgoist?"

"Do you know him?"

"No."

Hulda had asked herself more than once if she should tell her brother all that had occurred in his absence. When Joel heard how coolly their guest had conducted himself, and how he seemed to have come merely to appraise the house and its contents, what would he think? Would not he, too, fear that his mother must have had grave reasons for acting as she had? What were these reasons? What could there be in common between her and Sandgoist? Joel would certainly desire to know, and would be sure to question his mother, and as Dame Hansen, who was always so uncommunicative, would doubtless persist in the silence she had maintained hitherto, the relations between her and her children, which were so unnatural and constrained now, would become still more unpleasant.

But would Hulda be able to keep anything from Joel? A secret from him! Would it not be a violation of the close friendship that united them? No, this friendship must never be broken! So Hulda suddenly resolved to tell him all.

"Have you ever heard any one speak of this Sandgoist when you were in Drammen?" she asked.

"Never."

"But our mother knew him, Joel; at least by name."

"She knew Sandgoist?"

"Yes."

"I certainly never heard the name before."

"But she has, though she had never seen the man until day before yesterday."

Then Hulda related all the incidents that had marked Sandgoist's sojourn at the inn, not neglecting to mention Dame Hansen's singular conduct at the moment of his departure. Then she hastened to add:

"I think, Joel, it would be best not to say anything to mother about it at present. You know her disposition, and it would only make her still more unhappy. The future will probably reveal what has been concealed from us in the past. Heaven grant that Ole may be restored to us, and then if any misfortune should befall the family there will at least be three of us to share it."

Joel had listened to his sister with profound attention. Yes, it was evident that Dame Hansen must be at this man's mercy, and it was impossible to doubt that he had come to take an inventory of the property. And the destruction of the bill at the time of his departure--a destruction that seemed only right and proper to him--what could be the meaning of that?

"You are right, Hulda," said Joel. "I had better not say anything to mother about it. Perhaps she will feel sorry by and by that she has not confided in us. Heaven grant that it may not be too late! She must be wretched, poor woman! How strange it is that she can not understand that her children were born to sympathize with her."

"She will find it out some day, Joel."

"Yes; so let us wait patiently, little sister. Still, there is no reason why I should not try to find out who the man is. Perhaps Farmer Helmboe knows him. I will ask him the first time I go to Bamble, and if need be I will push on to Drammen. There it will not be difficult for me to at least learn what the man does, and what people think of him."

"They do not think well of him, I am sure," replied Hulda. "His face is very unprepossessing, and I shall be very much surprised if there is a noble soul concealed under such a repulsive exterior."

"Come, come, little sister, it will not do to judge people by outward appearances," exclaimed Joel. "Don't be so suspicious, Hulda, and cheer up. Ole will soon be with us, and we will scold him roundly for having kept us waiting."

The rain having ceased the pair left the hut and started up the path

leading to the inn.

"By the way, I must go away again to-morrow, little sister," said Joel.

"Go away again to-morrow!" repeated Hulda.

"Yes, early in the morning. On leaving the Hardanger I was informed by a comrade that a traveler, coming from the north by way of the Rjukanfos would arrive to-morrow."

"Who is this traveler?"

"I don't know his name, but I must be on hand to conduct him to Dal."

"Ah, well! go, then, as there is no help for it," replied Hulda, with a sigh.

"Yes, I must start to-morrow at sunrise. Do you really feel so badly about it, Hulda?"

"Yes, brother, I feel much more unhappy when you leave me, even if it is only for a few hours."

"Ah, well, this time I shall not go alone."



"Why, who is to accompany you?"

"You, little sister. You need diversion, and I am going to take you with me."

"Oh, thank you, Joel, thank you!"