

CHAPTER X.

The people of Scandinavia are very intelligent, not only the inhabitants of the cities, but of the most remote rural districts. Their education goes far beyond reading, writing, and arithmetic. The peasant learns with avidity. His mental faculties are ever on the alert. He takes a deep interest in the public welfare and no mean part in all political and local affairs. More than half of the Storting is made up of members of this rank in life. Not unfrequently they attend its sessions clad in the costume of their particular province; but they are justly noted for their remarkable good sense, acute reasoning powers, their clear though rather slow understanding, and above all, for their incorruptibility.

Consequently it is not at all strange that the name of Sylvius Hogg was a household word throughout Norway, and was uttered with respect even in the wilds of the Telemark; so Dame Hansen on receiving such a widely known and highly esteemed guest, thought it only proper to tell him how highly honored she felt at having him under her roof, if only for a few days.

"I don't know that I am doing you much honor, Dame Hansen," replied Sylvius Hogg, "but I do know that it gives me great pleasure to be here. I have heard my pupils talk of this hospitable inn for years. Indeed, that is one reason I intended to stop here and rest for about

a week, but by Saint Olaf! I little expected to arrive here on one leg!"

And the good man shook the hand of his hostess most cordially.

"Wouldn't you like my brother to fetch a doctor from Bamble?" inquired Hulda.

"A doctor! my little Hulda! Why! do you want me to lose the use of both my legs?"

"Oh, Mr. Sylvius!"

"A doctor! Why not send for my friend, the famous Doctor Bork, of Christiania? All this ado about a mere scratch, what nonsense!"

"But even a mere scratch may become a very serious thing if not properly attended to," remarked Joel.

"Well, Joel, will you tell me why you are so very anxious for this to become serious?"

"Indeed, I am not, sir; God forbid!"

"Oh, well, He will preserve you and me, and all Dame Hansen's household, especially if pretty little Hulda here will be kind enough

to give me some attention."

"Certainly, Mr. Sylvius."

"All right, my friends. I shall be as well as ever in four or five days. How could a man help getting well in such a pretty room? Where could one hope for better care than in this excellent inn? This comfortable bed, with its mottoes, is worth a great deal more than all the nauseous prescriptions of the faculty. And that quaint window overlooking the valley of the Maan! And the stream's soft, musical murmur that penetrates to the remotest corner of my cozy nest! And the fragrant, healthful scent of the pines that fills the whole house! And the air, this pure exhilarating mountain air! Ah! is not that the very best of physicians? When one needs him one has only to open the window and in he comes and makes you well without cutting off your rations."

He said all this so gayly that it seemed as if a ray of sunshine had entered the house with him. At least, this was the impression of the brother and sister, who stood listening to him, hand in hand.

All this occurred in a chamber on the first floor, to which the professor had been conducted immediately upon his arrival; and now, half reclining in a large arm-chair, with his injured limb resting upon a stool, he gratefully accepted the kindly attentions of Joel and Hulda. A careful bathing of the wound with cold water was the only remedy he would use, and in fact no other was needed.

"Thanks, my friends, thanks!" he exclaimed, "this is far better than drugs. And now do you know that but for your timely arrival upon the scene of action, I should have become much too well acquainted with the wonders of the Rjukanfos! I should have rolled down into the abyss like a big stone, and have added another legend to those already associated with the Maristien. And there was no excuse for me. My betrothed was not waiting for me upon the opposite bank as in the case of poor Eystein!"

"And what a terrible thing it would have been to Madame Hogg!" exclaimed Hulda. "She would never have got over it."

"Madame Hogg!" repeated the professor. "Oh! Madame Hogg wouldn't have shed a tear--"

"Oh, Mister Sylvius."

"No, I tell you, for the very good reason that there is no Madame Hogg. Nor can I ever imagine what Madame Hogg would be like, stout or thin, tall or short."

"She would, of course, be amiable, intelligent and good, being your wife," replied Hulda, naïvely.

"Do you really think so, mademoiselle? Well, well, I believe you! I

believe you!"

"But on hearing of such a calamity, Mister Sylvius," remarked Joel, "your relatives and many friends--"

"I have no relatives to speak of, but I have quite a number of friends, not counting those I have just made in Dame Hansen's house, and you have spared them the trouble of weeping for me. But tell me, children, you can keep me here a few days, can you not?"

"As long as you please, Mister Sylvius," replied Hulda. "This room belongs to you."

"You see, I intended to stop awhile at Dal as all tourists do, and radiate from here all over the Telemark district; but now, whether I shall radiate, or I shall not radiate, remains to be seen."

"Oh, you will be on your feet again before the end of the week, I hope, Mister Sylvius," remarked Joel.

"So do I, my boy."

"And then I will escort you anywhere in the district that you care to go."

"We'll see about that when Richard is himself again. I still have two

months leave before me, and even if I should be obliged to spend the whole of it under Dame Hansen's roof I should have no cause for complaint. Could I not explore that portion of the valley of Vesfjorddal lying between the two lakes, make the ascent of Gousta, and pay another visit to the Rjukanfos? for though I very narrowly escaped falling head foremost into its depths I scarcely got a glimpse of it, and am resolved to see it again."

"You shall do so, Mister Sylvius," replied Hulda.

"And we will visit it next time in company with good Dame Hansen if she will be kind enough to go with us. And now I think of it, my friends, I must drop a line to Kate, my old housekeeper, and Fink, my faithful old servant in Christiania. They will be very uneasy if they do not hear from me, and I shall get a terrible scolding. And now I have a confession to make to you. The strawberries and milk were delicious and extremely refreshing, but they scarcely satisfied my hunger, and as I won't submit to being put upon short allowance may I not ask if it is not nearly your dinner hour?"

"Oh! that makes no difference whatever, Mister Sylvius."

"On the contrary, it does make a great deal of difference. Do you think that I am going to sit in solitary grandeur at the table, and in my own room, all the time I stay at Dal? No, I want to take my meals with you and your mother if Dame Hansen has no objections."

Of course Dame Hansen could but assent when she was apprised of the professor's request, especially as it would be a great honor to her and hers to have a member of the Storthing at her table.

"It is settled, then, that we are to eat together in the living room," remarked Sylvius Hogg.

"Yes, Mister Sylvius," replied Joel. "I shall only have to wheel you out in your arm-chair when dinner is ready."

"Indeed, Mister Joel! Why don't you propose a kariol? No; with the aid of a friendly arm, I shall be able to reach the table. I haven't had my leg amputated yet, that I am aware of."

"As you please, Mister Sylvius," replied Hulda. "But don't be guilty of any imprudence, I beg of you, or Joel will have to hurry off in search of a doctor."

"More threats! Oh, well, I will be as prudent and docile as possible; provided you do not put me on short allowance, you will find me the most tractable of patient. Can it be that you are not hungry, my friends?"

"Give us only a quarter of an hour," replied Hulda; "and we will set before you a nice trout from the Maan, a grouse that Joel shot in the

Hardanger yesterday, and a bottle of French wine."

"Thank you, my dear child, thank you!"

Hulda left the room to superintend the dinner and set the table, while Joel took the kariol back to Lengling's stable. Sylvius Hogg was left alone, and his thoughts very naturally reverted to the honest family whose guest and debtor he was. What could he do to repay Hulda and Joel for the inestimable service they had rendered him?

He had not much time for reflection, however, for scarcely ten minutes had elapsed before he was seated in the place of honor at the family table. The dinner was excellent. It corresponded with the reputation of the inn, and the professor ate very heartily.

The rest of the evening was spent in conversation in which Sylvius Hogg took the leading part. As Dame Hanson found it well-nigh impossible to overcome her habitual reserve, Joel and Hulda were obliged to respond to their genial host's advances, and the sincere liking the professor had taken to them from the very first naturally increased.

When night came, he returned to his room with the assistance of Joel and Hulda, gave and received a friendly good-night, and had scarcely stretched himself out upon the big bed before he was sound asleep.

The next morning he woke with the sun, and began to review the situation.

"I really don't know how I shall get out of the scrape," he said to himself. "One can not allow one's self to be saved from death, nursed and cured without any other return than a mere thank you. I am under deep obligations to Hulda and Joel, that is undeniable; but the services they have rendered me are not of a kind that can be repaid with money. On the other hand, these worthy people appear to be perfectly happy, and I can do nothing to add to their happiness! Still, we shall probably have many talks together, and while we are talking, perhaps--"

During the three or four days the professor was obliged to keep his leg upon a stool he and the young Hansens had many pleasant chats together, but unfortunately it was with some reserve on the brother's and sister's part. Neither of them had much to say about their mother, whose cold and preoccupied manner had not escaped Sylvius Hogg's notice, and from a feeling of prudence they hesitated to reveal to their guest the uneasiness excited by Ole Kamp's delay, for might they not impair his good humor by telling him their troubles?

"And yet we perhaps make a great mistake in not confiding in Mister Sylvius," Joel remarked to her sister, one day. "He is a very clever man, and through his influential acquaintances he might perhaps be able to find out whether the Naval Department is making any effort to

ascertain what has become of the 'Viking.'"

"You are right, Joel," replied Hulda. "I think we had better tell him all; but let us wait until he has entirely recovered from his hurt."

"That will be very soon," rejoined Joel.

By the end of the week Sylvius Hogg was able to leave his room without assistance, though he still limped a little; and he now began to spend hours on the benches in front of the house, gazing at the snow-clad summit of Gousta, while the Maan dashed merrily along at his feet.

People were continually passing over the road that led from Dal to the Rjukanfos now. Most of them were tourists who stopped an hour or two at Dame Hanson's inn either to breakfast or dine. There were also students in plenty with knapsacks on their backs, and the little Norwegian cockade in their caps.

Many of them knew the professor, so interminable greetings were exchanged, and cordial salutations, which showed how much Sylvius Hogg was loved by these young people.

"What, you here, Mister Sylvius?" they would exclaim.

"Yes, my friend."

"You, who are generally supposed to be in the remotest depths of the Hardanger!"

"People are mistaken, then. It was in the remotest depths of the Rjukanfos that I came very near staying."

"Very well, we shall tell everybody that you are in Dal."

"Yes, in Dal, with a game leg."

"Fortunately you are at Dame Hansen's inn, where you will have the best of food and care."

"Could one imagine a more comfortable place?"

"Most assuredly not."

"Or better people?"

"There are none in the world," responded the young travelers merrily.

Then they would all drink to the health of Hulda and Joel, who were so well known throughout the Telemark.

And then the professor would tell them all about his adventure, frankly admitting his unpardonable imprudence, and telling how his

life had been saved, and how grateful he felt to his preservers.

"And I shall remain here until I have paid my debt," he would add. "My course of lectures on legislation will not be resumed for a long time, I fear, and you can enjoy an extended holiday."

"Good! good! Mister Sylvius," cried the light-hearted band. "Oh, you can't fool us! It is pretty Hulda that keeps you here at Dal."

"A sweet girl she is, my friends, and as pretty as a picture, besides; and by Saint Olaf! I'm only sixty."

"Here's to the health of Mister Sylvius!"

"And to yours, my dear boys. Roam about the country, gather wisdom, and yet be merry. Life is all sunshine at your age. But keep away from the Maristien. Joel and Hulda may not be on hand to rescue such of you as are imprudent enough to venture there."

Then they would resume their journey, making the whole valley ring with their joyful God-aften.

Once or twice Joel was obliged to act as guide to some tourists who wished to make the ascent of Gousta. Sylvius Hogg was anxious to accompany them. He declared that he was all right again. In fact, the wound on his leg was nearly healed; but Hulda positively forbade him

to undertake a trip which would certainly prove too fatiguing for him, and Hulda's word was law.

A wonderful mountain, though, is this Gousta, whose lofty summit traversed by deep snow-covered ravines, rises out of a forest of pines that form a thick green ruff about its snowy throat! And what a superb view one enjoys from its summit. To the east lies the bailiwick of Numedal; On the west, the Hardanger and its magnificent glaciers; down at the base of the mountain, the winding valley of Vesfjorddal between Lakes Tinn and Mjos, Dal, and its miniature houses, and the bright waters of the Maan leaping and dancing merrily along through the verdant meadows to the music of its own voice.

To make the ascent Joel was obliged to leave Dal at five o'clock in the morning. He usually returned about six o'clock in the evening, and Sylvius Hogg and Hulda always went to meet him. As soon as the primitive ferry-boat landed the tourists and their guide a cordial greeting ensued, and the three spent yet another pleasant evening together. The professor still limped a little, but he did not complain. Indeed, one might almost have fancied that he was in no haste to be cured, or rather to leave Dame Hansen's hospitable roof.

The time certainly passed swiftly and pleasantly there. He had written to Christiania that he should probably spend some time at Dal. The story of his adventure at the Rjukanfos was known throughout the country. The newspapers had got hold of it, and embellished the

account after their fashion, so a host of letters came to the inn, to say nothing of pamphlets and newspapers. All these had to be read and answered, and the names of Joel and Hulda which were necessarily mentioned in the correspondence, soon became known throughout Norway.

Nevertheless, this sojourn at Dame Hansen's inn could not be prolonged indefinitely, though Sylvius Hogg was still as much in doubt as ever, in regard to the manner in which he should pay his debt of gratitude. Of late, however, he had begun to suspect that this family was not as happy as he had at first supposed. The impatience with which the brother and sister awaited the arrival of the daily mail from Christiania and Bergen, their disappointment and even chagrin on finding no letters for them, all this was only too significant.

It was already the ninth of June, and still no news from the "Viking!" The vessel was now more than a fortnight overdue, and not a single line from Ole! No news to assuage Hulda's anxiety. The poor girl was beginning to despair, and Sylvius Hogg saw that her eyes were red with weeping when he met her in the morning.

"What can be the matter?" he said to himself, more than once. "They seem to be concealing some misfortunes from me. Is it a family secret, I wonder, with which a stranger can not be allowed to meddle? But do they still regard me as a stranger? No. Still, they must think so; but when I announce my departure they will perhaps understand that it is a true friend who is about to leave them."

So that very day he remarked:

"My friends, the hour is fast approaching when, to my great regret, I shall be obliged to bid you good-bye."

"So soon, Mister Sylvius, so soon?" exclaimed Joel, with a dismay he could not conceal.

"The time has passed very quickly in your company, but it is now seventeen days since I came to Dal."

"What! seventeen days!" repeated Hulda.

"Yes, my dear child, and the end of my vacation is approaching. I have only a week at my disposal if I should extend my journey to Drammen and Kongsberg. And though the Storthing is indebted to you for not being obliged to elect another deputy in my place, the Storthing will know no better how to compensate you than I do."

"Oh! Mister Sylvius," cried Hulda, placing her little hand upon his lips to silence him.

"Oh, I understand, Hulda. That is a forbidden subject, at least here."

"Here and everywhere," replied the girl, gayly.

"So be it! I am not my own master, and I must obey. But you and Joel must come and pay me a visit at Christiania."

"Pay you a visit?"

"Yes, pay me a visit; spend several weeks at my house in company with your mother, of course."

"And if we should leave the inn who will attend to things in our absence?" replied Joel.

"But your presence here is not necessary after the excursion season is over, I imagine; so I have fully made up my mind to come for you late in the autumn."

"It will be impossible, my dear Mister Sylvius, for us to accept--"

"On the contrary, it will be perfectly possible. Don't say no. I shall not be content with such an answer. Besides, when I get you there in the very best room in my house, in the care of my old Kate and faithful Fink, you will be my own children, and then you can certainly tell me what I can do for you."

"What you can do for us?" repeated Joel, with a glance at his sister.

"Brother!" exclaimed Hulda, as if divining his intention.

"Speak, my boy, speak!"

"Ah, well, Mister Sylvius, you can do us a great honor."

"How?"

"By consenting to be present at my sister Hulda's marriage, if it would not inconvenience you too much."

"Hulda's marriage!" exclaimed Sylvius Hogg. "What! my little Hulda is going to be married, and no one has said a word to me about it!"

"Oh, Mister Sylvius!" exclaimed the girl, her eyes filling with tears.

"And when is the marriage to take place?"

"As soon as it pleases God to bring her betrothed, Ole Kamp, back to us," replied the girl.