

CHAPTER XI.

Joel then proceeded to relate Ole Kamp's whole history. Sylvius Hogg, deeply moved, listened to the recital with profound attention. He knew all now. He even read Ole's letter announcing his speedy return. But Ole had not returned, and there had been no tidings from the missing one. What anxiety and anguish the whole Hansen family must have suffered!

"And I thought myself an inmate of a happy home!" he said to himself.

Still, after a little reflection, it seemed to him that the brother and sister were yielding to despair while there was still some room for hope. By counting these May and June days over and over again their imaginations had doubled the number, as it were.

The professor, therefore, concluded to give them his reasons for this belief, not feigned, but really sensible and plausible reasons that would also account for the delay of the "Viking."

Nevertheless his face had become very grave, for the poor girl's evident grief touched him deeply.

"Listen to me, my children," said he. "Sit down here by me, and let us talk the matter over calmly."

"Ah! what can you say to comfort us?" cried Hulda, whose heart was full to overflowing.

"I shall tell you only what I really and truly think," replied the professor. "I have been thinking over all that Joel just told me, and it seems to me that you are more anxious and despondent than you have any real cause to be. I would not arouse any false hopes, but we must view matters as they really are."

"Alas! Mister Sylvius," replied Hulda, "my poor Ole has gone down with the 'Viking,' and I shall never see him again!"

"Sister, sister!" exclaimed Joel, "becalm, I beseech you, and hear what Mister Sylvius has to say."

"Yes, be calm, my children, and let us talk the matter over quietly. It was between the fifteenth and twentieth of May that Ole expected to return to Bergen, was it not?"

"Yes; and it is now the ninth of June."

"So the vessel is only twenty days overdue, if we reckon from the latest date appointed for the return of the 'Viking.' That is enough to excite anxiety, I admit; still, we must not expect the same punctuality from a sailing-vessel as from a steamer."

"I have told Hulda that again and again, and I tell her so yet," interrupted Joel.

"And you are quite right, my boy. Besides, it is very possible that the 'Viking' is an old vessel, and a slow sailer, like most Newfoundland ships, especially when heavily laden. On the other hand, we have had a great deal of bad weather during the past few weeks, and very possibly the vessel did not sail at the date indicated in Ole's letter. In that case a week's delay in sailing would be sufficient to account for the non-arrival of the 'Viking' and for your failure to receive a letter from your lover. What I say is the result of serious reflection. Besides, how do you know but the instructions given to the captain of the 'Viking' authorize him to take his cargo to some other port, according to the state of the market?"

"In that case, Ole would have written," replied Hulda, who could not even be cheered by this hope.

"What is there to prove that he did not write?" retorted the professor. "If he did, it is not the 'Viking' that is behind time, but the American mail. Suppose, for instance, that Ole's ship touched at some port in the United States, that would explain why none of his letters have yet reached Europe."

"The United States, Mister Sylvius!"

"That sometimes happens, and it is only necessary to miss one mail to leave one's friends without news for a long time. There is, at all events, one very easy thing for us to do; that is to make inquiries of some of the Bergen shipowners. Are you acquainted with any of them?"

"Yes," replied Joel, "Messrs. Help Bros."

"Help Bros., the sons of old Help?"

"Yes."

"Why, I know them, too; at least, the younger brother, Help, Junior, they call him, though he is not far from my own age, and one of my particular friends. He has often dined with me in Christiania. Ah, well, my children, I can soon learn through him all that can be ascertained about the 'Viking.' I'll write him this very day, and if need be I'll go and see him."

"How kind you are, Mister Sylvius!" cried Hulda and Joel in the same breath.

"No thanks, if you please; I won't allow them. Did I ever thank you for what you did for me up there? And now I find an opportunity to do you a good turn, and here you are all in a flutter."

"But you were just talking of returning to Christiania," remarked Joel.

"Well, I shall go to Bergen instead, if I find it necessary to go to Bergen."

"But you were about to leave us, Mister Sylvius," said Hulda.

"Well, I have changed my mind, that is all. I am master of my own actions, I suppose; and I sha'n't go until I see you safely out of this trouble, that is, unless you are disposed to turn me out-of-doors--"

"What can you be thinking of, Mister Sylvius?"

"I have decided to remain in Dal until Ole's return. I want to make the acquaintance of my little Hulda's betrothed. He must be a brave, honest fellow, of Joel's stamp, I am inclined to think."

"Yes, exactly like him," replied Hulda.

"I was sure of it!" exclaimed the professor, whose cheerfulness had returned, at least apparently.

"Ole is Ole, Mister Sylvius," said Joel, "and that is equivalent to saying that he is the best-hearted fellow in the world."

"I believe you, my dear Joel, and what you say only makes me the more anxious to see him. I sha'n't have to wait long. Something tells me that the 'Viking' will soon come safely into port."

"God grant it!"

"And why should He not hear your prayer? Yes, I shall certainly attend Hulda's wedding, as you have been kind enough to invite me to it. The Storthing will have to do without me a few weeks longer, that is all. It would have been obliged to grant me a much longer leave of absence if you had let me fall into the Rjukanfos as I deserved."

"How kind it is in you to say this, Mister Sylvius, and how happy you make us!"

"Not as happy as I could wish, my friends, as I owe my life to you, and I don't know--"

"Oh! please, please say no more about that trifle."

"Yes, I shall. Come now, who drew me out of the frightful jaws of the Maristien? Who risked their own lives to save me? Who brought me to the inn at Dal, and cared for me, and nursed me without any assistance from the Faculty? Oh! I am as stubborn as an old cart-horse, I assure you, and I have made up my mind to attend the marriage of Hulda to Ole

Kamp, and attend it I shall!"

Hopefulness is contagious, and how could any one resist such confidence as Sylvius Hogg displayed? A faint smile crept over poor Hulda's face. She longed to believe him; she only asked to hope.

"But we must recollect that the days are passing very rapidly," continued Sylvius Hogg, "and that it is high time we began our preparations for the wedding."

"They are already begun, Mister Sylvius," replied Hulda. "In fact, they were begun more than three weeks ago."

"So much the better; but in that case, we must take good care not to allow anything to interrupt them."

"Interrupt them!" repeated Joel. "Why, everything is in readiness."

"What, the wedding-dress, the bodice with its silver clasps, the belt and its pendants?"

"Even the pendants."

"And the radiant crown that will make you look like a saint, my little Hulda?"

"Yes"

"And the invitations are written?"

"All written," replied Joel, "even the one to which we attach most importance, yours."

"And the bride-maid has been chosen from among the sweetest maidens of the Telemark?"

"And the fairest, Mister Sylvius," added Joel, "for it is Mademoiselle Siegfrid of Bamble."

"From the tone in which he uttered those words, and the way in which he blushed as he uttered them, I judge that Mademoiselle Siegfrid Helmboe is destined to become Madame Joel Hansen of Dal," said the professor, laughing.

"Yes, Mr. Sylvius," replied Hulda.

"Good! so there is a fair prospect of yet another wedding," exclaimed Sylvius Hogg. "And as I feel sure that I shall be honored with an invitation, I can do no less than accept it here and now. It certainly looks as if I should be obliged to resign my seat in the Storthing, for I really don't see how I am to find time to attend its sessions. But never mind, I will be your best man, Joel, after first serving in

that capacity at your sister's wedding. You certainly are making me do just what you like, or rather what I like. Kiss me, little Hulda! Give me your hand, my boy, and now let me write to my friend Help, Junior, of Bergen."

The brother and sister left the apartment of which the professor had threatened to take permanent possession, and returned to their daily tasks with rather more hopeful hearts.

Sylvius Hogg was left alone.

"Poor child! poor child!" he murmured. "Yes, I have made her forget her sorrow for a few moments. But the delay has been a long one; and the sea is very rough at this season of the year. What if the 'Viking' has indeed gone down, and Ole should never return!"

A moment afterward the professor was busily engaged in writing to his Bergen friend. He asked for the fullest possible particulars in regard to everything connected with the "Viking" and her cruise, and inquired if some event, unforeseen or otherwise, had made it necessary to send the vessel to a different port from that for which it was originally destined. He also expressed a strong desire to hear as soon as possible how the shipping merchants and sailors of Bergen explained the delay. In short, he begged his friend Help to give him all possible information in regard to the matter by return mail.

This urgent letter also explained Sylvius Hogg's interest in the mate of the "Viking," the invaluable service rendered him by the young man's betrothed, and the pleasure it would afford him to be able to give some encouragement to Dame Hansen's children.

As soon as this letter was finished Joel took it to Moel so it would go on the following day. It would reach Bergen on the eleventh, so a reply to it ought to be received on the evening of the twelfth or the morning of the thirteenth at the very latest.

Nearly three days of dreary waiting! How interminable they seemed! Still, by dint of reassuring words and encouraging arguments, the professor contrived to alleviate the painful suspense. Now he knew Hulda's secret, was there not a topic of conversation ever ready? And what a consolation it was to Joel and his sister to be able to talk of the absent one!

"I am one of the family now," Sylvius Hogg repeated again and again. "Yes, I am like an uncle that has just arrived from America or some foreign land."

And as he was one of the family, they must have no more secrets from him.

Of course he had not failed to notice the children's constrained manner toward their mother, and he felt satisfied that the reserve the

parent displayed had its origin in something besides the uneasiness she felt on Ole Kamp's account. He thought he might venture to question Joel; but the latter was unable to give any satisfactory reply. The professor then ventured to sound Dame Hansen on the subject, but she was so uncommunicative that he was obliged to abandon all hope of obtaining any knowledge of her secret until some future day.

As Sylvius Hogg had predicted, the letter from Help, Junior, reached Dal on the morning of the thirteenth. Joel started out before daylight to meet the postman, and it was he who brought the letter into the large hall where the professor was sitting with Dame Hansen and her daughter.

There was a moment's silence. Hulda, who was as pale as death, was unable to utter a word so violent was the throbbing of her heart, but she seized the hand of her brother, who was equally agitated, and held it tightly.

Sylvius Hogg opened the letter and read it aloud.

To his great regret the missive contained only some very vague information; and the professor was unable to conceal his disappointment from the young people who listened to the letter with tears in their eyes.

The "Viking" had left Saint-Pierre-Miquelon on the date mentioned in Ole Kamp's last letter. This fact had been established by the reports received from other vessels which had reached Bergen since the "Viking's" departure from Newfoundland. These vessels had seen nothing of the missing ship on their homeward voyage, but they had encountered very bad weather in the neighborhood of Iceland. Still they had managed to weather the gales; so it was possible that the "Viking" had been equally fortunate, and had merely been delayed somewhere, or had put into some port for repairs. The "Viking" was a staunch craft, very substantially built, and commanded by Captain Frikel, of Hammersfest, a thoroughly competent officer. Still, this delay was alarming, and if it continued much longer there would be good reason to fear that the "Viking" had gone down with all on board.

The writer regretted that he had no better news to give the young Hansens, and spoke of Ole Kamp in the most complimentary terms. He concluded his letter by assuring the professor of his sincere friendship, and that of his family, and by promising to send him without delay any intelligence that might be received at any Norwegian port, in relation to the "Viking."

Poor Hulda sunk half fainting into a chair while Sylvius Hogg was reading this letter, and she was sobbing violently when he concluded its perusal.

Joel, with his arms folded tightly upon his breast, listened in

silence, without daring to glance at his sister.

Dame Hansen, as soon as the reading was concluded, went up to her room. She seemed to have been expecting the blow.

The professor beckoned Hulda and her brother to his side. He wanted to talk with them calmly and sensibly on the subject, and he expressed a confidence that was singular, to say the least, after Help, Junior's letter. They had no reason to despair. Were there not countless examples of protracted delays while navigating the seas that lie between Norway and Newfoundland? Yes, unquestionably. And was not the "Viking" a strong craft, well officered, and manned by an excellent crew, and consequently in a much better condition than many of the vessels that had come safely into port? Most assuredly.

"So let us continue to hope," he added, "and wait. If the 'Viking' had been wrecked between Iceland and Newfoundland the numerous vessels that follow the same route to reach Europe would certainly have seen some trace of the disaster. But no, not a single floating plank or spar did they meet on the whole of this route, which is so much frequented at the conclusion of the fishing season. Still, we must take measures to secure information of a more positive nature. If we receive no further news of the 'Viking' during the coming week, nor any letter from Ole, I shall return to Christiania and ask the Naval Department to make careful inquiries, and I feel sure that the result will prove eminently satisfactory to all concerned."

In spite of the hopeful manner assumed by the professor, Joel and Hulda both felt that he did not speak as confidently as he had spoken before the receipt of the letter from Bergen--a letter whose contents gave them little if any grounds for hope. In fact, Sylvius Hogg no longer dared to venture any allusion to the approaching marriage of Hulda and Ole Kamp, though he said to himself again and again:

"No, no, it is impossible! Ole Kamp never cross the threshold of Dame Hansen's house again? Ole not marry Hulda? Nothing will ever make me believe such a misfortune possible."

He was perfectly sincere in this conviction. It was due to the energy of his character, to a spirit of hopefulness that nothing could crush. But how could he hope to convince others, especially those whom the fate of the "Viking" affected so directly?

A few days were allowed to elapse. Sylvius Hogg, who was now entirely well, took a long walk every day, and persuaded Hulda and her brother to accompany him. One day all three of them went up the valley of Vesfjorddal half-way to the falls of the Rjukan. The next day they went to Moel and Lake Tinn. Once they were even absent twenty-four hours. This time they prolonged their excursion to Bamble, where the professor made the acquaintance of Farmer Helmboe and his daughter Siegfrid. What a cordial welcome the latter gave to her friend Hulda, and what words of tenderness she found to console her!

Here, too, Sylvius Hogg did all in his power to encourage these worthy people. He had written to the Navy Department, and the government was investigating the matter. Ole would certainly return at no distant day. He might drop in upon them, indeed, at any moment. No; the wedding would not have to be postponed more than six weeks! The good man seemed so thoroughly convinced of all this, that his auditors were influenced rather by his firm conviction than by his arguments.

This visit to the Helmboe family did the young Hansens good, and they returned home much calmer than they went away.

At last the fifteenth of June came. The "Viking" was now exactly one month overdue; and as the distance from Newfoundland to the coast of Norway is comparatively short, this delay was beyond all reason, even for a sailing-vessel.

Hulda seemed to have abandoned all hope; and her brother could not find a single word to say by way of encouragement. In the presence of these poor, unhappy creatures, the professor realized the utter futility of any well-meant attempt at consolation. Hulda and Joel crossed the threshold only to stand and gaze in the direction of Moel, or to walk up the road leading to Rjukanfos. Ole Kamp would probably come by the way of Bergen, but he might come by way of Christiania if the destination of the "Viking" had been changed. The sound of an approaching kariol, a hasty cry, the form of a man suddenly rounding

a curve in the road made their hearts beat wildly; but all for naught. The good people of Dal were also eagerly watching. Not unfrequently they went half-way to meet the postman. Everybody was deeply interested, for the Hansen family was exceedingly popular in the neighborhood; and poor Ole was almost a child of the Telemark. But no letter came from Bergen or Christiania giving news of the absent one.

Nothing new occurred on the sixteenth. Sylvius Hogg could scarcely restrain his restlessness. He began to understand that he must proceed to act in person, so he announced to his friends that if no news was received on the following day he should go to Christiania and satisfy himself that nothing had been left undone. Of course, it was hard for him to leave Hulda and Joel, but there was no help for it; and he would return as soon as his task was accomplished.

On the seventeenth a greater part of the most wretched day they had ever spent together passed without bringing any new developments. It had rained incessantly since early morning; the wind was blowing a gale, and the rain dashed fiercely against the window on the side of the house nearest the Maan.

Seven o'clock came. They had just finished dinner, which had been eaten in profound silence, as if in a house of mourning. Even Sylvius Hogg had been unable to keep up the conversation. What could he say that he had not already said a hundred times before?

"I shall start for Christiania to-morrow morning," he remarked at last. "Joel, I wish you would procure a kariol and drive me to Moel."

"Very well, Mr. Sylvius. But wouldn't you like me to accompany you further?"

The professor shook his head, with a meaning glance at Hulda, for he did not want to see her separated from her brother.

Just then a sound, which was as yet scarcely audible, was heard on the road in the direction of Moel. They all listened breathlessly. Soon all doubts vanished. It was the sound of an approaching kariol coming swiftly toward Dal. Was the occupant some traveler who intended to spend the night at the inn? This was scarcely probable, as tourists rarely arrived at so late an hour.

Hulda sprung up trembling in every limb. Joel went to the door, opened it and looked out.

The noise grew louder. It was certain the clatter of horse's hoofs blended with, the roll of kariol wheels; but the storm without was so violent that Joel was obliged to close the door.

Sylvius Hogg tramped up and down the room in a perfect fever of impatience. Joel and his sister held each other tightly by the hand.

The kariol could not be more than twenty yards from the house now.

Would it pause or go by?

The hearts of all three throbbed to suffocation.

The kariol stopped. They heard a voice calling; but it was not the voice of Ole Kamp!

Almost immediately some one rapped at the door.

Joel opened it.

A man stood upon the threshold.

"Is Mr. Sylvius Hogg here?" he asked.

"I am he," replied the professor. "Who are you, my friend?"

"A messenger sent to you by the Secretary of the Navy at Christiania."

"Have you a letter for me?"

"Yes, sir; here it is."

And the messenger handed him a large envelope sealed with the Government seal.

Hulda's limbs tottered under her, and her brother sprung forward and placed her in a chair. Neither of them dared to ask Sylvius Hogg to open the letter.

At last he broke the seal and read the following:

"MR. PROFESSOR,--In reply to your last letter, I inclose a paper picked up at sea on the 3d instant by a Danish vessel. Unfortunately this discovery dispels any lingering doubt as to the fate of the 'Viking'--"

Sylvius Hogg, without taking time to read the rest of the letter, drew the paper from the envelope. He looked at it; he turned it over.

It was a lottery ticket bearing the number 9672.

On the other side of the ticket were the following lines:

"May 3d.

"DEAREST HULDA,--The 'Viking' is going down. I have only this ticket left of all I hoped to bring back to you. I intrust it to God's hands, hoping that it may reach you safely; and as I shall not be there, I beseech you to be present at the drawing. Accept the ticket with my last thought of you. Hulda, do not forget me in your prayers.

Farewell, my beloved, farewell!

"OLE KAMP."