

CHAPTER XIV.

The day that Sylvius Hogg left Bergen proved an eventful one at the inn.

After the professor's departure the house seemed deserted. It almost seemed as if the kind friend of the young Hansens had taken away with him, not only the last hope, but the life of the family, and left only a charnel-house behind him.

During the two days that followed no guests presented themselves at the inn. Joel had no occasion to absent himself, consequently, but could remain with Hulda, whom he was very unwilling to leave alone with her own thoughts.

Dame Hansen seemed to become more and more a prey to secret anxiety. She seemed to feel no interest in anything connected with her children, not even in the loss of the "Viking." She lived a life apart, remaining shut up in her own room, and appearing only at meal-time. When she did address a word to Hulda or Joel it was only to reproach them directly or indirectly on the subject of the lottery-ticket, which neither of them felt willing to dispose of at any price. Offers for the ticket continued to pour in from every corner of the globe. A positive mania seemed to have seized certain brains. Such a ticket must certainly be predestined to win the prize

of one hundred thousand marks--there could be no doubt of it, so said every one. A person would have supposed there was but one ticket in the lottery, and that the number of it was 9672. The Manchester man and the Bostonian were still at the head of the list. The Englishman had outbid his rival by a few pounds, but he, in turn, was soon distanced by an advance of several hundred dollars. The last bid was one of eight thousand marks--and it could be explained only as the result of positive madness, unless it was a question of national pride on this part of an American and an Englishman.

However this may have been Hulda refused all these offers, and her conduct excited the bitter disapproval of Dame Hansen.

"What if I should order you to sell this ticket? Yes, order you to sell it," she said to her daughter one day.

"I should be very sorry, mother, but I should be obliged to refuse."

"But if it should become absolutely necessary, what then?"

"But how can that be possible?" asked Joel.

Dame Hansen made no reply. She had turned very pale on hearing this straightforward question, and now withdrew, muttering some incoherent words.

"There is certainly something wrong," remarked Joel. "There must be some difficulty between mother and Sandgoist."

"Yes, brother, we must be prepared for some serious complications in the future."

"Have we not suffered enough during the past few weeks, my poor Hulda? What fresh catastrophe threatens us?"

"How long Monsieur Sylvius stays!" exclaimed Hulda, without paying any apparent heed to the question. "When he is here I feel less despondent."

"And yet, what can he do for us?" replied Joel.

What could there have been in Dame Hansen's past that she was unwilling to confide to her children? What foolish pride prevented her from revealing to them the cause of her disquietude? Had she any real cause to reproach herself? And on the other hand, why did she endeavor to influence her daughter in regard to Ole Kamp's ticket, and the price that was to be set upon it? Why did she seem so eager to dispose of it, or rather, to secure the money that had been offered for it? Hulda and Joel were about to learn.

On the morning of the 4th Joel escorted his sister to the little chapel where she went every morning to pray for the lost one. Her

brother always waited for her, and accompanied her back to the house.

That day, on returning, they both perceived Dame Hansen in the distance, walking rapidly in the direction of the inn. She was not alone. A man was walking beside her--a man who seemed to be talking in a loud voice, and whose gestures were vehement and imperious.

Hulda and her brother both paused suddenly.

"Who is that man?" inquired Joel.

Hulda advanced a few steps.

"I know him," she said at last.

"You know him?"

"Yes, it is Sandgoist."

"Sandgoist, of Drammen, who came here during my absence?"

"Yes."

"And who acted in such a lordly way that he would seem to have mother, and us, too, perhaps, in his power?"

"The same, brother; and he has probably come to make us feel his power to-day."

"What power? This time I will know the object of his visit."

Joel controlled himself, though not without an evident effort, and followed his sister.

In a few moments Dame Hansen and Sandgoist reached the door of the inn. Sandgoist crossed the threshold first; then the door closed upon Dame Hansen and upon him, and both of them entered the large parlor.

As Joel and Hulda approached the house the threatening voice of Sandgoist became distinctly audible. They paused and listened; Dame Hansen was speaking now, but in entreating tones.

"Let us go in," remarked Joel.

Hulda entered with a heavy heart; Joel was trembling with suppressed anger and impatience.

Sandgoist sat enthroned in the big arm-chair. He did not even take the trouble to rise on the entrance of the brother and sister. He merely turned his head and stared at them over his spectacles.

"Ah! here is the charming Hulda, if I'm not mistaken," he exclaimed in

a tone that incensed Joel even more deeply.

Dame Hansen was standing in front of the man in an humble almost cringing attitude, but she instantly straightened herself up, and seemed greatly annoyed at the sight of her children.

"And this is her brother, I suppose?" added Sandgoist.

"Yes, her brother," retorted Joel.

Then, advancing until within a few steps of the arm-chair, he asked, brusquely:

"What do you want here?"

Sandgoist gave him a withering look; then, in a harsh voice, and without rising, he replied:

"You will soon learn, young man. You happen in just at the right time. I was anxious to see you, and if your sister is a sensible girl we shall soon come to an understanding. But sit down, and you, too, young woman, had better do the same."

Sandgoist seemed to be doing the honors of his own house, and Joel instantly noted the fact.

"Ah, ha! you are displeased! What a touchy young man you seem to be!"

"I am not particularly touchy that I know of, but I don't feel inclined to accept civilities from those who have no right to offer them."

"Joel!" cried Dame Hansen.

"Brother, brother!" exclaimed Hulda, with an imploring look.

Joel made a violent effort to control himself, and to prevent himself from yielding to his desire to throw this coarse wretch out of the window, he retired to a corner of the room.

"Can I speak now?" inquired Sandgoist.

An affirmative sign from Dame Hansen was all the answer he obtained, but it seemed to be sufficient.

"What I have to say is this," he began, "and I would like all three of you to listen attentively, for I don't fancy being obliged to repeat my words."

That he spoke like a person who had an indisputable right to his own way was only too evident to each and every member of the party.

"I have learned through the newspapers," he continued, "of the misfortune which has befallen a certain Ole Kamp--a young seaman of Bergen--and of a lottery-ticket that he bequeathed to his betrothed, Hulda Hansen, just as his ship, the 'Viking,' was going down. I have also learned that the public at large feels convinced that this will prove the fortunate ticket by reason of the peculiar circumstances under which it was found. I have also learned that some very liberal offers for the purchase of this ticket have been received by Hulda Hansen."

He was silent for a moment, then:

"Is this true?" he added.

He was obliged to wait some time for an answer to this question.

"Yes, it is true," replied Joel, at last. "And what of it, if you please?"

"These offers are, in my opinion, the result of a most absurd and senseless superstition," continued Sandgoist, "but for all that, they will continue to be made, and to increase in amount, as the day appointed for the drawing approaches. Now, I am a business man myself, and I have taken it into my head that I should like to have a hand in this little speculation myself, so I left Drammen yesterday to come to Dal to arrange for the transfer of this ticket, and to beg Dame Hansen

to give me the preference over all other would-be purchasers."

Hulda was about to make Sandgoist the same answer she had given to all offers of this kind, though his remarks had not been addressed directly to her, when Joel checked her.

"Before replying, I should like to ask Monsieur Sandgoist if he knows to whom this ticket belongs?" he said haughtily.

"To Hulda Hansen, I suppose."

"Very well; then it is to Hulda Hansen that this application should be addressed."

"My son!" hastily interposed Dame Hansen.

"Let me finish, mother," continued Joel. "This ticket belonged originally to our cousin, Ole Kamp, and had not Ole Kamp a perfect right to bequeath it to his betrothed?"

"Unquestionably," replied Sandgoist.

"Then it is to Hulda Hanson that you must apply, if you wish to purchase it."

"So be it, Master Formality," retorted Sandgoist. "I now ask Hulda to

sell me this ticket Number 9672 that Ole Kamp bequeathed to her."

"Monsieur Sandgoist," the young girl answered in firm but quiet tones, "I have received a great many offers for this ticket, but they have been made in vain. I shall say to you exactly what I have said to others. If my betrothed sent me this ticket with his last farewell upon it it was because he wished me to keep it, so I will not part with it at any price."

Having said this Hulda turned, as if to leave the room, evidently supposing that the conversation so far as she was concerned had been terminated by her refusal, but at a gesture from her mother she paused.

An exclamation of annoyance had escaped Dame Hansen, and Sandgoist's knitted brows and flashing eyes showed that anger was beginning to take possession of him.

"Yes, remain, Hulda," said he. "This is not your final answer. If I insist it is because I certainly have a right to do so. Besides, I think I must have stated the case badly, or rather you must have misunderstood me. It is certain that the chances of this ticket have not increased because the hand of a shipwrecked seaman placed it in a bottle and it was subsequently recovered; still, the public seldom or never reasons, and there is not the slightest doubt that many persons desire to become the owners of it. They have already offered to

purchase it, and other offers are sure to follow. It is simply a business transaction, I repeat, and I have come to propose a good trade to you."

"You will have some difficulty in coming to an understanding with my sister, sir," replied Joel, ironically. "When you talk business to her she replies with sentiment."

"That is all idle talk, young man," replied Sandgoist. "When my explanation is concluded you will see that however advantageous the transaction may be to me it will be equally so to her. I may also add that it will be equally so to her mother, Dame Hansen, who is personally interested in the matter."

Joel and Hulda exchanged glances. Were they about to learn the secret Dame Hansen had so long concealed from them?

"I do not ask that this ticket shall be sold to me for what Ole Kamp paid for it," continued Sandgoist. No! Right or wrong, it has certainly acquired an increased financial value, and I am willing to make a sacrifice to become the owner of it."

"You have already been told that Hulda has refused much better offers than yours," replied Joel.

"Indeed!" exclaimed Sandgoist. "Much better offers, you say. How do

you know?"

"Whatever your offer may be, my sister refuses it, and I approve of her decision."

"Ah! am I dealing with Joel or Hulda Hansen, pray?"

"My sister and I are one," retorted Joel. "It would be well for you to become satisfied of this fact, as you seem to be ignorant of it."

Sandgoist shrugged his shoulders, but without being at all disconcerted, for like a man who is sure of his arguments, he replied:

"When I spoke of the price I was willing to pay for the ticket, I ought to have told you that I could offer inducements which Hulda Hansen can hardly reject if she takes any interest in the welfare of her family."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and it would be well for you, young man, to understand, in your turn, that I did not come to Dal to beg your sister to sell me this ticket. No, a thousand times no."

"For what, then?"

"I do not ask for it, I demand it. I will have it."

"And by what right?" exclaimed Joel, "and how dare you, a stranger, speak in this way in my mother's house?"

"By the right every man has to speak as he pleases, and when he pleases, in his own house," retorted Sandgoist.

"In his own house?"

Joel, in his indignation, stepped threateningly toward Sandgoist, who, though not easily frightened, sprung hastily out of his arm-chair. But Hulda laid a detaining hand upon her brother's arm, while Dame Hansen, burying her face in her hands, retreated to the other end of the room.

"Brother, look at her!" whispered the young girl.

Joel paused suddenly. A glance at his mother paralyzed him. Her very attitude revealed how entirely Dame Hansen was in this scoundrel's power.

Sandgoist, seeing Joel's hesitation, recovered his self-possession, and resumed his former seat.

"Yes, in his own house," he continued in a still more arrogant voice.

"Ever since her husband's death, Dame Hansen has been engaging in

unsuccessful speculations. After losing the small fortune your father left at his death, she was obliged to borrow money of a Christiania banker, offering this house as security for a loan of fifteen thousand marks. About a year ago I purchased the mortgage, and this house will consequently become my property--and very speedily--if I am not paid when this mortgage becomes due."

"When is it due?" demanded Joel.

"On the 20th of July, or eighteen days from now," replied Sandgoist. "Then, whether you like it or not, I shall be in my own house here."

"You will not be in your own house here until that date, even if you are not paid at that time," retorted Joel, "and I forbid you to speak as you have been doing in the presence of my mother and sister."

"He forbids me--me!" exclaimed Sandgoist. "But how about his mother--what does she say?"

"Speak, mother!" cried Joel, approaching Dame Hansen, and endeavoring to remove her hands from her face.

"Joel, my brother," exclaimed Hulda. "I entreat you, for my sake, to be calm."

Dame Hansen bowed her head upon her breast, not daring to meet

her son's searching eyes. It was only too true that she had been endeavoring to increase her fortune by rash speculations for several years past. The small sum of money at her disposal had soon melted away, and she had been obliged to borrow at a high rate of interest. And now the mortgage had passed into the hands of this Sandgoist--a heartless and unprincipled man--a well-known usurer, who was heartily despised throughout the country. Dame Hansen, however, had seen him for the first time when he came to Dal to satisfy himself in regard to the value of the property.

This was the secret that had weighed so heavily upon her. This, too, explained her reserve, for she had not dared to confide in her children. This was the secret she had sedulously kept from those whose future she had blighted.

Hulda scarcely dared to think of what she had just heard. Yes, Sandgoist was indeed a master who had the power to enforce his will! The ticket he wished to purchase would probably be worth nothing a fortnight hence, and if she did not consent to relinquish it certain ruin would follow--their house would be sold over their heads, and the Hansen family would be homeless and penniless.

Hulda dared not even glance at Joel, but Joel was too angry to pay any heed to these threats. He could think only of Sandgoist, and if the man continued to talk in this way the impetuous youth felt that he should not be able to control himself much longer.

Sandgoist, seeing that he had once more become master of the situation, grew even more arrogant and imperious in his manner.

"I want that ticket, and I intend to have it," he repeated. "In exchange for it I offer no fixed price, but I promise to extend the mortgage for one--two, or three years--Fix the date yourself, Hulda."

Hulda's heart was so deeply oppressed with anguish that she was unable to reply, but her brother answered for her.

"Ole Kamp's ticket can not be sold by Hulda Hansen. My sister refuses your offer, in spite of your threats. Now leave the house!"

"Leave the house," repeated Sandgoist. "I shall do nothing of the kind. If the offer I have made does not satisfy you I will go even further. In exchange for the ticket I offer you--I offer you--"

Sandgoist must certainly have felt an irresistible desire to possess this ticket--or at least he must have been convinced that the purchase would prove a most advantageous one to him, for he seated himself at a table upon which lay pen, ink, and paper, and a moment afterward he added:

"Here is what I offer."

It was a receipt for the amount of Dame Hansen's indebtedness--a receipt for the amount of the mortgage on the Dal property.

Dame Hansen cowered in her corner, with hands outstretched, and eyes fixed imploringly on her daughter.

"And now give me the ticket," cried Sandgoist, "I want it to-day--this very instant. I will not leave Dal without it"

As he spoke he stepped hastily toward the poor girl as if with the intention of searching her pockets, and wresting the ticket from her.

This was more than Joel could endure, especially when he heard Hulda's startled cry of "Brother! brother!"

"Get out of here!" he shouted, roughly. And seeing that Sandgoist showed no intention of obeying, the young man was about to spring upon him, when Hulda hastily interposed.

"Here is the ticket, mother," she cried.

Dame Hansen seized it, and as she exchanged it for Sandgoist's receipt her daughter sunk, almost fainting, into an arm-chair.

"Hulda! Hulda! Oh, what have you done?" cried Joel.

"What has she done," replied Dame Hansen. "Yes, I am guilty--for my children's sake I wished to increase the property left by their father, but instead I have reduced them to poverty. But Hulda has saved us all. That is what she has done. Thank you, Hulda, thank you."

Sandgoist still lingered. Joel perceived the fact.

"You are here still," he continued, roughly. And springing upon Sandgoist he seized him by the shoulders and hustled him out-of-doors in spite of his protests and resistance.