

CHAPTER II.

THE HOME OF A FISHERMAN IN NOROE.

The house of Mr. Hersebom was, like all others in Noroe, covered by a turf roof, and built of enormous timbers of fir-trees, in the Scandinavian fashion. The two large rooms were separated by a hall in the center, which led to the boat-house where the canoes were kept. Here were also to be seen the fishing-tackle and the codfish, which they dry and sell. These two rooms were used both as living-rooms and bedrooms. They had a sort of wooden drawer let into the wall, with its mattress and skins, which serve for beds, and are only to be seen at night. This arrangement for sleeping, with the bright panels, and the large open fire-place, where a blazing fire of wood was always kept burning, gave to the interior of the most humble homes an appearance of neatness and domestic luxury unknown to the peasantry of Southern Europe.

This evening all the family were gathered round the fire-place, where a huge kettle was boiling, containing "sillsallat," or smoked herring, salmon and potatoes.

Mr. Hersebom, seated in a high wooden chair, was making a net, which was his usual occupation when he was not on the sea, or drying his fish. He was a hardy fisherman, whose skin had been bronzed by exposure to the arctic breezes, and his hair was gray, although he was still in the

prime of life. His son Otto, a great boy, fourteen years old, who bore a strong resemblance to him, and who was destined to also become famous as a fisherman, sat near him. At present he was occupied in solving the mysteries of the rule of three, covering a little slate with figures, although his large hands looked as if they would be much more at home handling the oars.

Erik, seated before the dining-table, was absorbed in a Volume of history that Mr. Malarius had lent him. Katrina, Hersebom, the goodwife, was occupied peacefully with her spinning-wheel, while little Vanda, a blonde of ten years, was seated on a stool, knitting a large stocking with red wool.

At their feet a large dog of a yellowish-white color, with wool as thick as that of a sheep, lay curled up sound asleep.

For more than one hour the silence had been unbroken, and the copper lamp suspended over their heads, and filled with fish oil, lighted softly this tranquil interior.

To tell the truth, the silence became oppressive to Dame Katrina, who for some moments had betrayed the desire of unloosing her tongue.

At last she could keep quiet no longer.

"You have worked long enough for to-night," she said, "it is time to lay

the cloth for supper."

Without a word of expostulation. Erik lifted his large book, and seated himself nearer the fire-place, whilst Vanda laid aside her knitting, and going to the buffet brought out the plates and spoons.

"Did you say, Otto," asked the little girl, "that our Erik answered the doctor very well?"

"Very well, indeed," said Otto enthusiastically, "he talked like a book in fact. I do not know where he learned it all. The more questions the doctor asked the more he had to answer. The words came and came. Mr. Malarius was well satisfied with him."

"I am also," said Vanda, gravely.

"Oh, we were all well pleased. If you could have seen, mother, how the children all listened, with their mouths open. We were only afraid that our turn would come. But Erik was not afraid, and answered the doctor as he would have answered the master."

"Stop. Mr. Malarius is as good as the doctor, and quite as learned," cried Erik, whom their praises seemed to annoy.

The old fisherman gave him an approving smile.

"You are right, little boy," he said; "Mr. Malarius, if he chose, could be the superior of all the doctors in the town, and besides he does not make use of his scientific knowledge to ruin poor people."

"Has Doctor Schwaryencrona ruined any one?" asked Erik with curiosity.

"Well--if he has not done so, it has not been his fault. Do you think that I have taken any pleasure in the erection of his factory, which is sending forth its smoke on the borders of our fiord? Your mother can tell you that formerly we manufactured our own oil, and that we sold it easily in Bergen for a hundred and fifty to two hundred kroners a year. But that is all ended now--nobody will buy the brown oil, or, if they do, they pay so little for it, that it is not worth while to take the journey. We must be satisfied with selling the livers to the factory, and God only knows how this tiresome doctor has managed to get them for such a low price. I hardly realize forty-five kroners now, and I have to take twice as much trouble as formerly. Ah, well. I say it is not just, and the doctor would do better to look after his patients in Stockholm, instead of coming here to take away our trade by which we earn our bread."

After these bitter words they were all silent. They heard nothing for some minutes except the clicking of the plates, as Vanda arranged them, whilst her mother emptied the contents of the pot into a large dish.

Erik reflected deeply upon what Mr. Hersebom had said. Numerous

objections presented themselves to his mind, and as he was candor
itself--he could not help speaking.

"It seems to me that you have a right to regret your former profits,
father," he said, "but is it just to accuse Doctor Schwaryencrona of
having diminished them? Is not his oil worth more than the home-made
article?"

"Ah! it is clearer, that is all. It does not taste as strong as ours,
they say; and that is the reason why all the fine ladies in the town
prefer it, no doubt; but it does not do any more good to the lungs of
sick people than our oil."

"But for some reason or other they buy it in preference; and since it is
a very useful medicine it is essential that the public should experience
as little disgust as possible in taking it. Therefore, if a doctor finds
out a method of making it more palatable, is it not his duty to make use
of his discovery?"

Master Hersebom scratched his ear.

"Doubtless," he said, reluctantly, "it is his duty as a doctor, but that
is no reason why he should prevent poor fishermen from getting their
living."

"I believe the doctor's factory gives employment to three hundred,

whilst there were only twenty in Noroe at the time of which you speak," objected Erik, timidly.

"You are right, and that is why the business is no longer worth anything," said Hersebom.

"Come, supper is ready. Seat yourselves at the table," said Dame Katrina, who saw that the discussion was in danger of becoming unpleasantly warm.

Erik understood that further opposition on his part would be out of place, and he did not answer the last argument of his father, but took his habitual seat beside Vanda.

"Were the doctor and Mr. Malarius friends in childhood?" he asked, in order to give a turn to the conversation.

"Yes," answered the fisherman, as he seated himself at the table. "They were both born in Noroe, and I can remember when they played around the school-house, although they are both ten years older than I am. Mr. Malarius was the son of the physician, and Doctor Schwaryencrona only the son of a simple fisherman. But he has risen in the world, and they say that he is now worth millions, and that his residence in Stockholm is a perfect palace. Oh, learning is a fine thing."

After uttering this aphorism the brave man took a spoon to help the

smoking fish and potatoes, when a knock at the door made him pause.

"May I come in, Master Hersebom?" said a deep-toned voice. And without waiting for permission the person who had spoken entered, bringing with him a great blast of icy air.

"Doctor Schwaryencrona!" cried the three children, while the father and mother rose quickly.

"My dear Hersebom," said the doctor, taking the fisherman's hand, "we have not seen each other for many years, but I have not forgotten your excellent father, and thought I might call and see a friend of my childhood!"

The worthy man felt a little ashamed of the accusations which he had so recently made against his visitor, and he did not know what to say. He contented himself, therefore, with returning the doctor's shake of the hand cordially, and smiling a welcome, whilst his good wife was more demonstrative.

"Quick, Otto, Erik, help the doctor to take off his overcoat, and you, Vanda, prepare another place at the table," she said, for, like all Norwegian housekeepers, she was very hospitable.

"Will you do us the honor, doctor, of eating a morsel with us?"

"Indeed I would not refuse, you may be sure, if I had the least appetite; for I see you have a very tempting dish before you. But it is not an hour since I took supper with Mr. Malarius, and I certainly would not have called so early if I had thought you would be at the table. It would give me great pleasure if you would resume your seats and eat your supper."

"Oh, doctor!" implored the good wife, "at least you will not refuse some 'snorgas' and a cup of tea?"

"I will gladly take a cup of tea, but on condition that, you eat your supper first," answered the doctor, seating himself in the large arm-chair.

Vanda immediately placed the tea-kettle on the fire, and disappeared in the neighboring room. The rest of the family understanding with native courtesy that it would annoy their guest if they did not do as he wished, began to eat their supper.

In two minutes the doctor was quite at his ease. He stirred the fire, and warmed his legs in the blaze of the dry wood that Katrina had thrown on before going to supper. He talked about old times, and old friends; those who had disappeared, and those who remained, about the changes that had taken place even in Bergen.

He made himself quite at home, and, what was more remarkable, he

succeeded in making Mr. Hersebom eat his supper.

Vanda now entered carrying a large wooden dish, upon which was a saucer, which she offered so graciously to the doctor that he could not refuse it. It was the famous "snorgas" of Norway, slices of smoked reindeer, and shreds of herring, and red pepper, minced up and laid between slices of black bread, spiced cheese, and other condiments; which they eat at any hour to produce an appetite.

It succeeded so well in the doctor's case, that although he only took it out of politeness, he was soon able to do honor to some preserved mulberries which were Dame Katrina's special pride, and so thirsty that he drank seven or eight cups of tea.

Mr. Hersebom brought out a bottle of "schiedam," which he had bought of a Hollander.

Then supper being ended, the doctor accepted an enormous pipe which his host offered him, and smoked away to their general satisfaction.

By this time all feeling of constraint had passed away, and it seemed as if the doctor had always been a member of the family. They joked and laughed, and were the best of friends in the world, until the old clock of varnished wood struck ten.

"My good friends, it is growing late," said the doctor.

"If you will send the children to bed, we will talk about more serious matters."

Upon a sign from Dame Katrina, Otto, Erik, and Vanda bade them good-night and left the room.

"You wonder why I have come," said the doctor, after a moments' silence, fixing his penetrating glance upon the fisherman.

"My guests are always welcome," answered the fisherman, sententiously.

"Yes! I know that Noroe is famous for hospitality. But you must certainly have asked yourself what motive could have induced me to leave the society of my old friend Malarius and come to you. I am sure that Dame Hersebom has some suspicion of my motive."

"We shall know when you tell us," replied the good woman, diplomatically.

"Well," said the doctor, with a sigh, "since you will not help me, I must face it alone. Your son, Erik, Master Hersebom, is a most remarkable child."

"I do not complain of him," answered the fisherman.

"He is singularly intelligent, and well informed for his age," continued the doctor. "I questioned him to-day, in school, and I was very much surprised by the extraordinary ability which his answers displayed. I was also astonished, when I learned his name, to see that he bore no resemblance to you, nor indeed to any of the natives of this country."

The fisherman and his wife remained silent and motionless.

"To be brief," continued the doctor, with visible impatience, "this child not only interests me--he puzzles me. I have talked with Malarius, who told me that he was not your son, but that he had been cast on your shore by a shipwreck, and that you took him in and adopted him, bringing him up as your own, and bestowing your name upon him. This is true, is it not?"

"Yes, doctor," answered Hersebom, gravely.

"If he is not our son by birth, he is in love and affection," said Katrina, with moist eyes and trembling hands. "Between him, and Otto, and Vanda, we have made no difference--we have never thought of him only as our own child."

"These sentiments do you both honor," said the doctor, moved by the emotion of the brave woman. "But I beg of you, my friends, relate to me the history of this child. I have come to hear it, and I assure you that I wish him well."

The fisherman appeared to hesitate a moment. Then seeing that the doctor was waiting impatiently for him to speak, he concluded to gratify him.

"You have been told the truth," he said, regretfully; "the child is not our son. Twelve years ago I was fishing near the island at the entrance of the fiord, near the open sea. You know it is surrounded by a sand bank, and that cod-fish are plentiful there. After a good day's work, I drew in my lines, and was going to hoist my sail, when something white moving upon the water, about a mile off, attracted my attention. The sea was calm, and there was nothing pressing to hurry me home, so I had the curiosity to go and see what this white object was. In ten minutes I had reached it. It was a little wicker cradle, enveloped in a woolen cloth, and strongly tied to a buoy. I drew it toward me; an emotion which I could not understand seized me; I beheld a sleeping infant, about seven or eight months old, whose little fists were tightly clinched. He looked a little pale and cold, but did not appear to have suffered much from his adventurous voyage, if one might judge by his lusty screams when he awoke, as he did immediately, when he no longer felt himself rocked by the waves. Our little Otto was over two years old, and I knew how to manage such little rogues. I rolled up a bit of rag, dipped it in some eau de vie and water that I had with me, and gave it to him to suck. This quieted him at once, and he seemed to enjoy the cordial. But I knew that he would not be quiet long, therefore I made all haste to return to Noroe. I had untied the cradle and placed it in the boat at my feet; and while I attended to my sail, I watched the poor little one, and asked

myself where it could possibly have come from. Doubtless from some shipwrecked vessel. A fierce tempest had been raging during the night, and there had been many disasters. But by what means had this infant escaped the fate of those who had had the charge of him? How had they thought of tying him to the buoy? How many hours had he been floating on the waves? Where were his father and mother, those who loved him? But all these questions had to remain unanswered, the poor baby was unable to give us any information. In half an hour I was at home, and gave my new possession to Katrina. We had a cow then, and she was immediately pressed into service as a nurse for the infant. He was so pretty, so smiling, so rosy, when he had been fed and warmed before the fire, that we fell in love with him at once; just the same as if he had been our own. And then, you see, we took care of him; we brought him up, and we have never made any difference between him and our own two children. Is it not true, wife?" added Mr. Hersebom, turning toward Katrina.

"Very true, the poor little one," answered the good dame, drying her eyes, which this recital had filled with tears. "And he is our child now, for we have adopted him. I do not know why Mr. Malarius should say anything to the contrary."

"It is true," said Hersebom, and I do not see that it concerns any one but ourselves."

"That is so," said the doctor, in a conciliatory tone, "but you must not accuse Mr. Malarius of being indiscreet. I was struck with the

physiognomy of the child, and I begged my friend confidentially to relate his history. He told me that Erik believed himself to be your son, and that every one in Noroe had forgotten how he had become yours. Therefore, you see, I took care not to speak until the children had been sent to bed. You say that he was about seven or eight months old when you found him?"

"About that; he had already four teeth, the little brigand, and I assure you that it was not long before he began to use them," said Hersebom, laughing.

"Oh, he was a superb child," said Katrinn, eagerly. "He was so white, and strong, and plump; and such arms and legs. You should have seen them!"

"How was he dressed?" asked Dr. Schwaryencrona.

Hersebom did not answer, but his wife was less discreet.

"Like a little prince," she answered. "Imagine a robe of piquè, trimmed all over with lace, a pelisse of quilted satin, a cloak of white velvet, and a little cap; the son of a king could not have more. Everything he had was beautiful. But you can see for yourself, for I have kept them all just as they were. You may be sure that we did not dress the baby in them. Oh, no; I put Otto's little garments on him, which I had laid away, and which also served, later on, for Vanda. But his outfit is

here, and I will show it to you."

While she was speaking, the worthy woman knelt down before a large oaken chest, with an antique lock, and after lifting the lid, began searching the compartments.

She drew out, one by one, all the garments of which she had spoken, and displayed them with pride before the eyes of the doctor. She also showed the linen, which was exquisitely fine, a little quilt of silk, and a pair of white merino boots. All the articles were marked with the initials "E.D.," elegantly embroidered, as the doctor saw at a glance.

"'E.D.;' is that why you named the child Erik?" he asked.

"Precisely," answered Katrina, who it was evident enjoyed this exhibition, while her husband's face grew more gloomy. "See," she said, "this is the most beautiful of all. He wore it around his neck."

And she drew from its box a rattle of coral and gold, suspended from a little chain.

The initials "E.D." were here surrounded by a Latin motto, "Semper idem."

"We thought at first it was the baby's name, but Mr. Malarius told us it meant 'always the same,'" she continued, seeing that the doctor was

trying to decipher the motto.

"Mr. Malarius told you the truth," said the doctor. "It is evident the child belonged to a rich and distinguished family," he added, while Katrina replaced the babe's outfit in the oaken chest.

"Have you any idea what country he came from?"

"How could we know anything about it, since I found him on the sea?" replied Hersebom.

"Yes, but the cradle was attached to a buoy, you said, and it is customary on all vessels to write on the buoy the name of the ship to which it belongs," answered the doctor, fixing his penetrating eyes upon those of the fisherman.

"Doubtless," said the latter, hanging his head.

"Well, this buoy, what name did it bear?"

"Doctor, I am not a savant. I can read my own language a little, but as for foreign tongues--and then it was so long ago."

"However, you ought to be able to remember something about it--and doubtless you showed it to Mr. Malarius, with the rest of the articles--make a little effort, Mr. Hersebom. Was not this name

inscribed on the buoy, 'Cynthia'?"

"I believe it was something like that," answered the fisherman vaguely.

"It is a strange name. To what country does it belong in your judgment, Mr. Hersebom?"

"How should I know? Have I ever been beyond the shores of Noroe and Bergen, except once or twice to fish off the coast of Greenland and Iceland?" answered the good man, in a tone which grew more and more morose.

"I think it is either an English or a German name," said the doctor, taking no notice of his crossness. "It would be easy to decide on account of the shape of the letters, if I could see the buoy. Have you preserved it?"

"By my faith no. It was burnt up ages ago," answered Hersebom, triumphantly.

"As near as Mr. Malarius could remember, the letters were Roman," said the doctor, as if he were talking to himself--"and the letters on the linen certainly are. It is therefore probable that the 'Cynthia' was not a German vessel. I think it was an English one. Is not this your opinion, Mr. Hersebom?"

"Well, I have thought little about it," replied the fisherman. "Whether it was English, German, or Russian, makes no difference to me. For many years according to all appearances, they have lain beneath the sea, which alone could tell the secret."

"But you have doubtless made some effort to discover the family to whom the child belonged?" said the doctor, whose glasses seemed to shine with irony. "You doubtless wrote to the Governor of Bergen, and had him insert an advertisement in the journals?"

"I!" cried the fisherman, "I did nothing of the kind. God knows where the baby came from; why should I trouble myself about it? Can I afford to spend money to find his people, who perhaps care little for him? Put yourself in my place, doctor. I am not a millionaire, and you may be sure if we had spent all we had, we should have discovered nothing. I have done the best I could; we have raised the little one as our own son, we have loved him and taken care of him."

"Even more than the two others, if it were possible," interrupted Katrina, drying her eyes on the corner of her apron. "If we have anything to reproach ourselves for, it is for bestowing upon him too large a share of our tenderness."

"Dame Hersebom, you must not do me the injustice to suppose that your kindness to the little shipwrecked child inspires me with any other feeling than the greatest admiration," said the doctor.

"No, you must not think such a thing. But if you wish me to speak frankly--I must say that this tenderness has blinded you to your duty. You should have endeavored to discover the family of the infant, as far as your means permitted."

There was perfect silence for a few minutes.

"It is possible that we have done wrong," said Mr. Hersebom, who had hung his head under this reproach. "But what is done can not be altered. Erik belongs to us now, and I do not wish any one to speak to him about these old reminiscences."

"You need have no fear, I will not betray your confidence," answered the doctor, rising.

"I must leave you, my good friends, and I wish you good-night--a night free from remorse," he added, gravely.

Then he put on his fur cloak, and shook hands cordially with his hosts, and being conducted to the door by Hersebom, he took the road toward his factory.

The fisherman stood for a moment on the threshold, watching his retreating figure in the moonlight.

"What a devil of a man!" he murmured, as at last he closed his door.