

CHAPTER III.

MR. HERSEBOM'S REFLECTIONS.

The next morning Dr. Schwaryencrona had just finished breakfast with his overseer, after having made a thorough inspection of his factory when he saw a person enter whom he did not at first recognize as Mr. Hersebom.

He was clothed in his holiday suit: his embroidered waistcoat, his furred riding coat, and his high hat, and the fisherman looked very different to what he did in his working clothes. But what made the change more apparent, was the deep sadness and humility portrayed in his countenance. His eyes were red, and looked as if he had had no sleep all the night.

This was in fact the case. Mr. Hersebom who up to this time had never felt his conscience trouble him, had passed hours of sad remorse, on his mattress of skins.

Toward morning he had exchanged confidences with Dame Katrina, who had also been unable to close her eyes.

"Wife, I have been thinking of what the doctor said to us," he said, after several hours of wakefulness.

"I have been thinking of it also, ever since he left us," answered his worthy helpmate.

"It is my opinion that there is some truth in what he said, and that we have perhaps acted more egotistically than we should have done. Who knows but that the child may have a right to some great fortune, of which he is deprived by our negligence? Who knows if his family have not mourned for him these twelve years, and they could justly accuse us of having made no attempt to restore him to them?"

"This is precisely what I have been saying to myself," answered Katrina, sighing. "If his mother is living what frightful anguish the poor woman must have endured, in believing that her infant was drowned. I put myself in her place, and imagine that we had lost Otto in this manner. We would never have been consoled."

"It is not thoughts of his mother that trouble me, for according to all appearances, she is dead," said Hersebom, after a silence broken only by their sighs.

"How can we suppose that an infant of that age would travel without her, or that it would have been tied to a buoy and left to take its chances on the ocean, if she had been living?"

"That is true; but what do we know about it, after all. Perhaps she also has had a miraculous escape."

"Perhaps some one has taken her infant from her--this idea has often occurred to me," answered Hersebom. "Some one might be interested in his disappearance. To expose so young a child to such a hazardous proceeding is so extraordinary that such conjectures are possible, and in this case we have become accomplices of a crime--we have contributed to its success. Is it not horrible to think of?"

"And we thought we were doing such a good and charitable work in adopting the poor little one."

"Oh, it is evident that we had no malicious intentions. We nourished it, and brought it up as well as we were able, but that does not prevent me from seeing that we have acted rashly, and the little one will have a right to reproach us some of these days."

"We need not be afraid of that, I am sure. But it is too bad that we should feel at this late day that we have done anything for which we must reproach ourselves."

"How strange it is that the same action regarded from a different point of view, can be judged so differently. I never would have thought of such a thing. And yet a few words from the doctor seems to have turned my brain."

Thus these good people talked during the night.

The result of their nocturnal conversation was that Mr. Hersebom resolved to call upon the doctor, and ask him what they could do to make amends for the error of which they had been guilty.

Dr. Schwaryencrona did not revert to the conversation which had taken place the previous evening. He appeared to regard the visit of the fisherman as simply an act of politeness, and received him cordially, and began talking about the weather and the price of fish.

Mr. Hersebom tried to lead the conversation toward the subject which occupied his mind. He spoke of Mr. Malarius' school, and at last said plainly: "Doctor, my wife and I have been thinking all night about what you said to us last evening about the boy. We never thought that we were doing him a wrong in educating him as our son. But you have changed our opinion, and we want to know what you would advise us to do, in order to repair our fault. Do you think that we still ought to seek to find Erik's family?"

"It is never too late to do our duty," said the doctor, "although the task is certainly much more difficult now than it would have been at first."

"Will you interest yourself in the matter?"

"I will, with pleasure," answered the doctor; "and I promise you to use

every exertion to fulfill it, upon one condition: that is, that you let me take the boy to Stockholm."

If Mr. Hersebom had been struck on the head with a club, he would not have been more astonished than he was by this proposal.

"Intrust Erik to you! Send him to Stockholm! Why should I do this, doctor?" he asked, in an altered voice.

"I will tell you. My attention was drawn to the child, not only on account of his physical appearance, which was so different to that of his companions, but by his great intelligence and his evident taste for study. Before knowing the circumstances which had brought him to Noroe, I said to myself that it was a shame to leave a boy so gifted in a village school--even under such a master as Malarius; for here there is nothing to assist in the development of his exceptionally great faculties. There are no museums, nor scientific collections, nor libraries, nor competitors who are worthy of him. I felt a strong desire to give him the advantages of a complete education. You can understand that, after the confidence which you have bestowed upon me, I am more anxious to do so than before. You can see, Mr. Hersebom, that your adopted son belongs to some rich and distinguished family. If I succeed in finding them, would you wish to restore to them a child educated in a village, and deprived of this education, without which he will feel out of place among his kindred? It is not reasonable; and you are too sensible not to understand it."

Mr. Hersebom hung his head: without his being aware of it, two large tears rolled down his cheeks.

"But then," he said, "this would be an entire separation. Before we ever know whether the child will find his relations, he must be taken from his home. It is asking too much, doctor--asking too much of my wife. The child is happy with us. Why can he not be left alone, at least until he is sure of a better one?"

"Happy. How do you know that he will be so when he grows older? How can you tell whether he may not regret having been saved? Intelligent and superior as he will be, perhaps he would be stifled with the life which you would offer him in Noroe."

"But, doctor, this life which you disdain, is good enough for us. Why is it not good enough for him?"

"I do not disdain it," said the doctor. "Nobody admires and honors those who work more than I do. Do you believe, Mr. Hersebom, that I forget my birth? My father and grandfather were fishermen like yourself, and it is just because they were so far-seeing as to educate me, that I appreciate the value of it, and I would assure it to a child who merits it. It is his interest alone which guides me, I beg of you to believe."

"Ah--what do I know about it? Erik will be almost grown up when you have

made a gentleman of him, and he will not know how to use his arms. Then if you do not find his family, which is more than possible, since twelve years have passed since I found him, what a beautiful future we are preparing for him! Do you not see, doctor, that a fisherman's life is a brave one--better than any other: with a good boat under his feet and four or five dozen of cod-fish at the end of his lines, a Norwegian fisherman need have no fear, nor be indebted to any one. You say that Erik would not be happy leading such a life. Permit me to believe the contrary. I know the child well, he loves his books, but, above all, he loves the sea. It also almost seems as if he felt that he had been rocked upon it, and all the museums in the world would not console him for the loss of it."

"But we have the sea around us also at Stockholm," said the doctor, smiling--touched in spite of himself by this affectionate resistance.

"Well," said the fisherman, crossing his arms, "what do you wish to do? what do you propose, doctor?"

"There, you see, after all, the necessity of doing something. Well this is my proposition--Erik is twelve years old, nearly thirteen, and he appears to be highly gifted. We will say nothing about his origin--he is worthy of being supplied with the means of developing and utilizing his faculties; that is all we need trouble ourselves about at present. I am rich, and I have no children. I will undertake to furnish the means, and give him the best masters, and all possible facilities for profiting by

their instructions. I will do this for two years. During this time I will make inquiries, insert advertisements in the newspapers; make every possible exertion, move heaven and earth to discover his parents. If I do not find them in two years, we shall never do it. If his relatives are found, they will naturally decide his future career in life. If we do not find them, I will send Erik back to you. He will then be fifteen years old--he will have seen something of the world. The hour will have arrived to tell him the truth about his birth. Then aided by our advice, and the opinions of his teachers, he can choose what path he would prefer to follow. If he wishes to become a fisherman, I will not oppose it. If he wishes to continue his studies, I engage to furnish the means for him to follow any profession that he may choose. Does this seem a reasonable proposition to you?"

"More than reasonable. It is wisdom itself issuing from your lips, doctor," said Mr. Hersebom, overcome in spite of himself. "See what it is to have an education!" he continued, shaking his head. "The difficulty will be to repeat all you have said to my wife. When will you take the child away?"

"To-morrow. I can not delay my return to Stockholm any longer."

Mr. Hersebom heaved a deep sigh, which was almost a sob.

"To-morrow! So soon!" he said. "Well, what must be, must be. I will go and talk to my wife about it."

"Yes, do so, and consult Mr. Malarius also; you will find that he is of my opinion."

"I do not doubt it," answered the fisherman, with a sad smile.

He shook the hand which Dr. Schwaryencrona held out to him, and went away looking very thoughtful.

That evening before dinner the doctor again directed his steps toward the dwelling of Mr. Hersebom. He found the family assembled round the hearth, as they were the evening before, but not wearing the same appearance of peaceful happiness. The father was seated the furthest from the fire, silent, and with idle hands. Katrina, with tears in her eyes, held Erik's hands between her own, whose cheeks were reddened by the hope of the new destiny which seemed opening before him, but who looked sad at leaving all whom he loved, and who did not know what feeling he ought to yield to.

Little Vanda's face was hidden in her father's knees, and nothing could be seen except her long braids of golden hair. Otto, also greatly troubled at this proposed separation, sat motionless beside his brother.

"How sad and disconsolate you look!" said the doctor, stopping on the threshold. "If Erik were about to set out on a distant and most perilous expedition you could not show more grief. He is not going to do anything

of the kind, I assure you, my good friends. Stockholm is not at the antipodes, and the child is not going away forever. He can write to you, and I do not doubt that he will do so often. He is only going away to school, like so many other boys. In two years he will return tall, and well-informed, and accomplished, I hope. Is this anything to feel sad about? Seriously, it is not reasonable."

Katrina arose with the natural dignity of the peasant of the North.

"Doctor," she said, "God is my witness that I am profoundly grateful to you for what you propose to do for Erik--but we can not help feeling sad because of his departure. Mr. Hersebom has explained to me that it is necessary, and I submit. Do not think that I shall feel no regret."

"Mother," said Erik, "I will not go, if it causes you such pain."

"No, child," answered the worthy woman, taking him in her arms.

"Education is a benefit which we have no right to refuse you. Go, my son, and thank the doctor who has provided it for you, and prove to him by constant application to your studies that you appreciate his kindness."

"There, there," said the doctor, whose glasses were dimmed by a singular cloudiness, "let us rather speak of practical matters, that will be better. You know, do you not, that we must set out to-morrow very early, and that you must have everything ready. We will go by sleigh to Bergen,

and thence by railroad. Erik only needs a change of linen, I will procure everything else that is necessary at Stockholm."

"Everything shall be ready," answered Dame Hersebom.

"Vanda," she added, with Norwegian hospitality, "the doctor is still standing."

The little girl hurriedly pushed a large arm-chair toward him.

"I can not stay," said the doctor. "I promised my friend Malarius to dine with him, and he is waiting for me. Little girl," he said, laying his hand gently upon Vanda's blonde head, "I hope you do not wish me any harm because I am taking your brother away from you?"

"No, doctor," she answered gravely. "Erik will be happier with you--he was not intended to live in a village."

"And you, little one, will you be very unhappy without him?"

"The shore will seem deserted," she answered; "the seagulls will look for him without finding him, the little waves will be astonished because they no longer see him, and the house will seem empty, but Erik will be contented, because he will have plenty of books, and he will become a learned man."

"And his little sister will rejoice in his happiness--is it not so, my child?" said the doctor, kissing the forehead of the little girl. "And she will be proud of him when he returns--see we have arranged the whole matter--but I must hurry away. Good-bye until to-morrow."

"Doctor," murmured Vanda, timidly, "I wish to ask a favor of you!"

"Speak, child."

"You are going in a sleigh, you said. I wish with my papa's and mamma's permission to drive you to the first relay."

"Ah, ah! but I have already arranged that. Reguild, the daughter of my overseer, should do this."

"Yes, I know it, but she is willing that I should take her place, if you will authorize me to do so."

"Well, in that case you have only to obtain the permission of your father and mother."

"I have done so."

"Then you have mine also, dear child," said the doctor, and he took his departure.

The next morning when the sleigh stopped before the door of Mr. Hersebom little Vanda held the reins according to her desire, seated upon the front seat.

She was going to drive them to the next village, where the doctor would procure another horse and sleigh, and thus procure relays until he reached Bergen. This new kind of coachman always astonishes a stranger, but it is the custom in Norway and Sweden. The men would think it a loss of time to pursue such a calling, and it is not rare to see children of ten or twelve years of age managing heavy equipages with perfect ease.

The doctor was already installed in the back of the sleigh, nearly hidden by his furs. Erik took his seat beside Vanda, after having tenderly embraced his father and brother, who contented themselves by showing by their mute sadness the sorrow which his departure caused them; but the good Katrina was more open in the expression of her feelings.

"Adieu, my son!" she said, in the midst of her tears. "Never forget what you have learned from your poor parents--be honest, and brave, and never tell a lie. Work as hard as you can--always protect those who are weaker than yourself--and if you do not find the happiness you merit come back and seek it with us."

Vanda touched the horse which set out at a trot, and made the bells ring. The air was cold, and the road as hard as glass. Just above the

horizon a pale sun began to throw his golden beams upon the snowy landscape. In a few minutes Noroe was out of sight behind them.