

CHAPTER V.

THE THIRTEEN DAYS OF CHRISTMAS.

The next day Erik began his new life at school.

Dr. Schwaryencrona first took him to his tailors, and fitted him out with some new suits of clothes; then he introduced him to the principal of one of the best schools in town. It was called in Swedish "Hogre elementar larovek."

In this school were taught the ancient and modern languages, the elementary sciences, and all that it was necessary to learn before entering college. As in Germany and Italy, the students did not board in the college. They lived with their families in the town, with the professors, or wherever they could obtain comfortable accommodations. The charges are very moderate; in fact, they have been reduced almost to nothing. Large gymnasiums are attached to each of the higher classes, and physical culture is as carefully attended to as the intellectual.

Erik at once gained the head of his division. He learned everything with such extreme facility that he had a great deal of time to himself. The doctor therefore thought that it would be better for him to utilize his evenings by taking a course at the "Slodjskolan," the great industrial school of Stockholm. It was an establishment especially devoted to the

practice of the sciences, particularly to making experiments in physics and chemistry, and to geometrical constructions which are only taught theoretically in the schools.

Doctor Schwaryencrona judged rightly that the teachings of this school, which was one of the wonders of Stockholm, would give a new impetus to the rapid progress which Erik was making, and he hoped for great results from this double training.

His young protégé, proved worthy of the advantages which he procured for him. He penetrated the depths of the fundamental sciences, and instead of vague and superficial ideas, the ordinary lot of so many pupils, he stored up a provision of just, precise, and definite facts. The future development of these excellent principles could only be a question of time.

Hereafter he would be able to learn without difficulty the more elevated branches of these studies which would be required in college; in fact it would be only play to him.

The same service which Mr. Malarius had rendered him, in teaching him languages, history, and botany, the "Slodjskolan" now did for him by inculcating the A, B, C, of the industrial arts; without which the best teaching so often remains a dead letter.

Far from fatiguing Erik's brain, the multiplicity and variety of his

studies strengthened it much more than a special course of instruction could have done.

Besides, the gymnasium was always open to him to recruit his body when his studies were over; and here as well as in the school Erik stood first. On holidays he never failed to pay a visit to the sea which he loved with filial tenderness. He talked with the sailors and fishermen, and often brought home a fine fish, which was well received by Dame Greta.

This good woman had conceived a great affection for this new member of the household. Erik was so gentle, and naturally so courteous and obliging, so studious and so brave, that it was impossible to know him and not to like him. In eight days he had become a favorite with Mr. Bredejord and Mr. Hochstedt, as he was already with Doctor Schwaryencrona.

The only person who treated him with coldness was Kajsa. Whether the little fairy thought that her hitherto undisputed sovereignty in the house was in danger, or whether she bore Erik a grudge, because of the sarcasms which her aristocratic air toward him inspired in the doctor, nobody knew. However, she persisted in treating him with a disdainful coldness, which no courtesy or politeness on his part could overcome. Her opportunities of displaying her disdain were fortunately rare, for Erik was always either out-of-doors, or else busy in his own little room.

Time passed in the most peaceful manner, and without any notable incidents.

We will pass with our reader without further comment over the two years which Erik spent at school and return to Noroe.

Christmas had returned for the second time since Erik's departure. It is in all Central and Northern Europe the great annual festival; because it is coincident with the dull season in nearly all industries. In Norway especially, they prolong the festival for thirteen days.--"Tretten yule dage" (the thirteen days of Christmas), and they make it a season of great rejoicings. It is a time for family reunions, for dinners, and even for weddings.

Provisions are abundant, even in the poorest dwellings. Everywhere the greatest hospitality is the order of the day.

The "Yule ol," or Christmas beer, is drunk freely. Every visitor is offered a bumper in a wooden cup, mounted in gold, silver, or copper, which the poorest families possess, and which cups have been transmitted to them from time immemorial. The visitor must empty this cup, and exchange with his hosts the joyful wishes of the season, and for a happy New Year.

It is also at Christmas that the servants receive their new clothes;

which are often the best part of their wages--that the cows, and sheep, and even the birds of the air, receive a double ration, which is exceptionally large. They say in Norway of a "poor man," that he is so poor that he can not even give the sparrows their dinner at Christmas.

Of these thirteen traditional days, Christmas-eve is the gayest. It is the custom for the young girls and boys to go around in bands on their "schnee-schuhe," or snow-shoes, and stop before the houses, and sing in chorus the old national melodies. The clear voices suddenly sounding through the fresh night air, in the lonely valleys, with their wintery surroundings, have an odd and charming effect. The doors are immediately opened, the singers are invited to enter, and they offer them cake, dried apples, and ale; and often make them dance. After this frugal supper the joyous band depart, like a flock of gulls, to perform the same ceremony further away. Distances are regarded as nothing, for on their "schnee-schuhe," which are attached to their feet by leather straps, they glide over several miles with marvelous rapidity. The peasants of Norway also use, with these snow-shoes, a strong stick, to balance themselves, and help them along. This year the festival would be a joyous one for the Herseboms. They were expecting Erik.

A letter from Stockholm had announced that he would arrive that evening. Therefore Otto and Vanda could not sit still. Every moment they ran to the door, to see if he was coming. Dame Katrina, although she reproved them for their impatience, felt in the same way herself. Mr. Hersebom smoked his pipe silently, and was divided in his mind between a longing

to see his adopted son, and the fear that he would not be able to keep him with them very long.

For the fiftieth time, perhaps, Otto had gone to the door, when he gave a shout and cried out:

"Mother! Vanda! I believe it is he!"

They all rushed to the door. In the distance, on the road which led from Bergen, they saw a black object. It grew larger rapidly, and soon took the shape of a young man, clothed in gray cloth, wearing a fur cap, and carrying merrily over his shoulders a knapsack of green leather. He had on snow-shoes, and would soon be near enough to recognize.

The traveler perceived those who were watching before the door, and taking off his cap, he waved it around his head.

Two minutes later Erick was in the arms of Katrina, Otto, Vanda, and even Mr. Hersebom, who had left his arm-chair and advanced to the door.

They hugged him, and almost stifled him with caresses. They went into ecstasies over his improved appearance. Dame Katrina among them all could not get accustomed to it.

"What--is this the dear babe that I nursed on my knees?" she cried.

"This great boy, with such a frank and resolute air, with these strong

shoulders, this elegant form, and on whose lip I can already see signs of a mustache. Is it possible?"

The brave woman was conscious of feeling a sort of respect for her former nursling. She was proud of him, above all for the tears of joy which she saw in his eyes. For he also was deeply affected.

"Mother, is it really you," he exclaimed. "I can hardly believe that I am with you all again. The two years have seemed so long to me. I have missed you all, as I know you have missed me."

"Yes," said Mr. Hersebom, gravely. "Not a day has passed without our having spoken of you. Morning and evening, and at meal times, it was your name that was constantly on our lips. But you, my boy, you have not forgotten us in the grand city? You are contented to return and see the old country and the old house?"

"I am sure that you do not doubt it," said Erik, as he embraced them all. "You were always in my thoughts. But above all when the wind blew a gale. I thought of you, father. I said to myself, Where is he? Has he returned home in safety? And in the evening I used to read the meteorological bulletin in the doctor's newspaper, to see what kind of weather you had had on the coast of Norway; if it was the same as on the coast of Sweden?--and I found that you have severe storms more often than we have in Stockholm, which come from America, and beat on our mountains. Ah! how often I have wished that I could be with you in your

little boat to help you with the sail, and overcome all difficulties.

And on the other hand when the weather was fine it seemed to me as if I was in prison in that great city, between the tall three-story houses.

Yes! I would have given all the world to be on the sea for one hour, and to feel as formerly free, and joyfully exhilarated by the fresh air!"

A smile brightened the weather-beaten face of the fisherman.

"His books have not spoiled him," he said. "A joyful season and a happy New-Year to you, my child!" he added. "Come, let us go to the table. Dinner is only waiting for you."

When he was once more seated in his old place on the right hand of Katrina, Erik was able to look around him, and mark the changes that two years had made in the family. Otto was now a large, robust boy of sixteen years of age, and who looked twenty. As for Vanda, two years had added wonderfully to her size and beauty. Her countenance had become more refined. Her magnificent blonde hair, which lay in heavy braids upon her shoulders, formed around her forehead a light silvery cloud. Modest and sweet as usual, she busied herself, almost unconsciously, with seeing that no one wanted for anything.

"Vanda has grown to be a great girl!" said her mother, proudly. "And if you knew, Erik, how learned she has become, how hard she has worked and studied since you left us! She is the best scholar in the school now, and Mr. Malarius says she is his only consolation for no longer having

you among his pupils."

"Dear Mr. Malarius! how glad I shall be to see him again," said Erik.

"So our Vanda has become so learned, has she?" he replied with interest, while the young girl blushed up to the roots of her hair at these maternal praises.

"She has learned to play the organ also, and Mr. Malarius says that she has the sweetest voice of all the choir?"

"Oh, decidedly, it is a very accomplished young person whom I find on my return," Erik said, laughing, to relieve the embarrassment of his sister. "We must make her display all her talents to-morrow."

And without affectation he began to talk about all the good people of Noroe, asking questions about each one; inquiring for his old school-mates, and about all that had happened since he went away. He asked about their fishing adventures, and all the details of their daily life. Then on his part, he satisfied the curiosity of his family, by giving an account of his mode of life in Stockholm; he told them about Dame Greta, about Kajsa, and the doctor.

"That reminds me that I have a letter for you, father," he said, drawing it out of the inside pocket of his vest. "I do not know what it contains, but the doctor told me to take good care of it, for it was about me."

Mr. Hersebom took the letter, and laid it on the table by his side.

"Well!" said Erik, "are you not going to read it?"

"No," answered the fisherman, laconically.

"But, since it concerns me?" persisted the young man.

"It is addressed to me," said Mr. Hersebom, holding the letter before his eyes. "Yes, I will read it at my leisure." Filial obedience is the basis of family government in Norway.

Erik bowed his head in acquiescence.

When they rose from the table, the three children seated themselves on their little bench in the chimney-corner, as they had so often done before, and began one of those confidential conversations, where each one relates what the other is curious to know, and where they tell the same things a hundred times.

Katrina busied herself about the room, putting everything in order; insisting that Vanda should for once "play the lady," as she said, and not trouble herself about household matters.

As for Mr. Hersebom, he had seated himself in his favorite arm-chair,

and was smoking his pipe in silence. It was only after he had finished this important operation that he decided to open the doctor's letter.

He read it through without saying a single word; then he folded it up, put it in his pocket, and smoked a second pipe, like the first, without uttering a sound. He seemed to be absorbed in his own reflections.

Although he was never a talkative man, his silence appeared singular to Dame Katrina. After she had finished her work, she went and seated herself beside him, and made two or three attempts to draw him into conversation, but she only received the most brief replies. Being thus repulsed, she became melancholy, and the children themselves, after talking breathlessly for some time, began to be affected by the evident sadness of their parents.

Twenty youthful voices singing in chorus before the door suddenly greeted their ears, and made a happy diversion. It was a merry band of Erik's old classmates, who had conceived the pleasant idea of coming to give him a cordial welcome home.

They hastened to invite them into the house, and offered them the customary feast, whilst they eagerly pressed around their old friend to express the great pleasure which they felt in seeing him again. Erik was touched by the unexpected visit of the friends of his childhood, and was anxious to go with them on their Christmas journey, and Vanda and Otto also were, naturally, eager to be of the party. Dame Katrina charged

them not to go too far, but to bring their brother back early, as he needed rest after his journey.

The door was hardly closed upon them, when she resumed her seat beside her husband.

"Well, has the doctor discovered anything?" she asked, anxiously.

Instead of answering, Mr. Hersebom took the letter from his pocket, and read it aloud, but not without hesitating over some words which were strange to him:

"MY DEAR HERSEBOM," wrote the doctor, "it is now two years since you intrusted your dear child to my care, and every day I have had renewed pleasure in watching his progress in all the studies that he has undertaken. His intelligence is as remarkable as his heart is generous. Erik is truly one of nature's nobleman, and the parents who have lost such a son, if they knew the extent of their misfortune, would be objects of pity. But it is very doubtful whether his parents are still living. As we agreed, I have spared no efforts to discover them. I have written to several persons in England who have an agency for making special researches. I have had advertisements inserted in twenty different newspapers, English, Irish, and Scotch. Not the least ray of light has been thrown upon this mystery, and I have to confess that all the information which I have succeeded in procuring has rather tended

to deepen the mystery.

"The name 'Cynthia,' I find in very common use in the English navy. From Lloyd's office, they inform me, that there are seventeen ships, of different tonnage, bearing this name. Some of these ships belong to English ports, and some to Scotland and Ireland. My supposition concerning the nationality of the child is therefore confirmed, and it becomes more and more evident to me that Erik is of Irish parentage. I do not know whether you agree with me on this point, but I have already mentioned it to two of my most intimate friends in Stockholm, and everything seems to confirm it.

"Whether this Irish family are all dead, or whether they have some interest in remaining unknown, I have not been able to discover any trace of them.

"Another singular circumstance, and which I also think looks still more suspicious, is the fact that no shipwreck registered at Lloyd's, or at any of the marine insurance companies, corresponds with the date of the infant's arrival on your coast. Two vessels named 'Cynthia' have been lost, it is true, during this century; but one was in the Indian Ocean, thirty-two years ago, and the other was in sight of Portsmouth eighteen years ago.

"We are therefore obliged to conclude that the infant was not the victim of a shipwreck.

"Doubtless he was intentionally exposed to the mercy of the waves. This would explain why all my inquiries have been fruitless.

"Be this as it may, after having questioned successively all the proprietors of the vessels bearing the name of 'Cynthia,' without obtaining any information, and after exhausting all known means of pursuing my investigations, I have been compelled to conclude that there is no hope of discovering Erik's family.

"The question that arises for us to decide, my dear Hersebom, and particularly for you, is what we ought to say to the boy, and what we ought to do for him.

"If I were in your place, I should now tell him all the facts about himself which affect him so nearly, and leave him free to choose his own path in life. You know we agreed to adopt this course if my efforts should prove unsuccessful. The time has come for you to keep your word. I have wished to leave it to you to relate all this to Erik. He is returning to Noroe still ignorant that he is not your son, and he does not know whether he is to return to Stockholm or remain with you. It is for you to tell him.

"Remember, if you refuse to fulfill this duty, Erik would have the right some day, perhaps, to be astonished at you. Recall to mind also that he is a boy of too remarkable abilities to be condemned

to an obscure and illiterate life. Such a sentence would have been unmerited two years ago, and now, after his brilliant career at Stockholm, it would be positively unjustifiable.

"I therefore renew my offer: let him return to me and finish his studies, and take at Upsal the degree of Doctor of Medicine. I will continue to provide for him as if he were my own son, and he has only to go on and win honors and a fortune.

"I know that, in addressing you and the excellent adopted mother of Erik, I leave his future in good hands. No personal consideration, I am sure, will prevent you from accepting my offer. Take Mr. Malarius' advice in this matter.

"While awaiting your reply, Mr. Hersebom, I greet you affectionately, and I beg you to remember me most kindly to your worthy wife and children.

"R.W. SCHWARYENCRONA, M.D."

When the fisherman had finished reading this letter, Dame Katrina, who had been silently weeping while she listened to it, asked him what he intended to do.

"My duty is very clear," he said. "I shall tell the boy everything."

"That is my opinion also; it must be done, or we should never have another peaceful moment," she murmured, as she dried her eyes.

Then they both relapsed into silence.

It was past midnight when the three children returned from their expedition. Their cheeks were rosy, and their eyes shone with pleasure from their walk in the fresh air. They seated themselves around the fire to finish gayly their Christmas-eve by eating a last cake before the enormous log which looked like a burning cavern.