

## CHAPTER VI.

### ERIK'S DECISION.

The next day the fisherman called Erik to him, and in the presence of Katrina, Otto, and Vanda, spoke to him as follows:

"Erik, the letter of Doctor Schwaryencrona was about you. He writes that you have given entire satisfaction to your teachers, and the doctor offers to pay all the expenses of your education, if you wish to continue your studies. But this letter also requires you to decide for yourself, whether you will accept this offer, or remain with us at Noroe, which we would like so much to have you do, as you no doubt know. But before you make up your mind, I must tell you a great secret, a secret that my wife and I would have preferred to keep to ourselves."

At this moment Dame Katrina could not restrain her tears, and, sobbing, she took the hand of Erik and pressed it to her heart, as if protesting against the information which the young man was now to hear.

"This secret," continued Mr. Hersebom, in a strangely altered voice, "is that you are our son only by adoption. I found you on the sea, my child, and brought you home when you were only eight or nine months old. God is my witness that we never intended to tell you this, and neither my wife nor myself have ever made the least difference between you, and Otto,

and Vanda. But Doctor Schwaryencrona requires us to do so. Therefore, I wish you to read what he has written to me."

Erik had suddenly become deadly pale. Otto and Vanda, surprised at what they had heard, both uttered a cry of astonishment. Then they put their arms around Erik, and clung closely to him, one on the right, and the other on the left.

Then Erik took the doctor's letter, and without trying to conceal his emotion, he read what he had written to Mr. Hersebom.

The fisherman then told him all the facts about himself. He explained how Dr. Schwaryencrona had undertaken to try and discover the family to which he belonged; and, also, that he had been unsuccessful. How, that but for his advice and suggestions, they would never have thought of doing so. Then Dame Katrina arose, and going to the oaken chest, brought out the garments that the baby had worn, and showed him also the coral which had been fastened around his neck. The story was naturally so full of dramatic interest to the children, that they forgot for a time, at least, how sad it was. They looked with wonder at the lace, and velvet, the golden setting of the coral, and the inscription. It almost seemed to them as if they were taking part in some fairy tale. The impossibility of obtaining any information, as reported by the doctor, only made them regard these articles as almost sacred.

Erik looked at them as if he were in a dream, and his thoughts flew to

the unknown mother, who, without doubt, had herself dressed him in these little garments, and more than once shook the coral before the eyes of the baby to make him smile. It seemed to him when he touched them as if he held direct communion with her through time and space.

But where was this mother? Was she still living, or had she perished? Was she weeping for her lost son, or must the son, on the contrary, think of her as forever lost to him?

He remained for some minutes absorbed in these reflections, with his head bent, but a word from Dame Katrina recalled him to himself.

"Erik, you are always our child," she cried, disturbed by his silence.

The eyes of the young man as he looked around him fell on all their loving countenances--the maternal look of the loving wife, the honest face of Mr. Hersebom, that of Otto even more affectionate than usual, and that of Vanda, serious and troubled. As he read the tenderness and disquietude displayed on all their faces, Erik felt as if his heart was melting within him. In a moment he realized his situation, and saw vividly the scene which his father had described. The cradle abandoned to the mercy of the waves, rescued by the hardy fisherman, and carried to his wife; and these people, humble and poor as they were, had not hesitated to take care of the little stranger, to adopt and cherish him as their own son. They had not spoken of the matter for fourteen years, and now they were hanging on his words as if they were a matter of life

and death to them.

All this touched him so deeply that suddenly his tears came. An irresistible feeling of love and gratitude overwhelmed him. He felt eager on his part to repay by some devotion the tenderness which they had shown to him. He resolved to stay with them at Noroe forever, and content himself with their humble lot, while he endeavored to do everything in his power to repay them.

"Mother," said he, throwing himself into Katrina's arms, "do you think that I can hesitate, now that I know all? We will write to the doctor, and thank him for his kind offer, and tell him that I have chosen to remain with you. I will be a fisherman, like you, father, and like Otto. Since you have given me a place at your fireside, I would prefer to retain it. Since you have nourished me by the labor of your hands, I ask to be allowed to repay you in your old age for your generosity toward me when I was a helpless infant."

"God be praised!" cried Dame Katrina, pressing Erik to her heart in a transport of joy and tenderness.

"I knew that the child would prefer the sea to all their books," said Mr. Hersebom, not understanding the sacrifice that Erik's decision would be to him.

"Come, the matter is settled. We will not talk about it any more, but

only try to enjoy this good festival of Christmas!"

They all embraced each other, with eyes humid with happiness, and vowed they would never be separated.

When Erik was alone he could not help a stifled sigh, as he thought about all his former dreams of work, and of the career which he had renounced. But still he experienced at the same time a joy which he believed would repay him for the sacrifice.

"Since it is the wish of my adopted parents," he said to himself, "the rest does not signify. I ought to be willing to work for them in the sphere and condition where their devotion has placed me. If I have sometimes felt ambitious to take a higher position in the world, was it not that I might be able to assist them? Since it makes them happy to have me with them, and as they desire nothing better than their present life, I must try to be contented, and endeavor by good conduct and hard work to give them satisfaction. Adieu, then, to my books."

Thus he mused, and soon his thoughts returned to the time when the fisherman had found him floating in his little cradle on the waves. What country did he belong to? Who were his parents? Were they still alive? Had he in some foreign country brothers and sisters whom he would never know?

Christmas had also been in Dr. Schwaryencrona's house in Stockholm a

season of great festivity. It was at this time, as the reader doubtless remembers, that they had agreed to decide the bet between him and Mr. Bredejord, and that Professor Hochstedt was to be the umpire.

For two years not a word had been said by either of them about this bet. The doctor had been patiently pursuing his researches in England, writing to the maritime agencies, and multiplying his advertisements in the newspapers; but he had taken care not to confess that his efforts had been fruitless.

As for Mr. Bredejord, he had had the good taste to avoid all allusion to the subject, and contented himself with occasionally admiring the beautiful binding of the Pliny which was displayed in the doctor's book-case.

But when he struck his snuff-box sharply with the ends of his fingers, while he looked at the book, the doctor correctly interpreted the pantomime, which was a shock to his nerves, and said to himself:

"Oh, yes; he is thinking how well the Pliny will look beside his elegant editions of Quintilian and Horace."

On these evenings he was more merciless than ever, if his unfortunate partner made any mistakes at whist.

But time had taken its flight, and he was now obliged to submit the question to the impartial arbitration of Professor Hochstedt.

Dr. Schwaryencrona approached the subject frankly. Kajsa had hardly left him alone with his two friends when he confessed to them, as he had confessed in his letter to Mr. Hersebom, that his investigations had been without result. Nothing had occurred to throw any light on the mystery which surrounded Erik's origin, and the doctor in all sincerity declared that the problem was thought by him to be insolvable.

"But," he continued, "I should be doing myself an injustice if I did not declare with equal sincerity that I do not believe that I have lost my bet. I have not discovered Erik's family, it is true, but all the information that I have been able to obtain corroborates the conclusion which I had arrived at. The 'Cynthia' was, no doubt, an English vessel, for there are at least seventeen ships bearing this name registered at Lloyd's. As for ethnographical characteristics, they are clearly Celtic. My hypothesis, therefore, as to the nationality of Erik is victoriously confirmed. I am more than ever certain that he is of Irish extraction as I at first surmised. But I can not compel his family to come forward and acknowledge him, if they have any reasons of their own for wishing him to continue lost to them. This is all I have to say, my dear Hochstedt; and now you must be the judge as to whether the Quintilian of our friend Bredejord should not legitimately be transferred to my book-case!"

At these words, which seemed to occasion a strong inclination to laugh,

the lawyer fell back in his arm-chair, raised his hands as if in protestation, then he fixed his brilliant eyes upon Professor Hochstedt to see how he would regard the matter. The professor did not betray the embarrassment which might have been expected. He would have certainly felt miserable if the doctor had urged any incontrovertible argument, which would have compelled him to decide in favor of one or the other. His prudent character led him to speak in indefinite terms. He excelled in presenting, one after the other, both sides of a question, and he reveled in his vagaries, like a fish in water. Therefore, this evening he felt quite equal to the situation.

"The fact is incontestable," he said, shaking his head, "that there are seventeen English vessels bearing the name of 'Cynthia,' and this seems to favor the conclusion arrived at by our eminent friend. The characteristic traits also have assuredly great weight, and I do not hesitate to say that they appear to me to be quite conclusive. I do not hesitate to confess that if I were called upon to give an opinion as to Erik's nationality, I should say that he was Irish. But to decide the bet in question we require something more than probabilities; we must have facts to guide us. The chances so far greatly favor the opinion of Dr. Schwaryencrona, but Bredejord can allege that nothing has actually been proved. I see, therefore, no sufficient reason for declaring that the Quintilian has been won by the doctor; neither can I say that the professor has lost his Pliny. In my opinion, as the question remains undecided, it ought to be annulled, which is the best thing to do in such a case."

The doctor's face clearly betrayed his dissatisfaction. As for Mr. Bredejord he leaped to his feet, saying:

"Your argument is a beautiful one, my dear Hochstedt, but I think you are hasty in your conclusions. Schwaryencrona, you say, has not verified his opinions sufficiently for you to say positively that he has won the bet, although you think that all the probabilities are in his favor. What will you say then, if I prove to you immediately that the 'Cynthia' was not an English vessel at all?"

"What would I say?" said the professor, somewhat troubled by this sudden attack. "Upon my word I do not know. I would have to consider the question in a different aspect."

"Examine it then at your leisure," answered the advocate, thrusting his hand into the inner pocket of his coat, and taking out a case from which he selected a letter inclosed in one of those yellow envelopes, which betray at the first glance their American origin.

"This is a document which you can not controvert," he added, placing the letter before the doctor's eyes, who read aloud:

"To Mr. Bredejord, Stockholm.

"NEW YORK, October 27th.

"SIR,--In reply to your letter of the 5th instant, I hasten to write you the following facts:--

"1st.--A vessel named 'Cynthia,' commanded by Captain Barton, and the property of the Canadian General Transportation Company, was lost, with her cargo and all on board, just fourteen years ago, in the neighborhood of the Faroe Islands.

"2d.--This vessel was insured in the General Steam Navigation Company of New York for the sum of eight hundred thousand dollars.

"3d.--The disappearance of the 'Cynthia' having remained unexplained, and the causes of the sad accident never having been clearly proved to the satisfaction of the insurance company, a lawsuit ensued, which was lost by the proprietors of the said vessel.

"4th.--The loss of this lawsuit occasioned the dissolution of the Canadian General Transportation Company, which has ceased to exist for the last eleven years, having gone into liquidation. While waiting to hear from you again, I beg of you, sir, to accept our sincere salutations.

"JEREMIAH SMITH, WALKER & CO.,

"Maritime Agents."

"Well, what do you say to that?" asked Mr. Bredejord, when the doctor had finished reading the letter. "It is a document of some value, I think. Do you agree with me?"

"I quite agree with you," answered the doctor. "How did you procure it?"

"In the simplest way in the world. That evening when you spoke to me about the 'Cynthia' being necessarily an English vessel, I thought that you were taking too limited a field for your researches, and that the vessel might be an American one. When time passed, and you received no intelligence, for you would have told us if you had, the idea occurred to me of writing to New York. The third letter brought the result which you have before you. The affair is no longer a complicated one. Do you not think that it assures to me beyond contest the possession of your Pliny?"

"It appears to me to be rather a forced conclusion," replied the doctor, taking the letter and reading it over again, to see if he could find any new arguments to support his theory.

"How forced?" cried the advocate.

"I have proved to you that the vessel was an American one, and that she was lost off the Faroe Islands, that is to say, near the coast of Norway, precisely at the time which corresponds to the arrival of the

infant, and still you are not convinced of your error."

"Not in the least, my dear friend. I do not dispute the value of your document. You have discovered what I have found it impossible to do--the true 'Cynthia,' which was lost at a little distance from our coast, and at a specified epoch; but permit me to say, that this only confirms precisely my theory, for the vessel was a Canadian one, or in other words, English, and the Irish element is very strong in some parts of Canada, and I have therefore more reason than ever for being sure that the child is of Irish origin."

"Ah, is that what you find in my letter?" said Mr. Bredejord, more vexed than he was willing to appear to be. "Then without doubt you persist in believing that you have not lost your Pliny?"

"Assuredly!"

"Perhaps you think you have a right to my Quintilian?"

"I hope in any case to be able to prove my right, thanks to your discovery, if you will only give me time by renewing the bet."

"I am willing. I ask nothing better. How much time do you want?"

"Let us take two more years, and wait until the second Christmas after this one."

"It is agreed," answered Mr. Bredejord. "But be assured, doctor, that you will finally see me in possession of your Pliny!"

"By my faith no. It will make a fine appearance in my book-case beside your Quintilian."