

ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER I.

"You say your things are all ready, Cecil? Then I'll just go below and do up my Gladstone, and put it in your cabin. We shall be at Bergen before long, they say."

The speaker was a young Englishman of three or four-and-twenty, and the sister addressed by him was still in the first flush of girlhood, having but a few days before celebrated her nineteenth birthday.

"Let me see to your bag, Roy," she exclaimed. "It is a shame that you should miss this lovely bit of the fjord, and I shall do it in half the time."

"The conceit of women!" he exclaimed, with a smile in which brotherly love and the spirit of teasing were about equally blended. "No, no, Cis, I'm not going to let you spoil me. I shall be up again in ten minutes. Have you not made any friends here? Is there no one on deck you can talk to?"

"I don't want to talk," said Cecil. "Truth to tell, I am longing to get away from all these English people. Very unsociable of me, isn't it?"

Roy Boniface turned away with a smile, understanding her feeling well enough, and Cecil, with her back to the chattering tourist throng, let her eyes roam over the shining waters of the fjord to the craggy mountains on the further shore, whose ever-varying forms had been delighting her since the early morning.

She herself made a fair picture, though her beauty was not of the order which quickly draws attention. There was nothing very striking in her regular features, fair complexion, and light-brown hair; to a casual observer she would have seemed merely an average English girl, gentle, well-mannered, and nice-looking. It was only to those who took pains to study her that her true nature was revealed; only at times that her quiet gray eyes would flash into sudden beauty with the pleasure of meeting with some rare and unexpected sympathy; only in some special need that the force of her naturally retiring nature made itself felt as a great influence.

Cecil had passed a year of emancipated girlhood, she had for a whole year been her own mistress, had had time and money at her disposal and no special duties to take the place of her school-work. It was the time she had been looking forward to all her life, the blissful time of grown-up freedom, and now that it had come it had proved a disappointing illusion. Whether the fault was in herself or in her circumstances she did not know; but like so many girls of her age she was looking out on life with puzzled eyes, hardly knowing what it was that had gone amiss, yet conscious of a great want, of a great unrest, of a vague dissatisfaction which would not be reasoned down.

"Cecil is looking poorly," had been the home verdict; and the mother, not fully understanding the cause, but with a true instinct as to the remedy, had suggested that the brother and sister should spend a month abroad, grieving to lose Cecil from the usual family visit to the sea-side, but perceiving with a mother's wisdom and unselfishness that it was time, as she expressed it, for her young one to try its wings.

So the big steamer plied its way up the fjord, bearing Cecil Boniface and her small troubles and perplexities to healthy old Norway, to gain there fresh physical strength and fresh insights into that puzzling thing called life; to make friendships spite of her avowed unsociableness, to learn something more of the beauty of beauty, the joy of joy, and the pain of pain.

There was the clerical group, which had for its center no fewer than five gaitered bishops. There was the sporting group, distinguished by light-brown checked suits and comfortable traveling-caps. There was the usual sprinkling of pale, weary, overworked men and women come for a much-needed rest. And there was the flirting group—a notably small one, however, for Norwegian traveling is rough work and is ill-suited to this genus.

"Look here, Blanche," exclaimed a gray-bearded Englishman approaching a pretty little brunette who had a most sweet and winsome expression, and who was standing so near to the camp-stool on which Cecil had ensconced herself that the conversation was quite audible to her. "Just see if you can make out this writing; your eyes are better than mine. It is from Herr Falck, the Norwegian agent for our firm. I dare say your father told you about him."

"Yes, papa said he was one of the leading merchants out here and would advise us what to see, and where to go."

"Quite so. This letter reached me just as I was leaving home, and is to say that Herr Falck has taken rooms for us at some hotel. I can read it all well enough except the names, but the fellow makes such outrageous flourishes. What do you make of this sentence, beginning with 'My son Frithiof?'"

"Uncle, uncle, what shocking pronunciation! You must not put in an English 'th.' Did you ever hear of the Frithiof Saga? You must say it quickly like this—Freet-Yoff."

"A most romantic name," said Mr. Morgan. "Now I see why you have been so industrious over your Norwegian lessons. You mean to carry on a desperate flirtation with Herr Frithiof, oh! that is quite clear; I shall be on the lookout." Blanche laughed, not at all resenting the remark, though she bent her pretty face over the letter, and pretended to have great difficulty in reading Herr Falck's very excellent English.

"Do you want to hear this sentence?" she said, "because if you do I'll read it."

"My son Frithiof will do himself the honor to await your arrival at Bergen on the landing-quay, and will drive you to Holdt's Hotel, where we have procured the rooms you desired. My daughter Sigrid (See-gree) is eager to make the acquaintance of your daughter and your niece, and if you will all dine with us at two o'clock on Friday at my villa in Kalvedalen we shall esteem it a great pleasure."

"Two o'clock dinner!" exclaimed Florence Morgan, for the first time joining in the general conversation.

"What an unheard-of hour!"

"Oh, everything is primitive simplicity out here," said Mr. Morgan. "You needn't expect London fashions."

"I suppose Frithiof Falck will be a sort of young Viking, large-boned and dignified, with a kind of good-natured fierceness about him," said Blanche, folding the letter.

"No, no," said Florence, "he'll be a shy, stupid country bumpkin, afraid of airing his bad English, and you will step valiantly into the breach with your fluent Norwegian, and your kindness will win his heart. Then presently he will come up in his artless and primitive way with a Vaer saa god (if you please), and will take your hand. You will reply Mange tak (many thanks), and we shall all joyfully dance at your wedding."

There was general laughter, and some trifling bets were made upon

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the vexed question of Frithiof Falck's appearance.

"Well," said Mr. Morgan, "it's all very well to laugh now, but I hope you'll be civil to the Falcks when we really meet. And as to you, Cyril," he continued, turning to his nephew, a limp-looking young man of one-and-twenty, "get all the information you can out of young Falck, but on no account allow him to know that your father is seriously thinking of setting you at the head of the proposed branch at Stavanger. When that does come about, of course Herr Falck will lose our custom, and no doubt it will be a blow to him; so mind you don't breathe a word about it, nor you either, girls. We don't want to spoil our holiday with business matters, and besides, one should always consider other people's feelings."

Cecil set her teeth and the color rose to her cheeks; she moved away to the other side of the deck that she might not hear any more.

"What hateful people! they don't care a bit for the kindness and hospitality of these Norwegians. They only mean just to use them as a convenience." Then as her brother rejoined her she exclaimed, "Roy, who are those vulgar people over on the other side?"

"With two pretty girls in blue ulsters? I think the name is Morgan, rich city people. The old man's not bad, but the young one's a born snob. What do you think I heard him say as he was writing his name in the book and caught sight of ours. 'Why, Robert Boniface; that must be the music shop in Regent Street. Norway will soon be spoiled if all the cads take to coming over.' And there was I within two yards of him."

"Oh, Roy! he couldn't have known or he would never have said it."

"Oh, yes, he knew it well enough. It was meant for a snub, richly deserved by the presuming tradesman who dared to come to Norway for his holiday instead of eating shrimps at Margate, as such cattle should, you know!" and Roy laughed good-humoredly. Snubs had a way of gliding off him like water off a duck's back.

"I should have hated it," said Cecil. "What did you do?"

"Nothing; studied Baedeker with an imperturbable face, and reflected sapiently with William of Wykeham that neither birth nor calling, but 'manners maketh man.' But look! this must be Bergen. What a glorious view! If only you had time to sketch it just from here!"

Cecil, after one quick exclamation of delight, was quite silent, for indeed few people can see unmoved that exquisite view which is unfolded before them as they round the fjord and catch the first glimpses of the most beautiful town in Norway. Had she been alone she would have allowed the tears of happiness to come into her eyes, but being on a crowded steamer she fought down her emotion and watched in a sort of dream of delight the picturesque wooden houses, the red-tiled roofs, the quaint towers and spires, the clear, still fjord with its forest of masts and rigging, and the mountains rising steep and sheer, encircling Bergen like so many hoary old giants who had vowed to protect the town.

Meanwhile, the deck resounded with those comments which are so very irritating to most lovers of scenery; one long-haired aesthete gave vent to a fresh adjective of admiration about once a minute, till Roy and Cecil were forced to flee from him and to take refuge among the sporting fraternity, who occasionally admitted frankly that it was "a fine view," but who obtruded their personality far less upon their companions.

"Oh, Roy, how we shall enjoy it all!" said Cecil, as they drew near to the crowded landing-quay.

"I think we shall fit in, Cis," he said, smiling. "Thank Heaven, you don't take your pleasure after the manner of that fellow. If I were his traveling companion, I should throttle him in a week."

"Or suggest a muzzle," said Cecil, laughing; "that would save both his neck and your feelings."

"Let me have your key," he said, as they approached the wooden pier; "the custom-house people will be coming on board, and I will try to get our things looked over quickly. Wait here and then I shall not miss you."

He hastened away and Cecil scanned with curious eyes the faces of the little crowd gathered on the landing-quay, till her attention was arrested by a young Norwegian in a light-gray suit who stood laughing and talking to an acquaintance on the wooden wharf. He was tall and broad-shouldered, with something unusually erect and energetic in his bearing; his features were of the pure Greek type not unfrequently to be met with in Norway; while his northern birth was attested by a fair skin and light hair

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and mustache, as well as by a pair of honest, well-opened blue eyes which looked out on the world with a boyish content and happiness.

"I believe that is Frithiof Falck," thought Cecil. And the next moment her idea was confirmed, for as the connecting gangway was raised from the quay, one of the steamer officials greeted him by name, and the young Norwegian, replying in very good English, stepped on board and began looking about as if in search of some one. Involuntarily Cecil's eyes followed him; she had a strange feeling that in some way she knew him, knew him far better than the people he had come to meet. He, too, seemed affected in the same way, for he came straight up to her, and raising his hat and bowing, said with frank courtesy:

"Pardon me, but am I speaking to Miss Morgan?"

"I think the Miss Morgans are at the other side of the gangway; I saw them a minute ago," she said, coloring a little.

"A thousand pardons for my mistake," said Frithiof Falck. "I came to meet this English family, you understand, but I have never seen them."

(To be continued.)

Close Quarters

"Allow me to thank you, M'sieu," for the kindness you have shown," he murmured. "Touching that hidden room in the Cabaret, now. Do the police really know of it? You were not joking?"

"Not in the least."

"Then, M'sieu, I accompany them to the Argentine," and he jerked his thumb towards Dubois and his wife. "Paris is no place for me."

Soon after the ceremony Mme. Dubois asked to be allowed to visit Edith. When the two women met Marguerite flung herself impulsively on her knees and sobbed out a request for forgiveness. Miss Talbot should have been very angry with her erring sister. She was not. She took the keenest interest in the Frenchwoman's romantic history. They talked until Fairholme became impatient. He had not seen Edith for two whole hours.

Six months later, when the Earl and Countess of Fairholme returned from a prolonged wedding tour on the Blue Bell through the Nor-

wegian firds, Brett was invited to dinner. Talbot was there, of course, and Daubeney, and Sir Hubert. "Constantinople must be a queer place," observed Jack after the first rush of animated converse had exhausted itself.

"Surely there are no more diamond mysteries on foot!" cried his charming sister, who looked delightfully well, and brown as a berry with the keen sea breezes of the hardy North.

"Not exactly; but I made some inquiries through a friend of mine in the Legation. Hussein-ul-Mulk and his two Paris friends are quite important functionaries in the palace. You remember that the other pair of scoundrels escaped to Smyrna?"

"Yes," cried everybody. "Well, Mehemet Ali's relatives heard the truth about them by some means. Within a reasonable time they were chopped into small pieces, with other details that need not be repeated."

"Dogs, or pigs?" inquired Brett.

"Dogs!"

"I wish you wouldn't say such horrid things," protested Edith. "Is there any news of Monsieur Dubois, and the fat man Gros Jean?"

"You will receive some in the drawing-room, Lady Fairholme," said Brett; and not another word of explanation would he give until dinner was ended.

In the drawing-room her ladyship was delighted to find a splendid cockatoo, magnificent in size and white as snow, save for the brilliant red crest which he elevated when they all crowded round his handsome cage.

"The happy couple in the Argentine sent him to me to be presented to you on your return," explained the barrister. "He is named 'Le Prophete,' and he talks beautifully—indeed his language is most emphatic, but it is all French."

"What a darling!" cried Edith. "I do wish he would say something. Cher Prophete, parlez avec moi!"

And immediately the cockatoo stretched his wings and screamed—"Vive Mahomet! Vive le Sultan! A bas les Grecs! a bas! a bas!"

THE END.

The vows a man makes at the marriage altar do not worry him half as much as the silly promises he made to the woman in the case before she led him there.

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