ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER I.—

"There is Miss Morgan," exclaimed Cecil, "that lady in a blue ulster; and there is her uncle just joining her."

"Many thanks for your kind help," said Frithiof, and with a second bow and a smile from his frank eyes he passed on and approached Mr. Morgan.

"Welcome to Norway, sir," he exclaimed, greeting the traveler with the easy courteous manner peculiar to Norwegians. "I hope you have made a good voyage."

"Oh, how do you do, Mr. Falck?" said the Englishman, scanning him from head to foot as he shook hands and speaking very loud, as if the foreigner were deaf. "Very good of you to meet us, I'm sure. My niece, Miss Blanche Morgan."

Frithiof bowed, and his heart began to beat fast as a pair of most lovely dark-gray eyes gave him such a glance as he had never before received.

"My sister is much looking forward to the pleasure of making your acquaintance," he said.

"Ah!" exclaimed Blanche, "how beautifully you speak English! And how you will laugh at me when I tell you that I have been learning Norwegian for fear there should be dead silence between us."

"Indeed, there is nothing which pleases us so much as that you should learn our tongue," he said, smiling. "My English is just now in its zenith, for I passed the winter with an English clergyman at Hanover for the sake of improving it."

"But why not have come to England?" said Blanche.

"Well, I had before that been with a German family at Hanover to perfect myself in German, and I liked the place well, and this Englishman was very pleasant, so I thought if I stayed there it would be 'to kill two flies with one dash,' as we say in Norway. When I come to England that will be for a holiday, for nothing at all but pleasure."

"Let me introduce my nephew," said Mr. Morgan, as Cyril strolled up. "And this is my daughter. How now, Florence, have you found your boxes?"

"Allow me," said Frithiof; "if you will tell me what to look for I will see that the hotel porter takes it all."

There was a general adjournment to the region of pushing and confusion and luggage, and before long Frithiof had taken the travelers to his father's carriage, and they were driving through the long, picturesque Strandgaden. Very few vehicles passed through this main street, but throngs of pedestrians walked leisurely along, or stood in groups talking and laughing, the women chiefly wearing full skirts of dark-blue serge, short jackets to match, and little round blue serge hoods surmounting their clean white caps; the men also in dark blue with broad felt hats.

To English visitors there is an indescribable charm in the primitive simplicity, the easy informality of the place; and Frithiof was well content with the delighted exclamations of the new-comers.

"What charming ponies!" cried Blanche. "Look how oddly their manes are cut—short manes and long tails! How funny! we do just the opposite. And they all seem cream-colored."

"This side, Blanche, quick! A lot of peasants in sabots! and oh! just look at those lovely red gables!"

"How nice the people look, too, so different to people in an English street. What makes you all so happy over here?"

"Why, what should make us unhappy?" said Frithiof. "We love our country and our town, we are the freest people in the world, and life is a great pleasure in itself, don't you think? But away in the mountains our people are much more grave. Life is too lonely there. Here in Bergen it is perfection."

Cyril Morgan regarded the speaker with a pitying eye, and perhaps would have enlightened his absurd ignorance and discoursed of Pall Mall and Picadilly, had not they just then arrived at Holdt's Hotel. Frithiof merely waited to see that they approved of their rooms, gave them the necessary information as to bankers and lionizing, received Mr. Morgan's assurance that the whole party would dine at Herr Falck's the next day, and then, having previously dismissed the carriage, set out at a brisker pace than usual on his walk home.

Blanche Morgan's surprise at the happy-looking people somehow amused him. Was it then an out-of-the-way thing for people to enjoy life? For his own part mere existence satisfied him. But then he was as yet quite unacquainted with trouble. The death of his mother when he was only eleven years old had been at the time a great grief, but it had in no way clouded his after-life, he had been scarcely old enough to realize the greatness of his loss. Its effect had been to make him cling more closely to those who were left to him—to his father, to his twin-sister, Sigrid, and to the little baby, Swanhild (Svarnheel), whose birth had cost so much. The home life was an extremely happy one to look back on, and now that his year of absence was over and his education finished it seemed to him that all was exactly as he would have it. Faintly in the distance he looked forward to further success and happiness; being a fervent patriot, he hoped some day to be a king's minister—the summit of a Norwegian's ambition; and being human he had visions of an ideal wife and an ideal home of his own. But the political career could very well wait, and the wife too, for the matter of that.

CHAPTER II.

Herr Falck lived in one of the pretty, unpretentious houses in Klavedalen, which are chiefly owned by the rich merchants of Bergen. The house stood on the right-hand side of the road surrounded by a pretty little garden, it was painted a light-brown color, and like most Bergen houses it was built of wood. In the windows one could see flowers, and beyond them white muslin curtains, for aestheticism had not yet penetrated to Norway. The dark-tiled roof was outlined against a wooded hill rising immediately behind, with here and there gray rocks peeping through the summer green of the trees, while in front the chief windows looked on to a pretty terrace with carefully kept flower-beds, then down the wooden hillside heights on the further shore and on one side a break in the chain of mountains and a lovely stretch of open country. To the extreme left was the giant Ulriken, sometimes shining and glistening, sometimes frowning and dark, but always beautiful; while to the right you caught a glimpse of Bergen with its quaint cathedral tower, and away in the distance the fjord like a shining silver band in the sun.

As Frithiof walked along the grassy terrace he could hear sounds of music floating from the house; some one was playing a most inspiriting waltz; and as soon as he had reached the open French window of his father's study, a quaint pair of dancers became visible. A slim little girl of ten years old, with very short petticoats, and very long golden hair braided into a pig-tail, held by the front paws a fine Esquimau dog, who seemed quite to enter into the fun and danced and capered most cleverly, obediently keeping his long pointed nose over his partner's shoulder. The effect was so comical that Frithoif stood laughingly by to watch the performance for fully half a minute, then, unable to resist his own desire to dance, he unceremoniously called Lillo, the dog, away and whirled off little Swanhild in the rapid waltz which Norwegians delight in; the languid grace of a London ballroom would have had no charms for him, his dancing was full of fire and impetuosity, and Swanhild, too, danced very well; it had come to them both as naturally as breathing.

"This is better than Lillo," admitted the child. "Somehow he's so dreadfully heavy to get round. Have the English people come? What are they like?"

"Oh, they're middling," said Frithiof, "all except the niece, and she is charming."

"Is she pretty?"

"Prettier than any one you ever saw in your life."

"Not prettier than Sigrid?" said the little sister, confidently.

"Wait till you see," said Frithiof. "She is a brunette and perfectly lovely. There now!" as the music ceased, "Sigrid has felt her left ear burning, and knows that we are speaking evil of her. Let us come to confess."

With his arm still round the child he entered the pretty, bright-looking room to the right. Sigrid was still at the piano, but she had heard his voice and had turned round with eager expectation in her face. The brother and sister were very much alike; each had the same well-cut Greek features, but Frithiof's face was broader and stronger, and you could tell at a glance that he was the more intellectual of the two. On the other hand, Sigrid possessed a delightful fund of quiet common sense, and her judgment was seldom at fault, while, like most Norwegian girls, she had a most charmingly simple manner, and an unaffected light-heartedness which it did one good to see.

"Well, what news?" she exclaimed. "Have they come all right? Are they nice?"

"Nice is not the word! Charming! beautiful! To-morrow you will see if I have spoken too strongly."

"He says she is even prettier than you, Sigrid," said Swanhild, mischievously. "Prettier than any one we ever saw."

"She? Which of them?"

"Miss Blanche Morgan, the daughter of the head of the firm, you know."

"And the other one?"

"I hardly know, I didn't look at her much; the others all seemed to me much like ordinary English tourists. But she—well, you will see to-morrow."

"How I wish they were coming to-night! you make me quite curious. And father seems so excited about their coming. I have not seen him so much pleased about anything for a long time."

"Is he at home?"

"No; he went for a walk, his head was bad again. That is the only thing that troubles me about him, his headaches seem to have become almost chronic this last year."

A shade came over her bright face, and Frithiof, too, looked grave.

"He works very much too hard," he said; "but as soon as I come of age and am taken into partnership he will be more free to take a thorough rest. At present I might just as well be in Germany as far as work goes, for he will hardly let me do anything to help him."

"Here he comes, here he comes!" cried Swanhild, who had wandered away to the window, and with one accord they all ran out to meet the head of the house, Lillo bounding out in front and springing up at his master with a loving greeting.

Herr Falck was a very pleasant-looking man of about fifty; he had the same well-chiseled features as Frithiof, the same broad forehead, clearly marked, level brows, and flexible lips, but his eyes had more of gray and less of blue in them, and a practiced observer would have detected in their keen glance an anxiety which could not wholly disguise itself. His hair and whiskers were iron-gray, and he was an inch or two shorter than his son. They all stood talking together at the door, the English visitors still forming the staple of conversation, and the anxiety giving place to eager hope in Herr Falck's eyes as Frithiof once more sung the praises of Blanche Morgan.

"Have they formed any plan for their tour?" he asked.

"No; they mean to talk it over with you and get your advice. They all professed to have a horror of Baedeker, though even with your help I don't think they will get far without him."

"It is certain that they will not want to stay very long in our Bergen," said Herr Falck, "the English never do. What should you say now if you all took your summer outing at once and settled down at Ulvik or Balholm for a few weeks, then you would be able to see a little of our friends and could start them well on their tour."

"What a delightful plan, little father!" cried Sigrid, "only you must come too, or we shall none of us enjoy it."

(To be continued.)

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