ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER II.—(Cont'd)

Later on, when the whole party had started for a walk, and when Frithiof and Blanche had quite naturally drifted into a tete-a-tete, she said something to this effect:

"I begin not to wonder that you are so happy," she added, "the whole atmosphere of the place is happiness. I wish you could teach us the secret of it."

"Have you, then, only the gift of making other people happy?" said Frithiof. "That seems strange."

"You will perhaps think me very discontented," she said, with a pathetic little sadness in her tone which touched him. "But seeing how fresh and simple and happy your life is out here makes me more out of heart than ever with my own home. You must not think I am grumbling; they are very good to me, you know, and give me everything that money can buy; but somehow there is so much that jars on one, and here there seems nothing but kindliness and ease and peace."

"I am glad you like our life," he said, "so very glad."

And as she told him more of her home and her London life, and of how little it satisfied her, her words, and still more her manner and her sweet eyes, seemed to weave a sort of spell about him, seemed to lure him on into a wonderful future, and to waken in him a new life.

"I like him," thought Blanche to herself. "Perhaps, after all, this Norwegian tour will not be so dull. I like to see his eyes light up so eagerly; he really has beautiful eyes! I almost think—I really almost think I am just a little bit in love with him."

At this moment they happened to overtake two English tourists on the road; as they passed on in front of them, Frithiof, with native courtesy, took off his hat.

"You surely don't know that man? he is only a shop-keeper," said Blanche, not even taking the trouble to lower her voice.

Frithiof crimsoned to the roots of his hair. "I am afraid he must have heard what you said," he exclaimed, quickening his pace in the discomfort of the realization. "I do not know him certainly, but one is bound to be courteous to strangers."

"I know exactly who he is," said Blanche, "for he and his sister were on the steamer, and Cyril found out all about them. He is Boniface, the music-shop man."

Frithiof was saved a reply, for just then they reached their destination, and rejoined the rest of the party, who were clustered together on the hill-side enjoying a most lovely view. Down below them, sheltered by a great craggy mountain on the further side, lay a little lonely lake, so weird-looking, so desolate, that it was hard to believe it to be within an easy walk of the town. Angry-looking clouds were beginning to gather in the sky, a purple gloom seemed to overspread the mountain and the lake, and something of its gravity seemed also to have fallen upon Frithiof. He had found the first imperfection in his ideal, yet it had only served to show him how great a power, how strange an influence she possessed over him. He knew now that, for the first time in his life, he was blindly, desperately in love.

"Why, it is beginning to rain," said Mr. Morgan. "I almost think we had better be turning back, Herr Falck. It has been a most enjoyable little walk; but if we can reach the hotel before it settles in for a wet evening, why, all the better."

"The rain is the great drawback to Bergen," said Herr Falck. "At Christiania they have a saying that when you go to Bergen it rains three hundred and sixty-six days out of the year. But after all one becomes very much accustomed to it."

On the return walk the conversation was more general, and though Frithiof walked beside Blanche he said very little. His mind was full of the new idea which had just dawned upon him, and he heard her merry talk with Sigrid and Swanhild like a man in a dream. Before long, much to his discomfort, he saw in front of them the two English tourists, and though his mind was all in a tumult with this new perception of his love for Blanche, yet the longing to make up for her ill-judged remark, the desire to prove that he did not share in her prejudice, was powerful too. He fancied it was chiefly to avoid them that the Englishman turned toward the bank just as they passed to gather a flower which grew high above his head.

"What can this be, Cecil?" he remarked.

"Allow me, sir," said Frithiof, observing that it was out of the stranger's reach.

He was two or three inches taller, and, with an adroit spring, was able to bring down the flower in triumph. By this time the others were some little way in advance. He looked rather wistfully after Blanche, and fancied disapproval in her erect, trim, little figure.

"This is the Linnaea," he explained. "You will find a great deal of it about. It was the flower, you know, which Linnaeus chose to name after himself. Some say he showed his modesty in choosing so common and insignificant a plant, but it always seems to me that he showed his good taste. It is a beautiful flower."

Roy Boniface thanked him heartily for his help. "We were hoping to find the Linnaea," he said, handing it to his sister, while he opened a specimen tin.

"What delicate little bells!" she exclaimed. "I quite agree with you that Linnaeus showed his good taste."

Frithiof would probably have passed on had he not, at that moment, recognized Cecil as the English girl whom he had first accosted on the steamer.

"Pardon me for not knowing you before," he said, raising his hat. "We met yesterday afternoon, did we not? I hope you have had a pleasant time at Bergen?"

"Delightful, thank you. We think it the most charming town we ever saw."

"Barring the rain," said Roy, "for which we have foolishly forgotten to reckon."

"Never be parted from your umbrella is a sound axiom for this part of the world," said Frithiof, smiling. "Halloo! it is coming down in good earnest. I'm afraid you will get very wet," he said, glancing at Cecil's pretty, gray traveling-dress.

"Shall we stand up for a minute under that porch, Roy?" said the girl, glancing at a villa which they were just passing.

"No, no," said Frithiof; "please take shelter with us. My father's villa is close by. Please come."

And since Cecil was genuinely glad not to get wet through, and since Roy, though he cared nothing for the rain, was glad to have a chance of seeing the inside of a Norwegian villa, they accepted the kindly offer, and followed their guide into the pretty, snug-looking house.

Roy had heard a good deal of talk about sweetness and light, but he thought he had never realized the meaning of the words till the moment when he was ushered into that pretty Norwegian drawing-room, with its painted floor and groups of flowers, and its pink-tinted walls, about which the green ivy wreathed itself picturesquely, now twining itself round some mirror picture-frame, now forming a sort of informal frieze round the whole room, its roots so cleverly hidden away in sheltered corners or on unobtrusive brackets that the growth had all the fascination of mystery. The presiding genius of the place, and the very center of all that charmed, stood by one of the windows, the light falling on her golden hair. She had taken off her hat and was flicking the rain-drops from it with her handkerchief when Frithiof introduced the two Bonifaces, and Roy, who found his novel experience a little embarrassing, was speedily set at ease by her delightful naturalness and frank courtesy.

Her bow and smile were grace itself, and she seemed to take the whole proceeding as a matter of course; one might have supposed that she was in the habit of sheltering wet tourists every day of her life.

"I am so glad my brother found you," she exclaimed. "You would have been wet through had you walked on to Bergen. Swanhild, run and fetch a duster; oh, you have brought one already, that's a good child. Now let me wipe your dress," she added, turning to Cecil.

"Where has every one disappeared to?" asked Frithiof.

"Father has walked on to Holdt's Hotel with the Morgans," said Swanhild. "They would not wait, though we tried to persuade them to. Father is going to talk over their route with them."

Cecil saw a momentary look of annoyance on his face; but the next minute he was talking as pleasantly as possible to Roy, and before long the question of routes was being discussed, and as fast as Frithiof suggested one place, Sigrid and Swanhild mentioned others which must on no account be missed.

"And you can really only spare a month for it all?" asked Sigrid. "Then I should give up going to Christiania or Trondhjem if I were you. They will not interest you half as much as this south-west coast."

"But, Sigrid, it is impossible to leave out Kongswold and Dombaas. For you are a botanist, are you not?" said Frithiof, turning to the Englishman, "and those places are perfection for flowers."

"Yes? Then you must certainly go there," said Sigrid.

"Kongswold is a dear little place up on the Dovrefjeld. Yet if you were not botanists I should say you ought to see instead either the Voringsfos or the Skjaeggedalsfas, they are our two finest water-falls."

"The Skedaddle-fos, as the Americans call it," put in Frithiof.

"You have a great many American tourists, I suppose?" said Roy.

"Oh, yes, a great many, and we like them very well, though not as we like the English. To the English we feel very much akin."

"And you speak our language so well!" said Cecil, to whom the discovery had been a surprise and a relief.

"You see we Norwegians think a great deal of education. Our schools are very good; we are all taught to speak German and English. French, which with you comes first, does it not? stands third with us."

"Tell me about your schools," said Cecil. "Are they like ours, I wonder?"

"We begin at six years old to go to the middle school; they say it is much like your English high schools; both my brother and I went to the middle schools here at Bergen. Then when we were sixteen we went to Christiania, he to the Handels-gymnasium, and I to Miss Bauer's school, for two years. My little sister is now at the middle school here; she goes every day, but just now it is holiday time."

"And in holidays," said Swanhild, whose English was much less fluent and ready, "we go away. We perhaps go to-morrow to Balholm."

"Perhaps we shall meet you again there," said Sigrid. "Oh, do come there; it is such a lovely place."

Then followed a discussion about flowers, in which Sigrid was also interested, and presently Herr Falck returned, and added another picture of charming hospitality to the group that would always remain in the minds of the English travelers; and then there was afternoon tea, which proved a great bond of union, and more discussion of English and Norwegian customs, and much laughter and merriment and light-heartedness.

When at length the rain ceased and Roy and Cecil were allowed to leave for Bergen, they felt as if the kindly Norwegians were old friends.

"Shall you be very much disappointed if we give up the Skedaddle-fos?" asked Roy. "It seems to me that a water-fall is a water-fall all the world over, but that we are not likely to meet everywhere with a family like that."

"Oh, by all means give it up," said Cecil, gayly. "I would far rather have a few quiet days at Balholm. I detest toiling after the things everyone expects you to see. Besides, we can always be sure of finding the Skjaeggedalsfos in Norway, but we can't tell what may happen to these delightful people."

(To be continued.)

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