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ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER III.—(Cont'd)

At length the top of the mountain was reached, and a merry little picnic ensued.

"Come!" said Sigrid to Cecil Boniface, "you and I must add a stone to the cairn. Let us drag up this great one and put it on the top together in memory of our friendship."

They stood laughing and panting under the shelter of the cairn when the stone was deposited, the merry voices of the rest of the party floating back to them.

"Do you not think we are dreadful chatterers, we Norwegians?" said Sigrid.

"I think you are delightful," said Cecil, simply.

Something in her manner touched and pleased Sigrid. She had grown to like this quiet English girl.

Once more Frithiof and Blanche were left alone.

"And you must really go on Monday?" asked Frithiof, with a sigh.

"Well," she said, glancing up at him quickly, "I have been very troublesome to you, I'm sure; always needing help in climbing! You will be glad to get rid of me though you would be too polite to tell me so."

"How can you say such things?" he exclaimed. "You know—you must know what these days have been to me."

"After all, I believe I should do better if I trusted to my alpenstock!" And laughingly she began to spring down the rough descent, a little proud of her own grace and agility and a little glad to baffle and tease him for a few minutes.

"Take care! take care!" cried Frithiof, hurrying after her. Then, with a stifled cry, he sprung forward to rescue her, for the alpenstock had slipped on a stone, and she was rolling down the steep incline. How he managed it he never realized, but love seemed to lend him wings, and the next thing he knew was that he was kneeling on the grass only two or three feet from the sheer cliff-like side with Blanche in his arms.

"Are you hurt?" he questioned, breathlessly.

"No," she replied, trembling with excitement. "Not hurt at all, only shaken and startled."

He lifted her a little further from the edge.

"How strong you are," she said, "and how cleverly you caught me! Yet now that it is over you look quite haggard and white. I am really not hurt at all. It punished me well for thinking I could get on without you. You see I couldn't!"

She sat up and took off her hat, smoothing back her disordered hair.

"If only I might always serve you!" he cried. "Oh, Blanche, I love you! I love you! Will you not trust yourself to me?"

All in a moment she was conquered; she could not even make a feint of resistance, but just put her hand in his.

"I will always trust you," she faltered.

Then, as she felt his strong arm round her and his kisses on her cheek, there flashed through her mind a description she had once read of—

"a strong man from the North,
Light-locked, with eyes of dangerous gray."

It was a love worth having, she thought to herself; a love to be proud of!

"But, Frithiof," she began, after a timeless pause, "we must keep our secret just for a little while. You see, my father is not here, and—"

"Let me write to him and ask his consent," exclaimed Frithiof.

"No, no, do not write. Come over to England in October and see him yourself, that will be so much better."

"Must we wait so long?" said Frithiof, his face clouding.

"It is only a few weeks; papa will not be at home till then. Every one is away from London, you know. Don't look so anxious; I do not know your face; it isn't happy; you were never meant to be grave. As for papa, I can make him do exactly what I like; you need not be afraid that he will not consent. Come! I have promised to trust to you and yet you doubt me."

"Doubt you?" he cried. "Never! I trust you before all the world; and if you tell me to wait, why, then, I must obey."

"How I love you for saying that!" cried Blanche, clinging to him. "To think that you who are so strong should say that to me! It seems wonderful. But indeed, indeed, you need not doubt me. I love you with my whole heart. I love you as I never thought it possible to love."

CHAPTER IV.

"We were beginning to think some accident had happened to you," said Sigrid, who stood waiting at the door of the hotel.

"And so it did," said Blanche, laughing. "I think I should have broken my neck if it hadn't been for your brother. It was all the fault of this treacherous alpenstock which played me false."

And then, with a sympathetic little group of listeners, Blanche gave a full account of her narrow escape.

"And you are really not hurt at all? Not too much shaken to care to dance to-night?"

"Not a bit," said Blanche, merrily. "And you promised to put on your peasant costume and show us the spring dans, you know."

"So I did. I must make haste and dress, then," and Sigrid ran upstairs, appearing again before long in a simply made dark skirt, white sleeves and chemisette, and red bodice, richly embroidered in gold. Her beautiful hair was worn in two long plaits down her back, and the costume suited her to perfection. There followed a merry supper in the dependence where all meals were served, then every one adjourned to the hotel salon, the tables and chairs were hastily pushed aside, and dancing began.

Herr Falck's eyes rested contentedly on the slim little figure in the maize-colored dress who so often danced with his son; and indeed, Blanche looked more lovely than ever that evening, for happiness and excitement had brightened her dark eyes, and deepened the glow of color in her cheeks. The father felt proud, too, of his children, when, in response to the general entreaty, Frithiof and Sigrid danced the spring dans together with its graceful evolutions and quaint gestures. Then nothing would do but Frithiof must play to them on the violin, after which Blanche volunteered to teach every one Sir Roger de Coverley, and old and young joined merrily in the country dance and so the evening passed on all too rapidly to its close. It was a scene which somehow lived on in Cecil's memory; the merry dancers, the kindly landlord, Ole Kvikne sitting near the door and watching them, the expression of content visible in Herr Falck's face as he sat beside him, the pretty faces and picturesque attire of Sigrid and Swanhild, the radiant beauty of Blanche Morgan, the unclouded happiness of Frithiof.

The evening had done her good, its informality, its hearty, unaffected happiness and merriment made it a strange contrast to any other dance she could recollect; yet even here there was a slight shadow. She could not forget those words which she had overheard on board the steamer, could not get rid of the feeling that some trouble hung over the Falck family, and that hidden away, even in this Norwegian paradise, there lurked somewhere the inevitable serpent. Even as she mused over it, Frithiof crossed the room and made his bow before her, and in another minute had whirled her off. Happiness shone in his eyes, lurked in the tones of his voice, added fresh spirit to his dancing; she thought she had never before seen such an incarnation of perfect content. They talked of Norwegian books, and her interest in his country seemed to please him.

"You can easily get English translations of our best novelists," he said. "You should read Alexander Kielland's books, and Bjornsen's ringing all day in my head, we will make Sigrid say it to us, for I only know the chorus."

Then as the waltz came to an end he led her toward his sister, who was standing with Roy near the piano.

Just then a polka was struck up and he hastily made his bow to Blanche.

"May I have the pleasure of this dance?" he said, in his condescending tone.

"Thank you, but I am so tired," she replied. "Too tired for any more to-night."

"Yes," said Sigrid, glancing at her. "You look worn out. Munkeggen is a tiring climb. Let us come upstairs, it is high time that naughty little sister of mine was in bed."

"The reward of virtue," said Cyril Morgan, rejoining his cousin Florence. "I have been polite to the little bourgeoise and it has cost me nothing. It is always best in a place like this to be on good terms with every one. We shall never be likely to come across these people again; the acquaintance is not likely to bore us."

His words were perfectly true. That curiously assorted gathering of different nationalities would never again meet, and yet those days of close intimacy were destined to influence forever, either for good or for evil, the lives of each one.

All through the Sunday Blanche had kept in bed, for though the excitement had kept her up on the previous night, she inevitably suffered from the effects of her fall. It was not till the Monday morning, just before the arrival of the steamer, that Frithiof could find the opportunity for which he had impatiently waited. They walked through the little garden, ostensibly to watch for the steamer from the mound by the flag-staff, but they only lingered there for a minute, glancing anxiously down the fjord where in the distance could be seen the unwelcome black speck. On the further side of the mound, down among the trees and bushes, was a little sheltered seat. It was there that they spent their last moments, there that Blanche listened to his eager words of love, there that she again bade him wait till October, at the same time giving him such hope and encouragement as must surely have satisfied the most exigeant lover.

All too soon the bustle of departure reached them, and the steam-whistle—most hateful and discordant of sounds—rang and resounded among the mountains.

"I must go," she exclaimed, "or they will be coming to look for me. This is our real good-bye. On the steamer it will be just a hand-shake, but now—"

And she lifted a lovely, glowing face to his.

(To be continued.)

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