ONLY A MONTH;

OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER XVI.—(Cont'd)

Meanwhile Roy turned over in his mind half a dozen schemes, and at length decided to leave Frithiof during one of the quiet intervals, while he went for their own doctor, Miss Charlotte mounting guard outside the door, and promising to go to him if he seemed to need care.

Dr. Morris, who was an old friend, listened to Roy's description, and returned with him at once, much to the relief of poor Miss Charlotte, who was frightened out of her senses by one of Frithiof's paroxysms of wild excitement.

"Do you think seriously of him?" said Roy, when, the excitement having died down. Frithiof lay in a sort of stupor, taking no notice at all of his surroundings.

"If we can manage to get him any sleep he will pull through all right," said Dr. Morris, in his abrupt way. "If not, he will sink before many days. You had better send for his mother, if he has one."

"He has only a sister, and she is in Norway."

"Well, send for her, for he will need careful nursing. You say you will take charge of him? Very well; and to-morrow morning I will send in a nurse, who will set you at liberty for a few hours. Evidently he has had some shock. Can you make out what it was at all?"

"Well, last autumn, I believe; indeed, I am sure, he was jilted by an English girl with whom he was desperately in love. It all came upon the top of the other troubles of which I told you."

"And what is this paper he raves about? What is the girl's name? We might get some clew in that way."

"Oh," said Roy, "she was married some months ago. She is now Lady Romiaux."

The doctor gave a stifled exclamation.

"That explains all. I suppose the poor fellow honestly cared for her, and was shocked to see the paragraph in this week's 'Idle Time.' Your friend has had a lucky escape, if he could but see it in that light. For the husband of that heartless little flirt must be the most miserable man alive. We shall soon have another of those detestable causes celebres, and the newspapers lying about in every household will be filled with all the poisonous details."

As Roy kept watch through the long nights and days that followed, as he listened to the delirious ravings of his patient, and perceived how a man's life and health had been ruined by the faithlessness of a vain girl, he became so absorbed in poor Frithiof, so devoted to him, that he altogether forgot his specimens and his microscope.

Roy used to be haunted by the thought that he had telegraphed for Sigrid Falck, and that he should have to meet her after her long journey with the news that all was over. And remembering the bright face and sunny manner of the Norwegian girl, his heart failed him at the thought of her desolation. But Frithiof could not even take in the idea that she had been sent for. Nothing now made any difference to him. Sleep alone could restore him. But sleep refused to come, and already the death-angel hovered near, ready to give him the release for which he so greatly longed.

CHAPTER XVII.

Although it was the middle of August, a bitterly cold wind blew round the dreary little posting station of Hjerkin, on the Doverfield, and at the very time when Frithiof lay dying in the intolerable heat of London, Sigrid, shivering with cold, paced drearily along the bleak mountain road with her aunt. Apparently the subject they were discussing was not at all to the girl's taste, for as they walked along there were two ominous little depressions in her forehead, nor did her black fur hat entirely account for the shadow that overspread her face.

'Yes," said Fru Gronvold, emphatically, "I am sorry to have to say such a thing of you, Sigrid, but it really seems to me that you are playing the part of the dog in the manger. You profess absolute indifference to every man you meet, yet you go on absorbing attention, and standing in Karen's light, in a way which I assure you is very trying to me."

Sigrid's cheek flamed.

"I have done nothing to justify you in saying such a thing," she said, angrily.

"What!" cried Fru Gronvold. "Did not that Swedish botanist talk to you incessantly? Does not the English officer follow you about whenever he has the opportunity?"

"The botanist talked because we had a subject in common," replied Sigrid. "And probably the officer prefers talking to me because my English is more fluent than Karen's."

"And that I suppose was the reason that you must be the one to teach him the spring dans? And the one to sing him the 'Bridal Song of the Hardanger'?"

"Oh!" exclaimed Sigrid, with an impatient little stamp of the foot, "am I to be forever thinking of this wretched scheming and matchmaking? Can I not even try to amuse a middle-aged Englishman who is disappointed of his reindeer, and finds himself stranded in a dreary little inn with a handful of foreigners? I have only been courteous to him—nothing more; and if I like talking to him it is merely because he comes from England."

"I don't wish to be hard on you," said Fru Gronvold, "but naturally I have the feelings of a mother, and do not like to see Karen eclipsed. I accuse you of nothing worse, my dear, than a slight forwardness—a little deficiency in tact. There is no occasion for anger on your part."

Sigrid bit her lip hard to keep back the retort that she longed to make. In warm weather Hjerkin is a little paradise, but on this windy day, under a leaden sky, it seemed the most depressing place on earth.

"I shall go in and write to Frithiof," said Sigrid at length. And escaping gladly from Fru Gronvold, she ran up to her room.

"Here we are at Hjerkin," she wrote, "for a month, and it is more desolate than I can describe to you, uncle and Oscar out shooting all day long, and scarcely a soul to speak to, for most of the English have been driven away by the bad weather, and two girls from Stockholm who were here for their health are leaving this afternoon, unable to bear the dullness any longer. If something doesn't happen soon I think I shall grow desperate. But surely something will happen. We can't be meant to go on in this wretched way, apart from each other. I am disappointed that you think there is no chance of any opening for me in London. If it were not for Swanhild I think I should try for work—any sort of work except teaching—at Christiana. But I can't bear to leave her, and uncle would object to my trying for anything of the sort in Bergen. I can't help thinking of the old times when we were children, and of the summer holidays then. Don't you remember when we had the island all to ourselves, and used to rush down the fir-hill, and to frighten poor old Gro?"

She stopped writing because the thought of those past days had blinded her with tears, and because the longing for her father's presence had overwhelmed her; they had been so much to each other that there was not an hour in the day when she did not miss him.

Swanhild came dancing to meet her.

"Major Brown has got us such beautiful trout for supper, Sigrid, and uncle says I may go out fishing, too, some day. And you'll come with us, won't you?"

"You had better take Karen," said Sigrid, listlessly. "You know I never did care much for fishing. You shall catch them and will eat them," she added, with a dreary little smile. And throughout supper she hardly spoke, and at the first opportunity slipped away quietly, only, however, to be pursued by Swanhild.

"What is the matter?" said the child. "Are you not coming to the sitting-room?"

"No," said Sigrid, "I am tired, and it is so cold in there. I am going into the kitchen to buy some stamps. Frithiof's letter ought to go to-morrow."

As she spoke she opened the door of the roomy old kitchen, which is the pride of Hjerkin. Its three windows were shaded by snowy muslin curtains, its spotless floor was strewn with juniper, the walls, painted a peacock-blue, were hung with bright dish-covers, warming-pans, quaint old bellows and kitchen implements. There was a tall old clock in a black and gold case, a pretty corner cupboard in shaded brown, and a huge old-fashioned cabinet with cunning little drawers and nooks and corners, all painted in red and blue and green, with an amount of gilding which gave it quite an eastern look.

"Ah, how cozy the fire looks!" cried Swanhild.

"Bless your heart," said the kind old landlady, "sit down and warm yourself."

And one of the white-sleeved servant-girls brought a little chair which stood by a long wooden settle and put it close by the fire for the child, and Sigrid, her purchase made, joined the little group. Sitting there in the fire-light, she felt more at home than she had done for many months.

"Come, Swanhild," she said at last reluctantly, "it is ten o'clock and time you were in bed."

And thanking the landlady for her kindness, the two sisters crossed over the court-yard to the sitting-room.

"Where in the world have you been?" said Fru Gronvold, knitting vehemently. "We couldn't think what had become of you both."

"I went to the kitchen to get some stamps," said Sigrid, coldly.

"And it was so lovely and warm in there," said Swanhild, gayly, "and Fru Hjerkin has been telling me such beautiful stories about the Trolds. Her mother really saw one, do you know."

After this a cold good-night was exchanged, and Fru Gronvold's brow grew darker still when Major Brown called out in his hearty way:

"What, going so early, Miss Falck? We have missed you sadly to-night." Then, as she said something about the English mail, "Yes, yes, quite right. And I ought to be writing home, too, instead of playing."

"That means that he will not have another rubber," thought Sigrid as she hurried down the hill to the dependence, "and I shall be blamed for it."

"The only comfort is," she thought, "that the worst has happened to us; what comes now must be for the better. How the wind is raging round the house and shrieking at the windows! And, oh, how dreary and wretched this life is!"

And in very low spirits she blew out the candle, and lay down to sleep as best she might in a bed which shook beneath her in the gale.

(To be continued.)

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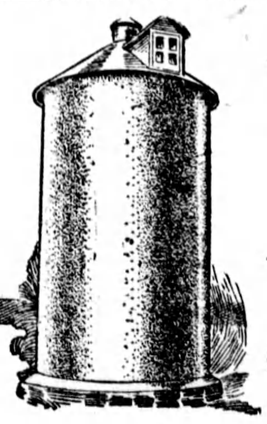

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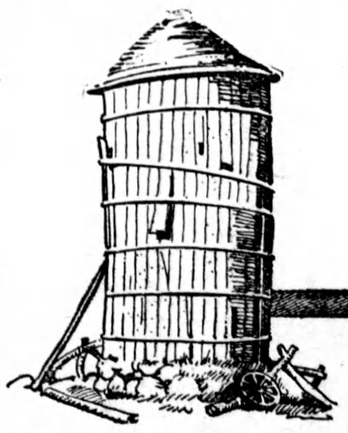

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