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OR, A CURIOUS MYSTERY EXPLAINED.

CHAPTER XXXVI.—(Cont'd)

"But what a terrible autumn for you!" exclaimed Frithiof. "And to think that all this should have sprung from that wretched five-pound note! Our stories have been curiously woven together, Sigrid."

As she thought of the contrast between the two stories her tears broke forth afresh; she walked on silently, hoping that he would not notice them, but a drop fell right on to his wrist; he stopped suddenly, took her face between his hands and looked full into her eyes.

"You dear little goose," he said, "what makes you cry? Was it because I said our stories had been woven together?"

"It's because I wish they could have been alike," she sobbed.

"But it wasn't to be," he said quietly. "It is an odd thing to say to you to-night, when your new life is beginning, but to-night I also am happy, because now at last my struggle is over—now at last the fire is burned out. I don't want anything but just the peace of being free to the end of my life. Believe me, I am content."

Her throat seemed to have closed up, she could not say a word just because she felt for him so intensely. She gave him a little mute caress, and once more they paced along the garden path. But her whole soul revolted against this notion of content. She understood it as little as the soldier marching to his first battle understands the calm indifference of the comrade who lies in hospital. Surely Frithiof was to have something better in his life than this miserable parody of love? This passion, which had been almost all pain, could surely not be the only glimpse vouchsafed him of the bliss which had transfigured the whole word for her? There came back to her the thought of the old study at Bergen, and she seemed to hear her father's voice saying:

"I should like an early marriage for Frithiof, but I will not say too much about you, Sigrid, for I don't know how I should ever spare you."

And she sighed as she remembered how his plans had been crossed and his business ruined, and his heart broken—how both for him and for Frithiof failure had been decreed.

Yet the Christmas bells rang on in this world of strangely mingled joy and sorrow, and they brought her much the same message that had been brought to her by the silence on Hjerkinsho:

"There is a better plan which can't go wrong," she said to herself.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"I have some news for you," said Mr. Horner to his wife a few days after this, as one evening he entered the drawing-room. The huge gold clock with the little white face pointed to the hour of eight, the golden pigs still climbed the golden hill, the golden swineherd still leaned meditatively on his golden staff. Mrs. Horner, arrayed in peacock-blue satin, glanced from her husband to the clock and back again to her husband.

"News?" she said, in a distinctly discouraging tone. "Is it that which makes you so late? However, it's of no consequence to me if the dinner is spoiled, quite the contrary, I am not particular. But I beg you won't grumble if the meat is done to a cinder."

"Never mind the dinner," replied Mr. Horner, captiously. "I have other things to think of than overdone joints. That fool Boniface has taken me at my word, and actually doesn't intend to renew the partnership."

"What!" cried his wife, "not now that all this affair is cleared up, and you have apologized so handsomely to young Falck?"

"No; it's perfectly disgraceful," said James Horner, looking like an angry turkey-cock as he paced to and fro. "I shook hands with Falck and told him I was sorry to have misjudged him, and even owned to Boniface that I had spoken hastily, but would you believe it, he won't reconsider the matter. He not only gives me the sack, but he takes in my place that scheming Norwegian."

"But the fellow has no capital," cried Mrs. Horner, in great agitation. "He is as poor as a rook! He hasn't a single penny to put into the concern."

"Precisely. But Boniface is such a fool, that he overlooks that and does nothing but talk of his great business capacities, his industry, his good address, and a lot of other rubbish of that sort. Why, without money a fellow is worth nothing—absolutely nothing."

"From the first I detested him," said Mrs. Horner. "I knew that the Bonifaces were deceived in him. It's my belief that although his character is cleared as to this five-pound note business, yet he is really a mere adventurer. Depend upon it, he'll manage to get everything into his own hands, and will be ousting Roy one of these days."

"Well, he's hardly likely to do that, for it seems the sister has been keeping her eyes open and that idiot of a Roy is going to marry her."

"To marry Sigrid Falck?" exclaimed Mrs. Horner, starting to her feet. "Actually to bring into the family a girl who plays at dancing classes and parties—a girl who sweeps her own house and cooks her own dinner!"

"I don't know that she is any the worse for doing that," said James Horner. "It's not the girl herself that I object to, for she's pretty and pleasant enough, but the connection, the being related by marriage to that odious Falck, who has treated me so insufferably, who looks down on me and is as standoff-ish as if he were an emperor."

"If there is one thing I do detest," said Mrs. Horner, "it is pushing people—a sure sign of vulgarity. But it's partly Loveday's fault. If I had to deal with the Falcks they would have been taught their proper place, and all this would not have happened."

At this moment dinner was announced. The overdone meat did not improve Mr. Horner's temper, and when the servants had left the room he broke out into fresh invectives again the Bonifaces.

"When is the wedding to be?" asked his wife.

"Some time in February, I believe. They are house-furnishing already."

Mrs. Horner gave an ejaculation of annoyance.

"Well, the sooner we leave London the better," she said. "I'm not going to be mixed up with all this, we'll avoid any open breach with the family of course, but for goodness' sake do let the house and let us settle down elsewhere. There's that house at Croydon I was very partial to, and you could go up and down easy enough from there."

"We'll think of it," said Mr. Horner, reflectively. "And, by the bye, we must, I suppose, get them some sort of wedding present."

"By good luck," said Mrs. Horner, "I won a sofa-cushion last week in a raffle at the bazaar for the chapel organ fund. It's quite good enough for them, I'm sure. I did half think of sending it to the youngest Miss Smith who is to be married on New-year's-day, but they are such rich people that I suppose I must send them something a little more showy and expensive. This will do very well for Sigrid Falck."

Luckily the opinion of outsiders did not at all mar the happiness of the two lovers. They were charmed to hear that the Horners were leaving London, and when, in due time, the sofa-cushion arrived, surmounted by Mrs. Horner's card, Sigrid, who had been in the blessed condition of expecting nothing, was able to write a charming little note of thanks, which by its straightforward simplicity, made the donor blush with an uncomfortable sense of guilt.

"And, after all," remarked Sigrid to Cecil, "we really owe a great deal to Mrs. Horner, for if she had not asked me to that children's fancy-ball I should never have met Madame Lechertier, and how could we ever have lived all together if it had not been for that?"

"In those days I think Mrs. Horner rather liked you, but somehow you have offended her."

"Why, of course it was by earning my living and setting up in model lodgings; I utterly shocked all her ideas of propriety, and, when once you do that, good-bye to all hopes of remaining in Mrs. Horner's good books. It would have grieved me to displease any of your relations if you yourselves cared for them, but the Horners—well, I can not pretend to care the least about them."

The two girls were in the little sitting-room of the model lodgings putting the finishing touches to the white cashmere wedding-dress which Sigrid had cut out and made for herself during the quiet days they had spent at Rowan Tree House. Every one entered most heartily into all the busy preparations, and Sigrid could not help thinking to herself that the best proof that trouble had not spoiled or soured the lives either of Cecil or Frithiof lay in their keen enjoyment of other people's happiness.

The wedding was to be extremely quiet. Early in the morning, when Cecil went to see if she could be of any use, she found the bride-elect in her usual dress and her housekeeping apron of brown holland, busily packing Frithiof's portmanteau.

"Oh, let me do it for you," she said. "The idea of your toiling away to-day as if you were not going to be married!"

Sigrid laughed merrily.

"Must brides sit down and do nothing until the ceremony?" she asked. "If so, I am sorry for them; I couldn't sit still if I were to try. How glad I am to think Frithiof and Swanhild will be at Rowan Tree House while we are away! I should never have had a moment's peace if I left them here, for Swanhild is after all only a child. It is so good of Mrs. Boniface to have asked them!"

"Since you are taking Roy away from us, I think it is the least you could do," said Cecil, laughing. "It will be such a help to have them this evening, for otherwise we should all be feeling very flat, I know."

"And we shall be on our way to the Riviera," said Sigrid, pausing for a few minutes in her busy preparations; a dreamy look came into her clear, practical eyes, and she let her head rest against the side of the bed.

"Sometimes, do you know," she exclaimed, "I can't believe this is all real. I think I am just imagining it all, and that I shall wake up presently and find myself playing the Myosotic waltz at the academy—it was always such a good tune to dream to."

"Wait," said Cecil, "does this make it feel more real?" and hastily going into the outer room she returned, bearing the lovely wedding bouquet which Roy had sent.

"Lilies of the valley!" exclaimed Sigrid. "Oh, how exquisite! And myrtle and eucharis lilies—it is the most beautiful bouquet I ever saw."

"Don't you think it is time you were dressing," said Cecil. "Come sit down and let me do your hair for you while you enjoy your flowers."

"But Swanhild's packing, I don't think it is quite finished."

"Never mind, I will come back this afternoon with her and finish everything, you must let us help you a little just for once."

And then as she brushed out the long golden hair she thought how few brides showed Sigrid's wonderful usefulness and care for others, and somehow wished that Roy could have seen her just as she was in her working-day apron, too full of household arrangements to spend much time over her own toilet.

(To be continued.)

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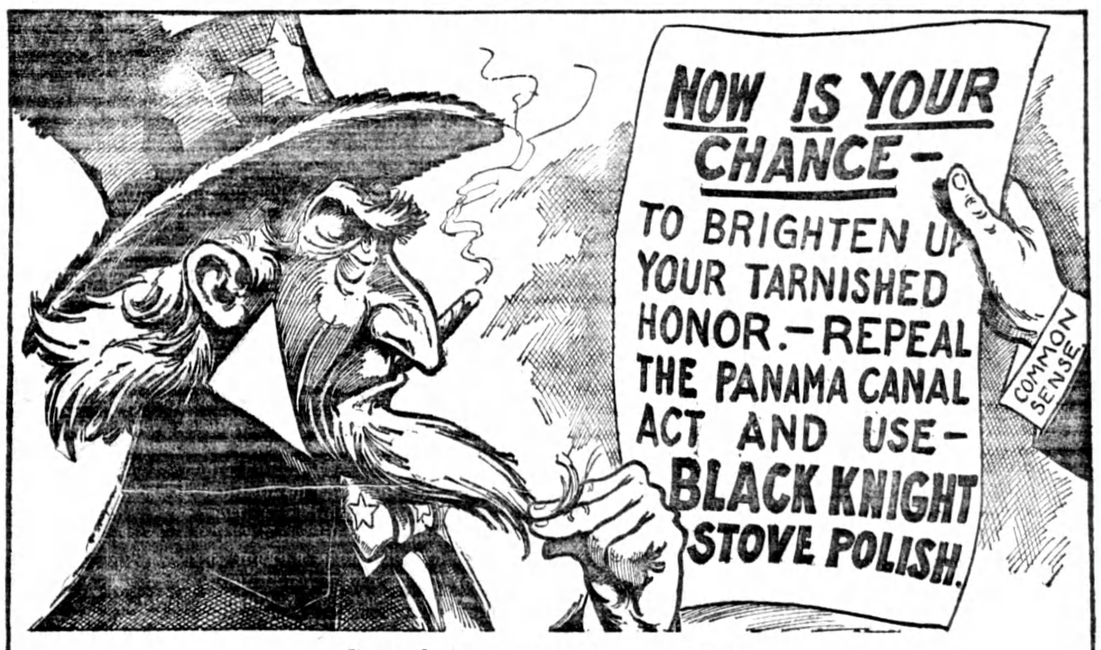

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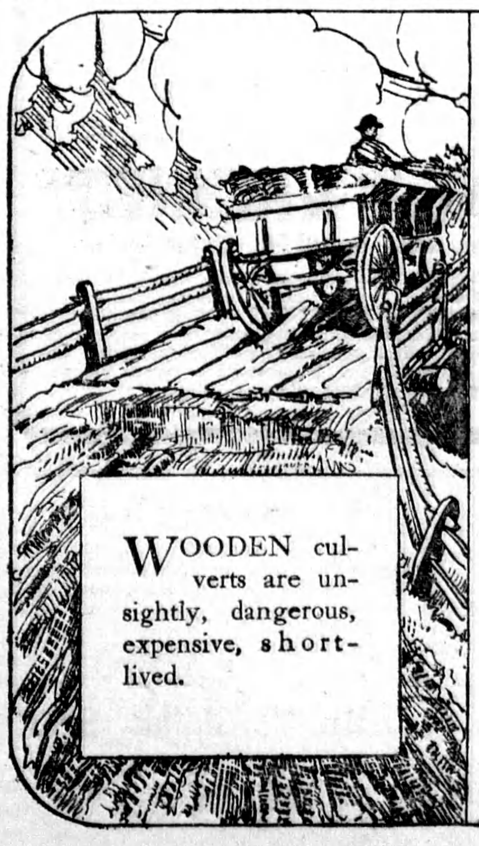

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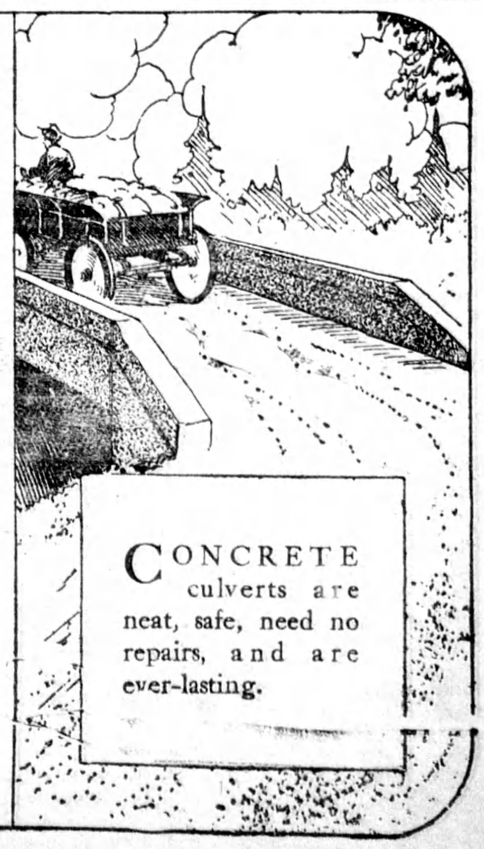
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