"Yes, yes," agreed Sigurd, seizing the basket full of the pansies he had plucked. "The sunshine is slipping away, and we cannot live with shadows! These are not real women, mistress; they are dreams—black dreams. I have often fought with dreams, and I know how to make them afraid! See how the one weeps because she knows me—and the other is just going to fall into a grave. I can hear the clods thrown on her head—thump—thump! It does not take long to bury a dream! Come, mistress, let us follow the sunshine!"

And, taking the hand she extended toward him, he turned away, looking back once, however, to call out loudly:

"Good-bye, bad dreams!"

As they disappeared behind the trees, Lovisa turned angrily to the still sobbing Ulrika.

"What is this folly?" she exclaimed, striking her staff fiercely into the ground. "Art mad or bewitched?"

Ulrika looked up—her plain face swollen and stained with weeping.

"Oh, Lord, have mercy upon me! Oh, Lord, forgive me!" she moaned. "I did not know it—how *could* I know?"

Lovisa grew so impatient that she seized her by the shoulder and shook her violently.

"Know what?" she cried; "know what?"

"Sigurd is my son'" said Ulrika, with a sort of solemn resignation—then, with a sudden gesture, she threw her hand above her head, crying: "My son, my son! The child I thought I had killed! The Lord be praised I did not murder him!"

Lovisa Elsland seemed stupefied with surprise. "Is this the truth?" she asked at last, slowly and incredulously.

"The truth, the truth!" cried Ulrika, passionately. "It is always the truth that comes to light! He is my child, I tell you! I gave him that scar!" She paused, shuddering, and continued in a lower tone, "I tried to kill him with a knife, but when the blood flowed, it sickened me, and I could not! He was an infant abortion—the evil fruit of an evil deed—and I threw him out to the waves—as I told you long ago. You have had good use of my confession, Lovisa Elsland; you have held me in your power by means of my secret, but now——"

The old woman interrupted her with a low laugh of contempt and malice.

"As the parents are, so are the children!" she said, scornfully. "Your lover must have been a fine man, Ulrika, if the son is like his father!"

Ulrika glared at her vengefully, then drew herself up with an air of defiance.

"I care nothing for your taunts, Elsland!" she said. "You can do me no harm! All is over between us! I will help in no

mischief against the Guldmars. Whatever their faults, they saved —my child!"

"Is that so great a blessing?" asked Lovisa, ironically.

"It makes your threats useless," answered Ulrika. "You can not call me *murderess* again!"

"Coward and fool!" shrieked Lovisa. "Was it *your* intent that the child should live? Were you not glad to think it dead? And cannot I spread the story of your infamy through all the villages where you are known? Is not the wretched boy himself a living witness of the attempt you made to kill him? Does not that scar speak against you? Would not Olaf Guldmar relate the story of the child's rescue to any one that asked him? Would you like all Bosekop to know of your intrigue with an escaped criminal, who was afterward caught and hung? The virtuous Ulrika—the zealous servant of the Gospel—the pious, praying Ulrika!" and the old woman trembled with rage and excitement. "Out of my power? Never, never! As long as there is breath in my body I will hold you down! *Not* a murderess, you say——"

"No," said Ulrika, very calmly, with a keen look, "I am *not*—but you *are!*"

CHAPTER XVI.

Il n'y a personne qui ait eu autant à souffrir a votre sujet que moi depuis ma naissance! aussi je vous supplie à deux genoux et au nom de Dieu, d' avoir pitie de moi!—*Old Breton Ballad.*

In a few more days Thelma's engagement to Sir Philip Bruce-Errington was the talk of the neighborhood. The news spread gradually, having been, in the first place, started by Britta, whose triumph in her mistress's happiness was charming to witness. It reached the astonished and reluctant ears of the Rev. Mr. Dyceworthy, whose rage was so great that it destroyed his appetite for twenty-four hours. But the general impression in the neighborhood, where superstition maintained so strong a hold on the primitive and prejudiced minds of the people, was that the reckless young Englishman would rue the day on which he wedded "the white witch of the Alten Fjord."

Guldmar was regarded with more suspicion than ever as having used some secret and diabolical influence to promote the match; and the whole party were, as it seemed, tabooed, and looked upon as given up to the most unholy practices.

Needless to say, the opinions of the villagers had no effect whatever on the good spirits of those who were thus unfavorably criticised, and it would have been difficult to find a merrier group than that assembled one fine morning in front of Guldmar's house, all equipped from top to toe for some evidently unusually lengthy

and arduous mountain excursion. Each man carried a long, stout stick, portable flask, knapsack, and rug—the latter two articles strapped together and slung across the shoulder—and they all presented an eminently picturesque appearance, particularly Sigurd, who stood at a little distance from the others, leaning on his tall staff and gazing at Thelma with an air of peculiar pensiveness and abstraction.

She was at that moment busied in adjusting Errington's knapsack more comfortably, her fair, laughing face turned up to his, and her bright eyes alight with love and tender solicitude.

"I've a good mind not to go at all," he whispered in her ear. "I'll come back and stay with you all day."

"You foolish boy!" she answered, merrily. "You would miss seeing the grand fall—all for what? To sit with me and watch me spinning, and you would grow so very sleepy! Now, if I were a man, I would go with you."

"I'm very glad you're not a man!" said Errington, pressing the little hand that had just buckled his shoulder-strap. "Though I wish you *were* going with us. But I say, Thelma, darling, won't you be lonely?"

She laughed gayly. "Lonely? I! Why, Britta is with me—besides, I am never lonely *now*." She uttered the last word softly, with a shy, upward glance. "I have so much to think about——" She paused and drew her hand away from her lover's close clasp. "Ah," she resumed, with a mischievous smile, "you are a conceited boy! You want to be missed! You wish me to say that I shall feel most miserable all the time you are away! If I do, I shall not tell you!"

"Thelma, child!" called Olaf Guldmar, at this juncture, "keep the gates bolted and doors barred all the time we are absent. Remember, thou and Britta must pass the night alone here—we cannot be at home till late in the evening of to-morrow. Let no one inside the garden, and deny thyself to all comers. Dost thou hear?"

"Yes, father," she responded, meekly.

"And let Britta keep good guard that her crazy hag of a grandam come not hither to disturb or fright thee with her croaking—for thou hast not even Sigurd to protect thee."

"Not even Sigurd!" said that personage, with a meditative smile. "No, mistress; not even poor Sigurd!"

"One of us might remain behind," suggested Lorimer, with a side-look at his friend.

"Oh, no, no!" exclaimed Thelma, anxiously. "It would vex me so much! Britta and I have often been alone before. We are quite safe, are we not, father?"

"Safe enough!" said the old man, with a laugh. "I know of no one save Lovisa Elsland who has the courage to face thee, child! Still, pretty witch as thou art, 'twill not harm thee to put the iron bar across the house door, and to lock fast the outer gate when we have gone. This done, I have no fear of thy safety. Now," and he kissed his daughter heartily, "now, lads, 'tis time we were on the march! Sigurd, my boy, lead on!"

"Wait!" cried Sigurd, springing to Thelma's side. "I must say good-bye!" And he caught the girl's hand and kissed it—then plucking a rose, he left it between her fingers. "That will remind you of Sigurd, mistress! Think of him once to-day!—once again when the midnight glory shines. Good-bye, mistress! that is what the dead say! Good-bye!"

And with a passionate gesture of farewell he ran and placed himself at the head of the little group that waited for him, saying exultingly:

"Now follow me! Sigurd knows the way! Sigurd is the friend of all the wild water-falls! Up the hills—across the leaping stream—through the sparkling foam!" And he began chanting to himself a sort of wild mountain song.

Macfarlane looked at him dubiously. "Are ye sure?" he said to Guldmar. "Are ye sure that wee chap kens whaur he's gaun? He'll no lead us into a ditch an' leave us there, mistakin' it for the fall?"

Guldmar laughed heartily. "Never fear! Sigurd's the best guide you can have, in spite of his fancies. He knows all the safest and surest paths; and Njedegorze is no easy place to reach, I can tell you!"

"*Pardon!* How is it called?" asked Duprez, eagerly.

"Njedegorze."

The Frenchman shrugged his shoulders. "I give it up!" he said, smilingly. "Mademoiselle Guldmar, if anything happens to me at this cascade with the name unpronounceable, you will again be my doctor, will you not?"

Thelma laughed as she shook hands with him. "Nothing will happen," she rejoined; "unless, indeed, you catch cold by sleeping in a hut all night. Father, you must see that they do not catch cold!"

The *bonde* nodded, and motioned the party forward, Sigurd leading the way. Errington, however, lingered behind on the pretense of having forgotten something, and, drawing his betrothed in his arms kissed her fondly.

"Take care of yourself, darling!" he murmured—and then hurrying away he rejoined his friends, who had discreetly refrained from looking back, and therefore had not seen the lovers embrace.

Sigurd, however, had seen it, and the sight apparently gave fresh impetus to his movements, for he sprung up the adjacent hill with so much velocity that those who followed had some difficulty

to keep up with him—and it was not until they were out of sight of the farm-house that he resumed anything like a reasonable pace.

As soon as they had disappeared, Thelma turned into the house and seated herself at her spinning-wheel. Britta soon entered the room carrying the same graceful implement of industry, and the two maidens sat together for some time in a silence unbroken, save by the low melodious whirring of the two wheels, and the mellow complaints of the strutting doves on the window-sill.

"Froken Thelma!" said Britta at last, timidly.

"Yes, Britta?" And her mistress looked up inquiringly,

"Of what use is it for you to spin now?" queried the little handmaid. "You will be a great lady, and great ladies do not work at all!"

Thelma's wheel revolved more and more slowly, till at last it stopped altogether.

"Do they not?" she said, half inquiringly and musingly. "I think you must be wrong, Britta. It is impossible that there should be people who are always idle. I do not know what great ladies are like."

"I do!" And Britta nodded her curly head sagaciously. "There was a girl from Hammerfest who went to Christiania to seek service—she was handy at her needle, and a fine spinner, and a great lady took her right away from Norway to London. And the lady bought her spinning-wheel for a curiosity she said—and put it in the corner of a large parlor, and used to show it to her friends, and they would all laugh and say; "How pretty!" And Jansena—that was the girl—never spun again—she wore linen that she got from the shops—and it was always falling into holes, and Jansena was always mending, mending, and it was no good!"

Thelma laughed. "Then it is better to spin, after all, Britta—is it not?"

Britta looked dubious. "I do not know," she answered; "but I am sure great ladies do not spin. Because, as I said to you, Froken, this Jansena's mistress was a great lady, and she never did anything—no! nothing at all—but she put on wonderful dresses, and sat in her room, or was driven about in a carriage. And that is what you will do also, Froken!"

"Oh, no, Britta," said Thelma, decisively. "I could not be so idle. Is it not fortunate I have so much linen ready? I have quite enough for marriage."

The little maid looked wistful. "Yes, dear Froken," she murmured, hesitatingly; "but I was thinking if it is right for you to wear what you have spun. Because, you see, Jansena's mistress had wonderful things all trimmed with lace—and they would all come back from the washing torn and hanging in threads, and Jansena had to mend those as well as her own clothes. You see,

they do not last at all—and they cost a large sum of money; but it is proper for great ladies to wear them."

"I am not sure of that, Britta," said Thelma, still musingly. "But still, it may be—my bridal things may please Philip. If you know anything about it, you might tell me what is right."

Britta was in a little perplexity. She had gathered some idea from her friend Jansena concerning life in London—she had even a misty notion of what was meant by a "*trousseau*" with all its dainty, expensive, and often useless fripperies; but she did not know how to explain herself to her young mistress, whose simple, almost severe tastes would, she instinctively felt, recoil from anything like ostentation in dress, so she was discreetly silent.

"You know, Britta," continued Thelma, gently, "I shall be Philip's wife, and I must not vex him in any little thing. But I do not quite understand. I have always dressed in the same way—and he has never said that he thought me wrongly clothed."

And she looked down with quite a touching pathos at her straight, white woolen gown, and smoothed its folds doubtfully. The impulsive Britta sprung to her side and kissed her with girlish and unaffected enthusiasm.

"My dear, my dear! You are more lovely and sweet than anybody in the world!" she cried. "And I am sure Sir Philip thinks so too!"

A beautiful roseate flush suffused Thelma's cheeks, and she smiled.

"Yes, I know he does!" she replied, softly. "And after all, it does not matter what one wears."

Britta was meditating—she looked lovingly at her mistress's rippling wealth of hair.

"Diamonds!" she murmured to herself in a sort of satisfied soliloquy. "Diamonds, like those you have on your finger, Froken—diamonds all scattered among your curls like dewdrops! And white satin, all shining, shining!—people would take you for an angel!"

Thelma laughed merrily. "Britta, Britta! You are talking such nonsense! Nobody dresses so grandly except queens in fairy-tales."

"Do they not?" and the wise Britta looked more profound than ever. "Well, we shall see, dear Froken—we shall see!"

"*We?*" queried Thelma with surprised emphasis.

Her little maid blushed vividly, and looked down demurely, twisting and untwisting the string of her apron.

"Yes, Froken," she said in a low tone. "I have asked Sir Philip to let me go with you when you leave Norway."

"Britta!" Thelma's astonishment was too great for more than this exclamation.

"Oh, my dear! don't be angry with me!" implored Britta, with

sparkling eyes, rosy cheeks, and excited tongue all pleading eloquently together, "I should die here without you! I told the *bonde* so; I did, indeed! And then I went to Sir Philip—he is such a grand gentleman—so proud and yet so kind—and I asked him to let me still be your servant. I said I knew all great ladies had a maid, and if I was not clever enough I could learn, and—and"—here Britta began to sob—"I said I did not want any wages—only to live in a little corner of the same house where you were—to sew for you, and see you, and hear your voice sometimes——" Here the poor little maiden broke down altogether and hid her face in her apron, crying bitterly.

The tears were in Thelma's eyes too, and she hastened to put her arm round Britta's waist, and tried to soothe her by every loving word she could think of.

"Hush, Britta dear! you must not cry!" she said, tenderly. "What did Philip say?"

"He said," jerked out Britta, convulsively, "that I was a g-good little g-girl, and that he was g-glad I wanted to g-go!" Here her two sparkling wet eyes peeped out of the apron inquiringly, and seeing nothing but the sweetest affection on Thelma's attentive face, she went on more steadily. "He p-pinched my cheek, and he laughed—and he said he would rather have me for your maid than anybody—there!"

And this last exclamation was uttered with so much defiance that she dashed away the apron altogether, and stood erect in self-congratulatory glory, with a particularly red little nose and very trembling lips. Thelma smiled, and caressed the tumbled brown curls.

"I am very glad, Britta!" she said, earnestly. "Nothing could have pleased me more! I must thank Philip. But it is of father I am thinking—what will father and Sigurd do?"

"Oh, that is all settled, Froken," said Britta, recovering herself rapidly from her outburst. "The *bonde* means to go for one of his long voyages in the 'Valkyrie'—it is time she was used again, I'm sure—and Sigurd will go with him. It will do them both good—and the tongues of Bosekop can waggle as much as they please, none of us will be here to mind them!"

"And you will escape your grandmother!" said Thelma, amusedly, as she once more set her spinning-wheel in motion.

Britta laughed delightedly. "Yes! she will not find her way to England without some trouble!" she exclaimed. "Oh, how happy I shall be! And you"—she looked pleadingly at her mistress—"you do not dislike me for your servant?"

"Dislike!" and Thelma gave her a glance of mingled reproach and tenderness. "You know how fond I am of you, Britta! It will be like having a little bit of my old home always with me."

Silently Britta kissed her hand, and then resumed her work.

The monotonous murmur of the two wheels recommenced—this time pleasantly accompanied by the rippling chatter of the two girls who, after the fashion of girls all the world over, indulged in many speculations as to the new and strange life that lay before them.

Their ideas were of the most primitive character—Britta had never been out of Norway, and Thelma's experiences, apart from her home life, extended merely to the narrow and restricted bounds of simple and severe convent discipline, where she had been taught that the pomps and vanities of the world were foolish and transient shows, and that nothing could please God more than purity and rectitude of soul. Her character was formed, and set upon a firm basis—firmer than she herself was conscious of. The nuns who had been entrusted with her education had fulfilled their task with more than their customary zeal—they were interested in the beautiful Norwegian child for the sake of her mother, who had also been their charge. One venerable nun, in particular, had bestowed a deep and lasting benefit on her, for, seeing her extraordinary beauty, and forestalling the dangers and temptations into which the possession of such exceptional charms might lead her, she adopted a wise preventive course that cased her as it were in armor, proof against all the assailments of flattery. She told the girl quite plainly that she was beautiful—but at the same time made her aware that beauty was common—that she shared it alike with birds, flowers, trees, and all the wonderful objects of nature—moreover, that it was nothing to boast of, being so perishable.

"Suppose a rose foolish enough to boast of its pretty leaves," said the gentle *religieuse* on one occasion. "They all fall to the ground in a short time, and become decayed and yellow—it is only the fragrance, or the *soul* of the rose that lasts." Such precepts, that might have been wasted on a less sensitive and thoughtful nature, sunk deeply into Thelma's mind—she accepted them not only in theory, but in practice, and the result was that she accepted her beauty as she accepted her health—as a mere natural occurrence—no more. She was taught that the three principal virtues of a woman were chastity, humility, and obedience—these were the laws of God, fixed and immutable, which no one dared break without committing grievous and unpardonable sin. So she thought, and according to her thoughts she lived. What a strange world, then, lay before her in the contemplated change that was about to take place in the even tenor of her existence! A world of intrigue and folly—a world of infidelity and falsehood!—how would she meet it? It was a question she never asked herself—she thought London a sort of magnified Christiania, or, at best, the Provençal town of Arles on a larger scale. She had heard her father speak of it, but only in a vague way, and she had been able to form no just idea even to herself of the enormous metropolis