

The Deacon

By Mary Howarth

PROLOGUE

“ Can flowers that breathe one little day
In odorous sweetness life away,
And wavering to the earth decay,

Have any claim to rank with her,
Warmed in whose soul impulses stir,
Then bloom to goodness ; and aver

Her worth through spherical joys shall move
When suns and systems cease above,
And nothing lives but perfect Love ? ”

BEST described in the words used by Thomas Woolner to express his Beautiful Lady, “ A wild-rose blossom of the wood ” is Johanna. For her loveliness was rarely simple ; her mind was rarely pure. Happy the man—so one would think—who should snatch her from the bush, and in his bosom wear her.

Nevertheless Johanna when she married him who to her had been her heart’s rest from the day on which she first of all saw him, married one in whose brightest moments but a faint conception of her wonderful beauties was apparent to himself. If Johanna

Johanna was satisfied however, shall it be for any one else to cavil ? And she was. God in His heaven knows and gladdens over the rapture of Johanna. To few only is such power to love given ; to those for whom the angels and the great God care most tenderly.

There is on earth no joy to be compared with this of perfect love, save one. And that one, that joy transcending all others, is when such love is met with such love.

Johanna knew not that joy. Hers was on her own side only. And therein is the essence of its wondrous pathos, which is indeed very, very great. But it may be hoped that her mind was blind to the lack. It may be hoped that she never recognised that her husband many and many a time bitterly resented his marriage, or that to it he traced the downfall of his early ambitions.

She, at least, was absolutely and entirely satisfied.

I

The deacon sat in the schoolroom and looked over a sheet of paper he held in his hand. It was covered with notes, and was indeed a synopsis of what he meant to say in church that day, when upon the occasion of his last appearance at Helga, where he had taught the children for three years, the priest would address a public farewell to him and he would have to reply.

" My friends," he read in a low voice, " my brethren, I am sorry to leave you. But first let me thank you for your kind words and good wishes. I have tried here in Helga to be a faithful servant to my church and country ; to teach the children as the State commands, to conduct such services as my priest dictated, and to make myself unto you what I could of comfort and solace.

Now

Now I am going further into the world to teach others, to pray with strangers, to comfort and to solace those whom, so far, I have not seen and do not know."

"Hjorth, Hjorth, the breakfast is ready, and here have I invited Lauritz and Pauline to come in. They were so anxious to see the deacon eat! Little curiosities! have they never seen anyone eat before?"

It was the cheery voice of Karen, the woman who came in in the morning to clean the schoolhouse and prepare the deacon's meal.

Hjorth folded up the sheet of paper over which he had hastily glanced to the end, and, crying out that he would be in the kitchen immediately, set about to clear away the writing materials he had been using.

From the outer room came the chatter of young voices, and the deacon, glancing out of the high window in the schoolroom, saw that a number of his pupils were congregated about the door.

"They have made you some fancy gardens," called Karen, "the children, I mean. You must come and see them before they fade. What is in them, Pauline? Speak up; the deacon will not chide. Hjorth, do you hear?"

"I hear," said the deacon.

"Well then, Pauline, what is in them?"

"There is ling," piped a small, timid voice.

"And sweet gale," shouted a bolder one.

"I got the purple loose-strife down by the river and the grass of Parnassus came from the meadow," cried a child outside the door.

"And you remember the name, which is more," shouted Karen, approvingly, and glancing at Hjorth, who at that moment appeared in the kitchen.

The deacon smiled. His was a serious face, a good deal covered with black hair, which contrasted strongly with his white complexion and pale grey eyes. When he smiled his expression became kind and indulgent. He knew this, and sometimes smiled instead of speaking, a plan that saved him trouble and was effective.

A small, fat, and solemn boy of seven, and a sprightly and coquettish damsel of four, advanced shyly to the breakfast table in response to his invitation. Usually quite at home with their teacher—a due allowance being made for the awe in which they held his office—they displayed a newly-acquired timidity upon this occasion. Not even encouraging remarks from Karen, and an unlimited supply of pancakes added to the usual Norwegian breakfast fare of smoked salmon, cheese, and flat-brod, sufficed to put them quite at their ease. They felt towards the deacon that odd degree of strangeness that forces itself upon one in one's relations towards anybody who has been very familiar and is destined shortly to enter upon another sphere. Thus the sister who is going to be married, the brother who has accepted an appointment abroad, the friend who has won distinction from the outer world, become momentarily some one unknown. The difference disturbs the old sympathy, but, of course, only quite fleetingly, and is recognised merely by those whose temperaments cause them to be hyper-sensitive to such impressions, as children are.

Lauritz and Pauline, moreover, were aware of their own importance upon the occasion, and were the observed of many observers, who clustered about the half-opened door and took turns to peep into the kitchen. This in itself was sufficient to make them self-conscious and shy. Every time the deacon looked in that direction there was a fresh little face, a little pale-haired crown, a couple of pink cheeks, a pair of blue eyes, and a moist open little mouth.

How anxious and inquisitive their expression was at first! But they smiled when their master smiled on them, and withdrew their heads rapidly after the smile.

When breakfast was over, and he had passed outside with Lauritz and Pauline to admire the mimic gardens the children had made for him in the sandy soil before the school, Hjorth dismissed them and bent his steps towards the sea-shore. He desired to be alone. He wanted to exult once more in the sensations of the occasion, and to picture again to himself the scene that was shortly to take place in the church, in which he would be the man of the hour. Accustomed as he was to live alone, this habit of introspective and anticipatory imagination had grown upon him. Whenever he was strongly moved he craved for solitude and an opportunity to think the whole situation through, just as urgently as other men crave for the companionship and sympathy of a dearly loved friend, into whose ears they can tell, perhaps in a fragmentary way, perhaps fully, as best suits their needs, all that is in their hearts.

The young deacon would not have felt himself so satisfying if he had not been true to himself. Mistaken and foolish he was, perhaps, but at least in his way he was honest.

He almost ran to the shore; he was so anxious to get to a certain place where he knew he should be absolutely alone. He found it. It was a high promontory jutting out into the open ocean, from which he could see, as he stood looking landwards upon his left, a wild shallow bay of sand, upon his right a jagged outline of sea-fringe, one mass of rocks, and then as far as the horizon pile after pile of strange boulder hills, like an exaggerated lava field, melting away above the sandy bay into a waving plain of wild moorland.

He was absolutely alone; the one human thing in a great inanimate

animate world. He had purposely chosen for such moments this desolate spot, because from it not even a human habitation could be seen.

Conqueror of the universe, full to overflowing of majesty and power, conscious even to sorrow of his own omnipotence, he stood there and gazed around him. The youth, the strength, the ambition, the perseverance, the dauntlessness within him joined with the beautiful exhilaration of the air to produce a feeling of majestic supremacy. There was the world before him ; there was he, imperial.

His mind went back a little. He had caught the day before, while he officiated at the funeral of an old man from the felds, a transitory impression that had pleased him. It was while he headed the procession and chanted the scriptural sentences that came at the beginning of the service. Between him and the coffin placed on its shabby bier, a farm trolley, and pulled by a mountain pony, had come on foot the old man's near relations, and next after them all the crowd of followers that could be collected from the country-side. The dirge-like chant was familiar enough to him to permit his thoughts to wander while he sang, but because he had had to lead the procession over the pathless meads he had not been able to follow up his ideas so carefully and absorbingly as here on this rocky promontory. The particularly gratifying one that he had caught and stowed away for future enjoyment was a strange mixture of the sensations of the moment. He had left it for absorbing contemplation until a more convenient season. He had thought he was looking inside that rude coffin and gazing upon the seamed, grey face of the aged man, pathetic in its image of care, yet beautiful exceedingly in its meekness and patience. And without knowing at the moment why he thus spoke, he thought he had quoted these words :

“ God,

"God, I thank Thee that I am not as other men are—or even as this."

He had been pleased. Yes ; he had been pleased. Dwelling over it now it seemed to bear a fantastic, indeed a blasphemous significance. Why had he been pleased ? He must know. Gazing around once more with arms stretched out in yearning love for the prospect and what it meant to him, he recognised that for the life within him, glorious, promising, full of possibilities of God only knew what greatness and joy, he had been rapturously happy that he was not as that corpse : a dead man after a life of much and grinding misery, such as the constant struggle for existence implies for the labourer in a sterile country.

Heaven be praised, he was not as that cold clay, but young and strong and lusty, free as the ocean behind him, strong as the hills before him, and full, full, full to the lips, of vivid pulsing life.

Sorry ? Was he sorry to be leaving this place where there were less than a dozen houses, for the town where they reckoned them by hundreds ? He knew he was not sorry.

Was he sorry for one moment to leave anyone in it ; any single person, beautiful Johanna for example, with her red rose mouth, her pink cheeks melting in a rich cream, her chestnut hair with the love locks curling tendril-wise upon her brow ? Would there be one pang for her ? He passed down from the promontory to the shore, and from the shore to the road, with his mind strangely fixed upon Johanna, meeting and greeting many families in carrioles and stolkjærres, and on horse-back, who were on their way to the church.

Not that he had encouraged the thought of her habitually. Indeed it was she who had encouraged him. She had what he called

called taken a fancy to him, and a very embarrassing fancy it had been, displayed in bunches of flowers and bowls of wild fruit which she had deposited upon his desk, when she brought her little cousins Pauline and Lauritz to school. He had been compelled to be almost rude when she ran after him across the mead one evening, to tell him that the fish were rising in a favourite pool, and to imply a lie when he remarked that that was no business of his. Also he had purposely neglected her flowers, and pushed the bowls of fruit aside.

No ; he should not regret Johanna for a moment. She was a forward child ; just that.

So during the service that came next he paid no more attention to Johanna Tubering than a deacon should to any member of the congregation. Neither did he think less of his own vastly important share in the ceremony. He was conscious all the while that he was the cynosure of every eye there, and when he stood up to answer the priest, who in a few fatherly words had bade him God-speed in his own name and that of the people, the very modesty and repression of his demeanour was the result of a carefully thought out and cultivated attitude of mind and manner.

Johanna's eyes, on the contrary, were frankly turned towards him throughout the ceremony. She sat with her aunt and the other women on the left side of the church ; the men occupying the pews upon the right. She thought of nothing, this child Johanna, but that he was going, and would God bless him ? "Oh, God, Father in Heaven, bless him, I pray Thee. Oh, my God, bless him. Oh, Saviour Christ, I beseech Thee to bless him. Dear God, bless him." Such were her prayers, what time the old priest besought the Lord for all sorts and conditions of men.

And below the oft-repeated supplication came the accompanying added

added plea : "Oh, God, I do so love him. If it may be that Thou wilt bless him because I love him so dearly, do so I pray Thee. Amen."

She seemed to think that the God she loved would care more for him because she loved him. God was to her a personality ; a kind, loving Father, indulgent to His daughters, because He loved them. Nine times out of ten she did not add the greatest importunement of all : for Christ's sake.

She had it in her mind that she herself went hand in hand with God.

II

It transpired that Hjorth did not immediately settle in the town whither he had been sent. Directly he got there he was despatched to a hamlet up country, where he was to combine the duties of schoolmaster and deacon during the absence of the priest. It happened that the *praestegaard* or parsonage was being thoroughly overhauled ; something very wrong had been discovered respecting its drainage. The priest was therefore lodged in the inn, where the deacon joined him, for there were many matters upon which the elder man found it necessary to confer with the younger before his departure.

The deacon now discovered what a strangely desolate life he had led in that little sea-coast Helga. He had not recognised while he was there in the middle of the children that he was so alone. He found himself among these people dizzy with their talk. Existence seemed to him a dream and not reality. It was the ending of the tourist season, and there were several English in the house. If it had been the height of the season the poor man would certainly have lost his head. As it was, he went a long way towards doing so.

After,

After his first shyness had worn off he began to take note of his companions, and immediately became interested in a certain young lady who was the governess of some children staying in the hotel. Had he been told that the cause of his interest in her was hers in him, he would not have believed it. Hjorth was a man who was thoroughly imbued with a sense of his own originality.

It all came about after she had asked him to be so kind as to pass the sugar at "aftens," the evening meal corresponding to English high tea. A little discussion ensued as to the Norwegian for sugar, in which the children, her charges, joined. Hjorth, who, of course, like every educated Norsemen, could speak English, instructed them in the word, and then they asked for bread, tea, coffee, and eggs, all of which he translated for them.

The governess laughed merrily with the children. The languages were exactly alike, they declared.

Afterwards he met her now and then, taking walks by herself or with the little girls. Amy Travis contrived that they should meet alone not seldom. She on her side was interested in him.

She used to draw him out. She was a creature of impulses and fads, and her fad at the moment was Norway. During the season that she had just passed in London with the family with whom she lived, she had taken every opportunity that presented itself of going to the theatre to see the Ibsen plays. She had read what she had not seen acted, and was really grateful to the Norwegian writer, declaring that he had given her a taste for the reading of drama, and that since she had known Ibsen and not till then, she had been able to read and enjoy Shakespeare. The deacon was to her a very romantic object. Moreover he seemed to be much in the same position that she occupied—a subordinate one. She felt for him. The mind that is essentially mediocre kicks continually against the subordinate, though it never rises beyond it. Hjorth,

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to do him justice, did not feel this. But he felt something else keenly. It was being borne in upon him that he ached for sympathy ; that so far he had only been half a creature ; that he must have the completion of himself. What has been already said about Miss Amy Travis ought to be sufficient to show that he was frightfully over-sanguine, indeed utterly mistaken, in imagining that in her he would find his other soul side. This girl would never in her then condition penetrate further than the eyes and the heart of a man. She was pretty and her manner was attractive. But good as these two attributes undoubtedly are, they go but a short way in the formation of that marriage of true minds that is of all unions the most perfect and enduring on God's earth.

He talked to her about Ibsen, rallying her gently upon her enthusiasm, for one whom he, in company with many of his countrymen, called brain-sick. Nevertheless he spent some hours of each night reading him up in Norsk, so that in the daytime he could compare vexed passages with Miss Amy and, if it might be, explain to her items that had puzzled her, or rather that had puzzled wiser heads in London, Miss Amy having read in the newspapers concerning these disputed lines and appropriated unto herself the bewilderments they expressed. It was significant of the girl's mind that they never discussed Ibsen's theories or ethics. Amy Travis deduced nothing from what she read, and had therefore nothing to say upon such topics. But Hjorth did not detect this. Indeed, he would have been shocked had the girl started the subject of say heredity with him, or of the rights of men to suicide, or of other weighty matters shut out from the consideration of women. Had the girl overstepped by half an inch the limits his inherited convictions set for her, he, the deacon, who was to be a priest, would have been repulsed instantly. Yet he craved

craved the other soul side of him ; fiercely, eagerly. It is impossible to laugh at Hjorth. One does not laugh at a baby who fondly imagines it has got the moon it cried for, when it is given an indiarubber ball.

The people in the hotel began to take an interest in the pair. Trust Norwegians for curiosity. They are one of the most inquisitive people on the earth's surface, as inquisitive as the Welsh. That is where the old romance of their forefathers comes in. It is what it has worked round to. Now that the ancient days of the Vikings are over, with all that they brought of glorious sensation-stirring deeds, the people have to amuse themselves. So they weave all sorts of romances about other people, feeding their ideas, or setting them in the right direction, by inquisitive questions. It is an innocent form of amusement. They are not spiteful. But not comprehending this national weakness, when to her ears the general gossip came, Amy Travis's mistress—shall we call her?—spoke to the girl laughingly :

" You are making him worship the very ground you tread on," she said. And then she adjured her to remember Ernest.

Whereupon the bright-faced girl also laughed and shook her head merrily. But at the same time she hated her employer a little more than she had done before, for her unwarrantable interference.

When once Hjorth got an idea into his head, it consumed him. He was so passionately constituted, a man of such wildness of disposition, just the sort to rise to any height. Had he not felt unconquerable out there on the rocks at Helga ? It is never given to any one to feel master of the world for nothing. It is a sign of the will that is indomitable, the best attribute, if all others are equal, a man or a woman can possess. Yes, a woman also. Hjorth waited long enough therefore to sound himself only ; not to think
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of her and whether she manifested any show of feeling that should lead him to suppose she really cared for him. And then he spoke.

They were standing together beneath the flag-staff on a promontory outside the hotel overlooking the lake deep down below them, and on the other side of the valley the glacier mountain, part of the way up which they had all that day walked to see the reindeer cows with their young come down to feed. It was evening. Amy Travis, in her romantic, high-flown way, had been telling Hjorth that a party of republican Norsemen who had been at the inn that day, had said to the manageress that they hoped next time they came, a *pure* flag would be flying instead of the one there was then. What they meant by a pure flag was the Norwegian without the quarterings of Sweden in the corner.

"And I hope so too," the girl added, raising her face, so that the wind blew full upon it. "This land is too beautiful and too free to stand yoked. It should be alone; independent, sole."

Hjorth stood and admired her. What joy she had in Norway! How pleasant it was to be so appreciated!

"Yes," he said, meditatively yet modestly, "it is a beautiful land. I am glad you like it."

"And for why?"

"Because I want you to stay in it," he answered immediately. "Because I ask you to remain in it—to be my wife, Miss Travis. That is why."

It was an open place this, that had shaped itself into his arena for declaration, and, so far, the dusk of the evening was not sufficiently thick to veil their proceedings. Amy Travis took the situation in at a flash. Her presence of mind was wonderful. She laughed a low little laugh, half frightened, half encouraging, stepped just

just the minutest way from him, turned half round on her heel and spoke :

"What," she said, "become a priest's wife; out here in Norway—live in the *praestegaard*, or not that even; surely you are only a deacon so far?—in the little house behind the schoolroom? And in time—*perhaps* in time—to improve into someone like Frue Margetson, with her sad, wrinkled face and eager, anxious eyes, Do you ask me to do this, Herr Hjorth?"

"I ask you to be my wife," he repeated, ignoring the chance she gave him of tacking away from the serious side of the subject. He spoke sullenly. The prescience of disappointment was upon him. Amy Travis turned half towards him and then back before she spoke.

"Surely you must have known; surely this must have told you that I am already engaged," she asked, holding forth her left hand and touching a single ring that adorned the third finger of it.

The deacon shuddered. Here indeed was a blow.

"No, no, I did not," he stammered, "the ring told me nothing. We wear it on the right hand here in Norway."

"I am sorry," said the girl; and then she turned from him in real earnest and left him standing there beside the flag-staff, where he continued to stand until the inn-porter came and hauled the flag down, and the deacon strode off to the house.

This episode annoyed him terribly. His pride was so abased that he assured himself he had been outrageously badly treated.

It seemed to him so monstrous that a man who was going to be a priest should be made the subject of a frivolous girl's flirtation. He was now as enraged with Amy Travis and her attentions as before he had been flattered by them. It was pretty generally the feeling in the hotel also that he had been badly treated. They looked

looked upon the deacon as a raw young schoolmaster set in a position above his rights. The mistress of Amy Travis was very justly vexed with the girl's conduct, and threatened to tell Ernest the whole circumstances. But her husband, to whom she confided her anger, remembering the lad Ernest, and thinking of him with compassion, counselled her to let Amy bear her own burdens and Ernest his as he met them. This was after it had leaked out in the house that the deacon had proposed to Amy, which of course it did when it became known that that very evening Hjorth had removed all his belongings to a farm-house a mile away, and had apprised the priest of the fact that he could no longer stay at the inn.

A general break-up of the party then occurred. Amy's employers moved on upon their travels, taking her with them ; the priest with his sad-eyed wife left for their holiday, and Hjorth was alone. But before he went, the priest, who on his part had thought the deacon extremely foolish, took upon himself the task of informing him as much. He had lived beyond his first feelings of sympathy for the lover and disgust for the girl, and blamed Hjorth pretty plainly for this presumptuous sin of youth, as he termed it. Hjorth was abandoned, sore and miserable. What wonder that his mind turned back to Johanna, the girl at Helga farm, whose deep devotion to himself had been unmistakable ? He locked the thought of her and her adulation in his heart, however, struck body and soul into his work, and upon the return of the priest to his parish, departed to the town with praises ringing in his ears. The priest had had a holiday, one out of half a dozen in a lifetime, and Hjorth was flourishing as young men can on thoughts of love and what love means. Strangely enough, this rebuff had failed to teach him its most obvious lesson. And yet why write strangely ? A wise Norwegian proverb has it that 'tis

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the eyes that go blind first, and another in another land that a man is never a prophet in his own country. So the most open book is that least read, and the moral that is more plain than any, discovered last of all.

III

And now for Johanna.

The Johanna whom Hjorth had left was not the Johanna of three weeks later. She had been only an imaginative child while the deacon was at Helga, a child whom nature was expanding from a lover of fairy stories and the wonderful supernatural, to a worshipper of the human living hero. When the object of her delightful day-dreams, of her very active and ever-present admiration was withdrawn, she comprehended reality. Reality became to her an unpleasant fact. She understood the meaning of life, and life was sad to the girl.

It was sad to her so far as she could recognise a reason, because she could look no further forward than the dull, uninteresting present. Existence is very monotonous in farm life. Every day brought her the same duties to perform ; the care of her small cousins and of the poultry yard, the laying of the table and the clearing up and washing of the things, needlework, more care of the children and of the poultry yard, more needlework, and then bed. To a nature in which environment was scarcely less actual than the spirit of past ages, this was weariness. Johanna came of a stock of adventurers. The blood of the Vikings coursed in her veins, and, strangely enough, though she was a gentle maiden, most delicately and tenderly formed, and though for generations past her forebears had been drifting slowly and very securely into

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the haven of quiet uneventfulness in which the average modern Norwegian passes his life, Johanna's circumstances and Johanna's nature were at war with one another. Concentration was the crux of the girl's being. Interests spread over the domesticity of farm life bred in her a state of hopeless ennui. She was unable to put her desires into words; and had any far-seeing creature, divining her mind, suggested that she ought to have been a boy so that she could go before the mast, or, like so many of her compatriots, to America, she would have denied the truth of the suggestion, even while an uneasy questioning of its sagacity troubled her.

The departure of the deacon opened her eyes to her surroundings. Her daily duties had, while he was near, been gilded with the beatitude of worship. From a distance she had adored. He had mingled with her conception of God, and, unconsciously Pantheistic, she had instilled divinity into everything. God was in the atmosphere, so that whether there was sunshine or mist, rain or calm, Johanna was satisfied with His likeness; God was in the sea, so that the life of it or the death it dealt were to her alike acceptable; God was about her path and around her. She was seraphically content.

But when Hjorth went, this gracious, goodly Pantheism went also. Atmosphere, sea, her daily tasks, all were sordid, uninteresting facts. She saw Helga and her existence there stretch out into the infinite. Though she was seventeen only a cruel comprehension of decay haunted her. She noticed for the first time in her life a darkening, weary look beneath her eyes. It seemed to her that she was growing old. Not all of a sudden old, be it understood, but more dismally than that, gradually old. Other signs she looked for. She could not find them. There were no hollows on her temples; no doubling of her chin; no stoop of her neck; no wrinkles anywhere. Nevertheless she realised that age was. She would

would change from year to year though her life remained the same. Oh, the intense misery of an outlook so completely hopeless ! Johanna hated her own indifference to life. Yet life under its new conditions seemed absorbed in indifference. She was a human being stranded ; impotent to carve her own future ; a vegetable just sentient enough to be conscious of vegetation.

So the summer chilled into winter. Autumn is not accounted a season in Norway. As the days shortened and grew colder, the stove in the farm parlour was lighted, and customs assumed their character in keeping. Card games began in the evenings, and there were dances now and then. The first was in honour of the sheep-shearing. The sheep, which all through the warm weather had been fending for themselves up in the hills were brought down to the farm, clipped, and let loose within its boundary. Then the farm hands made merry, and with them their master and mistress and the friends of the family. Johanna the year before had been in her quiet way completely happy on this joyful occasion. It was true that the deacon was not present. His dignity he held in too lofty an estimation to permit him to mix thus freely with the people. But Johanna had had the impression of him about her. So she had danced and laughed—all quite quietly, as was her manner—and looked fresh and light-hearted, and had assured her aunt that she had thoroughly enjoyed herself. Perhaps most of that delicious content had been secured by her absence from Helga upon the business of gathering the flocks upon the mountains. It was so completely satisfying to return, knowing that he was there ; knowing that, though upon that Saturday night in the barn he would not be present among the merrymakers, the next morning she would see him in church. How those Sundays were blessed ! Only illness could deny her his presence thrice that day,

day, excepting during the three months when he took travelling school in the mountains. And Hjorth and Johanna were never ill.

Her uncle invited her to go up with him to fetch the flocks home again this time. She consented. The affair took them three days. One whole day they drove up in the old family carriage into the hills, meeting on the way scores of others on the same errand as themselves. The next was occupied by a sorting of the sheep (which had been driven into pens in the valley by boys) and a village entertainment. The third saw the return journey. Johanna took the whole occasion with more than usual quietude. She had no disappointment to face. The blank lack of interest that life at Helga meant for her would not, she had felt, be dispelled by the three days' jaunt to the hills. She had expected no change. She accepted the listless joylessness of existence, and did not even sigh for sorrow that such life was. But her uncle noticed her indifference, and determined to lose no time in settling the girl. He had already an eligible bridegroom for her in his eye. He reminded himself of Ole Ormond. Some sensible man like Ormond would, as the farmer put it mentally, make all the difference to Johanna. Herr Berg knew nothing of his niece's passion for Hjorth. If he had, his honest heart would have beat heavily with emotion, for Johanna was strangely, pathetically wistful, and Berg was aware that, just as it ran in the family to be concentrative, so did it to be constant. Without any idea but that his niece was sad, and needed brightening, he thought often of her mother, his sister, who, after three months of wedded happiness had lost her husband, and had herself died a heart-broken woman directly after Johanna's birth. Even, however, had Berg been conscious of the reason of his niece's grief, he must have acted as he did. For he would have felt quite sure

that for the deacon to look at his niece was something as unlikely as that his own little Lauritz should some day aspire to a princess of the reigning house. It was not that the deacon was in reality far removed in the social scale from Johanna. It was that the deacon was Hjorth, a man of pronounced ambition, with an exaggerated estimate of his own peculiar importance.

IV

Never had the tragedy of being, as opposed to the comedy of doing, been so plainly focussed on the lens of Johanna's vision as on the evening upon which she first made the acquaintance of Ole Ormond. She, who had always been open-eyed to the influences of nature, was now dominated by what was happening about her. All was so changed with the outgoing of the Godliness that had before been the essence of all she saw and was impressed by, that she existed in a maze of mysteries. Mysteries alarm. Johanna was intimidated. For the winter mists that constantly rolled down the valley now, that crept up suddenly and quietly from one point or from all, and sucked up to the very walls of the farmhouse, seemed to be enveloping her and her life into what she comprehended it was become. All was narrowing, encircling closer and more close, towards a prevention of any change or stir. The tragedy of being is bitter. Johanna's realisation of it came early, and found her an easy victim. The girl had no wit for self-sacrifice. She was unaware that she might defy the desperation of her case by declaring that, though for her the actualities of existence were over, there should remain opportunities for benefiting others of which she would avail herself. Tragedy with her had the fullest chance. She was devoid of the

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cunning to parry—an easy prey to the foil of cruel circumstance. Therefore she met Ole Ormond, aware that he was the husband intended for her, and terrified because Fate had gone against her and was so powerful. It was Fate now, not God, that held her life.

She tightened her lips therefore, and hardened her heart in presence of the inevitable.

As for Johanna's uncle, when he of set purpose invited Ole Ormond to sup with him at the farm and spend the night, he acted, as he would have declared, entirely for his niece's benefit. Ormond was a thriving man. He had been the only child of his parents, and they, too, were without relations. The farm he had inherited had become his, then, without encumbrances. To Johanna's uncle—who had charged upon his estate the keeping of two aged aunts, three sisters, and a mother, all of whom participated according to Norwegian law, in its profits—this was a circumstance much in Ole's favour and to his personal advantage.

But Berg must have hesitated, for he was a humane and kindly creature, in bringing so inflammatory a nature, so yearning a nature, as Ormond's, in contact with that of a girl so sweetly fascinating as Johanna, had he guessed what Ormond was and known Johanna's feelings. A glance at the man would have told a thinker of such things that Ormond was no ordinary person. Johanna, to whom the aspect of anything was always arrestive, looked at him again and again, with the furtive, watching gaze of a perplexed but interested spectator, at supper upon the first night of their meeting. Ormond's hair was absolutely white—thick, healthy, in generous waves, but white. His face, too, was white, his features clearly cut and strong, his eyes dark and flashing. The pathetic droop of his mouth betrayed him. He was a man of intense feeling. Even while he laughed and made merry with the house mistress, upon whom the fascination of his picturesque

presence

presence was not lost, and flung answers to the observations of his host, the impression of pathos clung to him. Johanna decided that she liked him. He was not of a pattern with the rest of her uncle's guests.

He stayed a week at the farm, then went away for a few days, and then returned. Johanna treated him with absolute trust, the affectionate trust of a little child. Ormond, on his part, fell passionately in love with her. But this feeling he did not manifest. There was nothing vulgar, nothing positive about his wooing. He had been in the habit all through life of suppressing his emotions. His intensity had been unwelcome at home to the widowed, shrewish mother with whom he lived. So he had become used to reserve, and, as use is second nature, had grown to like it. Though there was about him, in his every look, his every word, his every action, something that Johanna would have expressed as kindness the most patent, there was nothing to tell the girl she was the personification of all he had in his solitary life dreamed of as heaven, the possible heaven of this earthly sphere.

There are men whom women could swear loved them unselfishly. Their manner betokens the essence of highest, purest, least human love. Women have wept to see such love, have laughed aloud, with the teardrops still dewing their eyes, to find themselves mistaken. There came no opportunity to Johanna to change the impression she had received of Ole Ormond. She never knew that his way of loving her was selfish. Had she been told so she would have been unable to believe it. Had she at last been convinced, she would have been very grieved. Every action of her immediate after-life was founded on this belief, that Ole loved her with such completeness that he would forego all things for her sake, voluntarily arrange all things for her happiness. Love, so she thought, meant selflessness with Ole.

Ormond

Ormond carried his tale to his dearest's uncle first, and the good farmer received with acclamation the protestations of his devotion and the recital of his means. "They are all right," he declared; "take the rest to Johanna and see if she approves." So Ormond took them.

Johanna consented to become his wife.

Fate was too strong to be defied.

It was then arranged that Ole should go home upon some necessary business, that he should next proceed to the town, where he should buy the wedding-ring, which, during her betrothal, the Norwegian bride wears, a badge as sacred and binding as the matrimonial circlet itself, and that upon his reappearance at the farm the engagement should be made known and the wedding-day fixed. There was no need to postpone the event. Ole's house was ready, and Johanna's uncle was anxious to see the girl settled.

To this point matters had come when Hjorth, in his lonely lodgings, determined to lose no more time in offering himself to Johanna. He was weary of a solitary life, and in Vik he felt miserably a unit.

V

Johanna's uncle accompanied Ole when he left the farm; Johanna, therefore, and her aunt were alone with the children.

It was three mornings after the men had gone that Johanna received a letter. There was nothing extraordinary in that, as a circumstance, for Johanna's schoolfellows often wrote to her. But this letter she saw at a glance was from no schoolfellow. It was from Hjorth. She knew his handwriting. Among her treasures—it was her most precious—she kept a note he had sent to her aunt, a polite refusal to one of her parties, which the irate lady

lady had thrown away in disgust. What could this letter have to say? Johanna's heart beat gladly. At least here was a letter from him. She covered the envelope with ardent kisses, but did not open it until her early morning work was finished, and she was free to rush away into a lonely place where no one would intrude between her and the supreme moment of her life. She had a letter from him. So off she ran, and to the sea of course. The sea called to her, as it had to Hjorth, to come and be solitary, one with the element whose voice is sympathy in sound, whose very impersonality is strangely human, something mightier than man, above the denizens of earth, and beneath the God of heaven. The meadows were hard and dry, though the damp mists of autumn still obscured the sky; the air was very still. Johanna's skirts as she hurried only slightly rose with the movement of her feet; there was no wind to meddle with them. One hand she kept in her pocket holding her precious letter; with the other she pressed the middle wire of the two fences she had to get through, passing from the fields on to the broad sands. Her favourite rock she gained with more than usual celerity, though it was difficult of access. She was as nimble as a goat. Then her heart began to beat, as it had beat when she received the letter, at first slowly with dull thumps that she could feel, almost with pain, then more and more quickly. The letter must ease her she felt. She drew her hand out of her pocket with it in it, read it without ado, and instantly started back for the farm, at a wild run, the slim page clasped in her palm, her hand upon her lips.

Her aunt was in the kitchen, but Johanna called to her from the house room and Frue Berg entered, her face reddened by the fire, her eyes sparkling with mingled impatience and wonder at being thus peremptorily summoned.

"Will you take me?" asked Johanna in a small, half-gasping voice,

voice, as she handed the letter to her. This is what the astonished farmer's wife read :

DEAR MISS TUBERING,

I hope you will not be displeased when you read this. I write to ask you if you will be my wife. I am very lonely here, and when I was at Helga I used to think you cared for me. I am going to write to your uncle to ask him if he will allow your aunt to bring you here to Vik. I know he has relations in the town who would take you in, and what I desire is, if my proposition meets with your approval, that we should be married forthwith. Of course I should have liked to come to Helga and fetch you away myself. But this I cannot do. Pray, then, influence your uncle to waive all ceremony, and what you do must be done quickly. If I could be certain of seeing you this week I should feel happier than I do now. I never thought that in so large a town as this I could feel so much alone. Helga was different.

Believe me

Yours faithfully,

CHRISTIAN HJORTH.

Johanna only gave her amazed relative time to read to the end of the letter, before she interrupted the exclamation she saw was coming by this question.

"Will you take me this afternoon?" she pleaded. Her aunt flushed anew, but her eyes softened and grew kind as she walked over to the girl's side, laid her hand on her shoulder, and looking into her face said, gently :

"Then it was Hjorth you loved all the time. I knew it."

Johanna did not make any reply, but she too rose, and while her aunt went to the tall bureau in the corner of the room, pulled out a drawer and from it took her black silk dress, Johanna fetched a small desk, which she placed upon the table, and seated herself to

write

write a letter. It was to Ole, and in it the girl expressed quite simply her reasons for taking the step that was to change both their lives. She loved Hjorth, she said, and she knew that Ole loved her so dearly that he would want her to do what pleased her most. She added that she had known Hjorth one year for every week that Ole had known her. The meaning of this she was certain Ole would understand.

"I am not sure whether I should," demurred Frue Berg, as she eyed the white frilling in her gown, to see that it was clean. Johanna looked back at her. She was just leaving the room for her own.

"The train leaves in half-an-hour," she said, and went away. "If it's to be done, it must be done quickly," muttered the farmer's wife to herself. "I never could think matters over. And it's a match, quite a good and high match for Johanna. She loves the deacon. He'll rise in the world for certain."

As the woman and the girl travelled to Vik, Johanna was speechless, but her aunt was extremely voluble.

"I justify myself for what I am doing," said she, "by recollecting the days of my own courtship. My position was exactly that of yours, Johanna, only that in England we do not think of betrothals so solemnly as you do here in Norway. What I said to your uncle was that though I had been engaged to Tom Wills for a month to please my mother, I should now consider myself. And it ended in our making a runaway match, very much as you are doing, my dear."

Johanna turned her head from the window, whence she had been gazing over the great expanse of moorland, which is a peculiarity of that corner of the southern seaboard, and her serene eyes met those of her aunt, who forthwith continued her rather nervous harangue.

"What

"What I shall tell your uncle will be just this," said she; "Johanna cares for the deacon in the same way that I cared for you. That is why I took her off. He cannot blame me, for, if he should do so, it will show that his love for me is dead, and that," she added, in lower tones, and with a gay toss of her head, "I am sure is not the case."

Still Johanna said nothing. She was never a girl of many words, and this affair had the astonishing strangeness of the unexpected about it; that is to say, it so convinced Johanna of its absolute positiveness that had she known for years past that Hjorth loved her, she could not have felt more at home with the knowledge than she did then.

When they alighted at Vik station the farmer's wife, whose nervousness was becoming more assertive, proposed that they should go straight away to Hjorth's house.

"Better see him and make all arrangements," she remarked, "before going to your uncle's sister's. Then we shall know how to act. Let me see now. We have the address in the letter." She felt in her pocket for the letter, pulled out her handkerchief, an extra pair of gloves and her keys, then turned the pocket inside out, but there was no letter. "That is annoying," she said, "because I think I have left it on the table for everyone to look at. But we can't help it, and I remember that he lives in the Valbjerg-Gade."

"The number is 52," Johanna said quietly, drawing the letter from her own pocket.

Their few belongings the women had packed in a couple of boxes used by Norwegians, oval wooden things, gaily painted, with tightly fitting tops and convenient handles. These they carried to Hjorth's lodgings, where they arrived ten minutes after leaving the station. The trepidation, which Frue Berg was slow

to

to acknowledge, once more asserted itself as they climbed the stairs to Hjorth's room ; so, catching sight of an oil-stove through the half-opened door of the kitchen as they passed, she declared she must positively go in and see the " machine," so that she might order one for herself like it.

" You go on," she said to Johanna, " and I will follow in a few moments."

So Johanna went on calmly enough, and, when she had knocked at the door of the deacon's room and had got no reply she walked inside, to find Hjorth lying back in a chair asleep. As she stood looking at him his eyes opened, and seeing her, he sprang to his feet, took her hands in his and kissed them gently.

" So you have come," he said. " That is good."

Nevertheless, five minutes later Johanna walked downstairs again, and tapping her aunt on the shoulder, separated her from the woman of the house, with whom she was in lively conversation concerning the stove, with these words :

" We are to go back by the first train to Helga. He says so. There are only a few minutes in which to catch it. Be quick."

Then Johanna's aunt understood that she had made a great mistake. It did not need any explanation on Johanna's part, though the girl gave it in calm, even tones, to assure her that Hjorth refused to marry one who was already promised to another.

" Why did you tell him ? " she asked, rather ruefully.

" Of course I told him," Johanna replied.

" Then more silly you," said her aunt. " That should have come later."

So they caught the train, and went journeying homewards. The afternoon was closing in, and the great Jaederen plain stretched

stretched drearily, a great, sad, mysterious blank on either side of them, and when they reached Helga station it was quite dark, and they had been speechless for more than half an hour.

Hjorth had sent her back ; that was all Johanna's numbed mind could comprehend.

VI

Johanna and her aunt separated at the station. Frue Berg set off at a great pace for the farm, but Johanna turned in just the opposite direction. Frue Berg was tired, anxious, and very cross. Foreshadowing, of distress and discomfort as a result of the afternoon's escapade haunted her. She vaguely wondered in what form her niece's and her own action would be punished, and settled in her mind that there should be good excuses coined for their visit to Vik, which Herr Berg would accept without any doubt. Johanna, she determined, should be made to understand that her foolishness in telling Hjorth she was betrothed must not be repeated by making a clean breast of matters to Ormond. "If I'd understood the girl," grumbled the farmer's wife to herself, "she should have gone down on her bended knees before I'd have taken her to Vik."

As she tramped sullenly along the sandy road leading from the station, head downwards, walking in growing wrath mingled largely with resentment, with a thought for the baking she had left behind, and the teasing side conviction that the fact that she had done so unhousewifely an action would materially interfere with the appearance of truth her tale would bear, Frue Berg heard a sudden chorus of shouts.

"It's something to do with Lauritz," she cried out, quite loud ; and with the mother-wit of a woman there flashed into her mind

a prescience

a prescience of what was actually partly the case. "He's at the eel-traps," she said as she ran, "he's drowning; my boy's dead."

Glimpses of lights flashing here and there in the dimness down through the leafless trees in the meadows where the river ran, confirmed her suspicions. Unaccustomed though she was to running, she struggled on, thick, incessant utterances forcing themselves from her trembling lips. "To think I should have left them—wicked woman as I am. Won't someone tell me whether my Lauritz is drowned? Is he dead—is he dead, I say?" There was not a creature at hand to reply. Frue Berg had never felt so much alone, nor so helpless, in all her life before.

As she approached nearer her worst fears were confirmed. The lanterns were certainly being carried backwards and forwards, in an agitated medley, beside the river's brink. But before she actually reached the crowd of men, women, and children, her ears were gladdened by tones she recognised, though they were shrill and terrified, as her boy's.

"It was here," she heard Lauritz declare. "Just here."

Frue Berg stumbled forward, made a way for herself through the cluster of folk, and seized the child by the arm.

He was dripping wet.

"What is it all about?" she asked roughly, once more anger predominating now that fear was soothed.

Then Lauritz and a woman servant separated themselves from the rest, and told their tale, but Lauritz broke away from the recital to cry, and as his mother's grip became tighter his wailings grew more intense, for he feared the wrath to come. Frue Berg hurried him to the house, listening to the servant the while.

It transpired that Lauritz, whose ambition it had long been to set some eel traps in a place upon which he had had his eye for

some

some time, had seized the very obvious opportunity of his mother's absence to carry out the scheme. He had therefore stolen out of the farm very quietly, had got into the boat, and had pushed off into the river. His haste and fear that he should be found out had been his own undoing, for, leaning out of the boat at his work, he had fallen into the river and would have drowned only for Ole Ormond's interference. Frue Berg gasped.

"Ole Ormond," she screamed, "how, when did he come? Where is he?"

"He is there," replied the servant, pointing out riverwards.
"That is why—"

Lauritz here raised redoubled cries. His mother, who was undressing him, slapped him and pushed him away. Then she rose and took the woman servant by the shoulders.

"You shall tell me all," she said sternly, "all from the very beginning. But first, is he dead—Ole Ormond—is he drowned?"

"That is what they fear," declared the woman. "They cannot find him. But he saved your son's life, Frue Berg, that he did; it is certain." The farmer's wife could have shrieked. Here was life playing her a sorry trick, and all for one little false step. She controlled herself, however, to listen. It was important that every wit she possessed should be about her.

The servant said that Ormond had arrived at the farm an hour after Frue Berg and her niece had left it. The blot on the Fröken's letter to him was barely dry when she handed it to Herr Ormond she declared.

"Then he got the letter," groaned Frue Berg.

"Certainly, yes, he got the letter," the maid answered, with some resentment. "It was for him, and I saw that he had it."

"And afterwards?"

"Afterwards

"Afterwards he seemed angry."

"Did he say anything?"

"Say, no, that is, I know nothing. I was at work in the kitchen," the woman replied. "He went out into the garden and sat on the seat. He and Lauritz there were talking."

"Never a word," whimpered Lauritz from his bed. He had got himself into that haven of repose and felt that he might speak at last with impunity.

"What do you mean?" his mother asked sharply.

"Just that and no more," answered the boy. "What Anna heard was Ormond talking to himself. I went up to him and he was swearing—cursing aloud—bad, wicked oath words."

"Go to sleep," said the farmer's wife, and left the room with the maid.

"You haven't heard the rest," Anna whispered, with her apron to her eyes. She proceeded to narrate that directly she had missed Lauritz, she had rushed out to the river, and, finding, the boat gone, had shouted across the water for him to come back. Almost at that moment there was a shriek from the lad. "He is drowning, he is drowning," she had cried aloud, running towards Herr Ormond. Then Herr Ormond had strode past her with all his speed to the river, and had swam out to Lauritz.

"He came back with him so quickly that I couldn't have believed it possible," concluded she.

"And then?"

"No one knows. He was missed. The farm men had hurried up. But not a creature could discover him. Nils says he must have slipped back into the stream with cramp on him, and been taken off by the current over the rocks. They are searching. God send they may find the good gentleman."

They were searching still when Frue Berg went out again; dragging

dragging the river with huge salmon nets, the handiest means they could devise.

"It's for the body," explained the maid, who kept close by the mistress's side; "they'll never find him alive."

Frue Berg groaned again. A great wish was upon her for her husband. She longed to tell him everything, to hold back nothing, to gloss nothing. She sent a man post-haste to Bruvand, where she believed that he would be, to fetch him.

Four miles out of Helga the man, who was mounted on one of the creamy yellow farm ponies, met Berg in the stolkjærre coming homewards. With him was Johanna. The man shouted the dire news out to Berg, who whipped up the companion pony he was driving into a fierce gallop. It was dangerous to drive on so dark a night at speed so terrible, along a rough road, with loose stones everywhere, and deep pools at constant intervals unprotected from the causeway, but Berg was a man who got the utmost out of his cattle with safety. Before he started off, he gave the mounted man directions.

"Go instantly to Ormond's house," he said, "and see if he is there. Say nothing of all this to Madam. Simply inquire of the servant and return with your information. Borrow a horse for the return."

There was a long shawl wrap across his shoulders and Johanna's which he gathered tightly about her and himself, and gave into her hands.

"What can it mean, child?" he whispered as he bent over her to adjust the wrap. His voice was very tender.

"Lars will find him safe enough," she declared calmly. "I passed him and had speech with him an hour since, on the road."

"As we go tell me again. The night is still. I shall hear."

So Johanna retold her tale, and the farmer, tormented as he was with

with fear and sorrow, had the acumen to observe that in no way did it differ from her previous story. She was as clear, as self-possessed, as satisfied as she had been before. Her very utterance bore the sound of simplest truth.

She declared that at the station her only wish was to find her uncle and Ormond, and tell them all she had done. Ten miles off was Ormond's house. She had set out with the intention of getting there as fast as possible to ask him for his consent to her marriage with Hjorth. She was certain he would give it when he knew that Hjorth wanted her, and she him. Seven miles away, from Helga—three from Bruvand, where Ormond lived—Ormond had passed her. He was running along the road. She had not seen him ; she had heard him. He was running towards her, at the back of her, and she knew that it was he from his step. She had turned and called Ormond aloud, and Ormond had answered, "Well." She resumed that she and he had not come together, that the voice from the very first travelled across to her from a path or way beyond the road over water, a short cut probably to his home, upon which he must have struck directly she had recognised him by his footstep on the road. It was a grassy path, she was certain, for whereas his hurrying presence was manifested by the sound of his feet upon the highway, there was nothing to hear during their short conversation, although they both ran, and in the same direction, she on the road, he beyond the lake on the sward. She described how his voice had travelled, at first clear and loud, then more and more distantly, until at last it had altogether become inaudible. She had talked the most ; she had told him everything. "He will be happy," she ended with serenity. "He wished me well and blessed me. I always knew it. I could not be mistaken. He cared for me just as God cares."

Upon the arrival of the pair at the farm the same explanation
was

was given again, with the same conviction of its truth as far as Johanna was concerned, and the information added that she had tarried at the roadside after her interview, if such it could be called, was over, in order that she might consider whether to proceed to Bruvand to find her uncle, or whether to go home and await him there. While she was waiting she had heard the wheels of the stolkjærre and had run to meet it. Her uncle was in it, and she had repeated the history to him out there beneath the fjelds on the lonely road, telling him also of her so recent meeting with Ole. To her the idea that Ole was drowned was ridiculous. But to her aunt and to the farm folk it was like a conviction of the worst fears, this meeting with the unseen. His body, it was true, was not found, but neither was there to be discovered one single person who could say they had seen the man after he had handed Lauritz over to the maid. The farmer's wife sobbed out that it was Ormond's ghost that had held communion with Johanna. The farm folk shuddered, and believed their mistress. The girl's uncle dragged the river the night through with proper appliances but no result, and in the morning the message that Lars brought back from Bruvand was that the master had not been seen there, and up to the time of Lars' departure for the farm had not arrived. Then the whole country-side was roused, and search was made.

But Ormond was not found.

VII

Hjorth in Vik town when the news reached him was absolutely furious. Fortune was never to favour him, it seemed, in love. He had persuaded himself that Johanna was really dear to him

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after

after his disappointment over Amy Travis ; now he knew that it was no more Johanna than it was the girl who waited on him in his rooms. He had been lonely and had wanted a companion. Johanna, the woman who had worshipped him, appealed to him as a desirable one ; that was all. But here was a pother. Here was a matter that concerned him nearly ; though it was in no way one of his making. He had proposed for the second time to a girl who was already engaged, and this one, foolish idiot, had compromised him, had involved him in a tragedy that had ended in the self-inflicted death of her lover.

It was in the spirit of self-defence that Hjorth journeyed down to Helga, and made his way to the farm. Rumours in Vik so far had suggested no solution of the mystery of Ormond's death (all were convinced that he was dead) that involved any idea of suicide. Hjorth had not the slightest doubt personally but that suicide had presented itself to the wretched man. He was persuaded that the reason of Johanna's journey to Vik had become known to her lover, and that the fact of the boy's accident had put into Ormond's way his chance of release. To save his own name from the stigma of dishonour and treachery that must stick to it, he felt, without any just cause, should his part in the tragedy not be properly understood by all concerned, he hurried to his former home.

Helga hailed him with welcome ; hailed him with welcome and not a whisper of reproach. It was at first a relief, as intense as it was unexpected, to find that he was honoured just as he had always been in the little sea-board village, from which he had gone to the big world. Then he became suspicious, and probed the innermost of the people secretly but certainly. When he was convinced that Ormond's death was taken to have occurred as a result of accident after saving the lad Lauritz's life—men must die, said the people ; it was sad, but it was that way exactly with hosts

hosts of others ; they drowned a good deal in Norway—he repented him of his haste, and almost deplored the sanctity in which he held his good name.

It had never been in jeopardy. No one, it transpired, had had the smallest idea that Ormond was a suitor for Johanna's hand. The three who had known it—Berg, his wife, and Johanna—had not breathed the news to any person. It was very clear to Hjorth, on the other hand, that he and Johanna were looked upon as a likely couple. People nodded, and smiled, and surmised with cunning meaning that he was ready for a bride. At the farm, where he was entertained with the utmost courtesy and respectful cordiality, he met with no hint of the kind, it is true, for all mention of what was past was withheld ; but the very fact of this restraint proved to him clearly that he was looked upon as the man to save the situation, to remove the tense horror of what had happened, from the minds of Frue Berg and her husband.

He proposed, therefore, for the third time, and was accepted with a delight that pleased his pride at last. There was no doubt about Johanna's love ; it was intense. From beginning to end she had cared for him with a passion that had never cooled, a love that burned unalterably bright.

VIII

Johanna had been a wife some time when her story of the meeting with Ole on the Bruvand road was confirmed by his re-appearance.

She and the deacon were living many miles from Helga then. They heard the news from the good uncle who had so generously believed in Johanna at that dreadful time, and had, by his patient philosophy and calm common-sense, made the best of what seemed

to

to have been a fatally foolish step on his wife's part. Ormond, he said, had come home from America (he wrote as if they had all been well aware that he had gone there), with a charming wife and a beautiful child. He did not mention that he looked quite an old man, and that the white moustache he wore completely changed the expression of his face. But so it was. Ormond had materialised in spite of the few seconds of his last meeting with Johanna, and the self-abnegation of his parting words ; and the moustache, had it been removed, would have revealed a cynical curve of the lips that erstwhile had drooped, before the sorrow that was to come.

Johanna read about the charming wife and beautiful little child with eyes that beamed with joy. The deacon, on the other hand, made no comment—verbal or expressive.