

BJØRNSTJERNE BJØRNSON

ABSALOM'S HAIR

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CHAPTER 1

Harald Kaas was sixty.

He had given up his free, uncriticised bachelor life; his yacht was no longer seen off the coast in summer; his tours to England and the south had ceased; nay, he was rarely to be found even at his club in Christiania. His gigantic figure was never seen in the doorways; he was failing.

Bandy-legged he had always been, but this defect had increased; his herculean back was rounded, and he stooped a little. His forehead, always of the broadest—no one else's hat would fit him—was now one of the highest, that is to say, he had lost all his hair, except a ragged lock over each ear and a thin fringe behind. He was beginning also to lose his teeth, which were strong though small, and blackened by tobacco; and now, instead of "deuce take it" he said "deush take it."

He had always held his hands half closed as though grasping something; now they had stiffened so that he could never open them fully. The little finger of his left hand had been bitten off "in gratitude" by an adversary whom he had knocked down: according to Harald's version of the story, he had compelled the fellow to swallow the piece on the spot.

He was fond of caressing the stump, and it often served as an introduction to the history of his exploits, which became greater and greater as he grew older and quieter.

His small sharp eyes were deep set and looked at one with great intensity. There was power in his individuality, and, besides shrewd sense, he possessed a considerable gift for mechanics. His boundless self-esteem was not devoid of greatness, and the emphasis with which both body and soul proclaimed themselves made him one of the originals of the country.

Why was he nothing more?

He lived on his estate, Hellebergene, whose large woods skirted the coast, while numerous leasehold farms lay along the course of the river. At one time this estate had belonged to the Kurt family, and had now come back to them, in so far as that Harald's father, as every one knew, was not a Kaas at all, but a Kurt; it was he who had got the estate together again; a book might be written about the ways and means that he had employed.

The house looked out over a bay studded with islands; farther out were more islands and the open sea. An immensely long building, raised on an old and massive foundation, its eastern wing barely half furnished, the western inhabited by Harald Kaas, who lived his curious life here.

These wings were connected by two covered galleries, one above the other, with stairs at each end.

Curiously enough, these galleries did not face the sea, that is, the south, but the fields and woods to the north. The portion of the house between the two wings was a neutral territory—namely, a large dining-room with a ballroom above it, neither of which was used in later years.

Harald Kaas's suite of rooms was distinguished from without by a mighty elk's head with its enormous antlers, which was set up over the gallery.

In the gallery itself were heads of bear, wolf, fox and lynx, with stuffed birds from land and sea. Skins and guns hung on the walls of the anteroom, the inner rooms were also full of skins and impregnated with the smell of wild animals and tobacco-smoke. Harald himself called it "Man-smell;" no one who had once put his nose inside could ever forget it.

Valuable and beautiful skins hung on the walls and covered the floors; his very bed was nothing else; Harald Kaas lay, and sat, and walked on skins, and each one of them was a welcome subject of conversation, for he had shot and flayed every single animal himself. To be sure, there were those

who hinted that most of the skins had been bought from Brand and Company, of Bergen, and that only the stories were shot and flayed at home.

I for my part think that this was an exaggeration; but be that as it may, the effect was equally thrilling when Harald Kaas, seated in his log chair by the fireside, his feet on the bearskin, opened his shirt to show us the scars on his hairy chest (and what scars they were!) which had been made by the bear's teeth, when he had driven his knife, right up to the haft, into the monster's heart. All the queer tankards, and cupboards, and carved chairs listened with their wonted impassiveness.

Harald Kaas was sixty, when, in the month of July, he sailed into the bay accompanied by four ladies whom he had brought from the steamer—an elderly lady and three young ones, all related to him. They were to stay with him until August.

They occupied the upper storey. From it they could hear him walking about and grunting below them. They began to feel a little nervous. Indeed, three of them had had serious misgivings about accepting the invitation; and these misgivings were not diminished when, next morning, they saw Kaas composedly strolling up from the sea stark naked!

They screamed, and, gathering together, still in their nightgowns, held a council of war as to the advisability of leaving at once; but when one of them cried "You should not have called us, Aunt, and then we should not have seen him," they could not help laughing, and therewith the whole affair ended. Certainly they were a little stiff at breakfast; but when Harold Kaas began a story about an old black mare of his which was in love with a young brown horse over at the Dean's, and which plunged madly if any other horse came near her, but, on the other hand, put her head coaxingly on one side and whinnied "like a dainty girl" whenever the parson's horse came that way—well, at that they had to give in, as well first as last.

If they had strayed here out of curiosity they must just put up with the "NIGHT side of nature," as Harald Kaas expressed it, with the stress on the first word.

For all that they were nearly frightened out of their wits the very next night, when he discharged his gun right under their windows. The aunt even asserted that he had shot through her open casement. She screamed loudly, and the others, starting from their sleep, were out on the floor before they knew where they were. Then they crouched in the windows and peeped out, although their aunt declared that they would certainly be shot—they really must see what it was.

Yes! there they saw him among the cherry and apple trees, gun in hand, and they could hear him swearing. In the greatest trepidation they crept back into bed again. Next morning they learned that he had shot at some night prowlers, one of whom had got "half the charge in his leg, that he had, Deush take him! It ain't the prowling I mind, but that he should prowl here. We bachelors will have no one poaching on our preserves."

The four ladies sat as stiff as four church candles, till at length one of them sprang up with a scream, the others joining in chorus.

The visitors were not bored; Harald Kaas dealt too much in the unexpected for that. There was a charm, too, in the great woods, where there had been no felling since he had come into the property, and there were merry walks by the riverside and plenty of fish in the river.

They bathed, they took delightful sails in the cutter and drives about the neighbourhood, though certainly the turn-out was none of the smartest.

The youngest of the girls, Kristen Ravn, presently became less eager to join in these expeditions. She had fallen in love with the disused east wing of the house, and there she spent many a long hour, alone by the open window, gazing out at the great lime-trees which stood straggling, gaunt, and mysterious.

"You ought to build a balcony here, out towards the sea," she said. "Look how the water glitters between the limes."

When once she had hit upon a plan, Kristen Ravn never relinquished it, and when she had suggested it some four or five times, he promised that it should be done. But on the heels of this scheme came another.

"Below the first balcony there must be another wider one," said she in her soft voice, "and it must have steps at each end down to the lawn—the lawn is so lovely just here."

The unheard-of presumption of her demand inoculated him with the idea, and at length he consented to this as well.

"The rooms must be refurnished," she gravely commanded. "The one next to the balcony which is to be built under here shall be in yellow pine, and the floor must be polished." She pointed with her long delicate hand. "ALL the floors must be polished. I will give you the design for the room above, I have thought it carefully out." And in imagination she papered the walls, arranged the furniture, and hung up curtains of wondrous patterns.

"I know, too, how the other rooms are to be done," she added. And she went from one to the other, remaining a little while in each. He followed, like an old horse led by the bridle.

Before their visit was half over he most coolly neglected three out of his four guests.

His deep-set eyes twinkled with the liveliest admiration whenever she approached. He sought in the faces of the others the admiration which he himself felt: he would amble round her like an old photographic camera which had the power of setting itself up.

But from the day when she took down from his bookshelf a French work on mechanics, a subject with which she was evidently acquainted and for which she declared that she had a natural aptitude, it was all over with him. From that day forward, if she were present, he effaced himself both in word and action.

In the mornings when he met her in one of her characteristic costumes he laughed softly, or gazed and gazed at her, and then glanced towards the others. She did not talk much, but every word that she uttered aroused his admiration. But he was most of all captivated when she sat quietly apart, heedless of every one: at such times he resembled an old parrot expectant of sugar.

His linen had always been snowy white, but beyond this he had taken no special pains with his toilet; but now he strutted about in a Tussore silk coat, which he had bought in Algiers, but had at once put aside because it was too tight—he looked like a clipt box hedge in it.

Now, who was this lion-tamer of twenty-one, who, without in the least wishing to do so, unconsciously even (she was the quietest of the party), had made the monarch of the forest crouch at her feet and gaze at her in abject humility?

Look at her, as she sits there, with her loose shining hair of the prettiest shade of dark red; look at her broad forehead and prominent nose, but more than all at those large wondering eyes; look at her throat and neck, her tall slight figure; notice especially the Renaissance dress which she wears, its style and colour, and your curiosity will still remain unsatisfied, for she has an individuality all her own.

Kristen Ravn had lost her mother at her birth and her father when she was five years old. The latter left her a handsome fortune, with the express condition that the investments should not be changed, and that the income should be for her own use whether she married or not. He hoped by this means to form her character. She was brought up by three different members of her wide-branching family, a family which might more properly be termed a clan, although they had no common characteristics beyond a desire to go their own way.

When two Ravens meet they, as a rule, differ on every subject; but as a race they hold religiously together—indeed, in their eyes there is no other family which is "amusing," the favourite adjective of the Ravens.

Kristen had a receptive nature; she read everything, and remembered what she read; that is say, she had a logical mind, for a retentive memory implies an orderly brain. She was consequently NUMBER ONE in everything which she took up. This, coupled with the fact that she lived among

those who regarded her somewhat as a speculation, and consequently flattered her, had early made an impression on her nature, quite as great, indeed, as the possession of money.

She was by no means proud, it was not in the Ravn nature to be so; but at ten years old she had left off playing; she preferred to wander in the woods and compose ballads. At twelve she insisted on wearing silk dresses, and, in the teeth of an aunt all curls and lace and with a terrible flow of words, she carried her point. She held herself erect and prim in her silks, and still remained NUMBER ONE. She composed verses about Sir Adge and Maid Else, about birds and flowers and sad things.

On reaching the age at which other girls, who have the means, begin to wear silk dresses, she left them off. She was tired, she said, of the "smooth and glossy."

She now grew enthusiastic for fine wool and expensive velvet of every shade. Dresses in the Renaissance style became her favourites, and the subject of her studies. She puffed out her bodices like those in Leonardo's and Rafael's portraits of women, and tried in other ways as well to resemble them.

She left off writing verses, and wrote stories instead; the style was good, though they were anything rather than spontaneous.

They were short, with a more or less clear point. Stories by a girl of eighteen do not as a general rule make a sensation, but these were particularly audacious. It was evident that their only object was to scandalise. Instead of her own name she used the nom-de-plume of "Puss." This, however, was only to postpone the announcement that the author who scandalised her readers most, and that at a time when every author strove to do so, was a girl of eighteen belonging to one of the first families in the country.

Soon every one knew that "Puss" was she of the tumbled red locks, "the tall Renaissance figure with the Titian hair."

Her hair was abundant, glossy, and slightly curling; she still wore it hanging loose over her neck and shoulders, as she had done as a child. Her great eyes seemed to look out upon a new world; but one felt that the lower part of her face was scarcely in harmony with the upper. The cheeks fell in a little; the prominent nose made the mouth look smaller than it actually was; her neck seemed only to lead the eye downward to her bosom, which almost appeared to caress her throat, especially when her head was bent forward, as was generally the case. And very beautiful the throat was, delicate in colour, superb in contour, and admirably set upon the bust. For this reason she could never find in her heart to hide this full white neck, but always kept it uncovered. Her finely moulded bust surmounting a slender waist and small hips, her rounded arms, her long hands, her graceful carriage, in her tightly-fitting dress, formed such a striking picture that one did more than look—one was obliged to study her. When the elegance and beauty of her dress were taken into account, one realised how much intelligence and artistic taste had here been exercised.

She was friendly in society, natural and composed, always occupied with something, always with that wondering expression. She spoke very little, but her words were always well chosen.

All this, and her general disposition, made people chary of opposing her, more especially those who knew how intelligent she was and how much knowledge she possessed.

She had no friends of her own, but her innumerable relations supplied her with society, gossip, and flattery, and were at once her friends and body-guard. She would have had to go abroad to be alone.

Among these relations she was a princess: they not only paid her homage, but had sworn by "Life and Death" that she must marry without more ado, which was absolutely against her wish.

From her childhood she had been laying by money, but the amount of her savings was far less than her relations supposed. This rather mythical fortune contributed not a little to the fact that "every one" was in love with her. Not only the bachelors of the family, that was a matter of course, but artists and amateurs, even the most blase, swarmed round her, la jeunesse doree (which is homely

enough in Norway), without an exception. A living work of art, worth more or less money, piquante and admired, how each longed to carry her home, to gloat over her, to call her his own!

There was surely more intensity of feeling near her than near others, a losing of oneself in one only; that unattainable dream of the world-weary.

With her one could lead a thoroughly stylish life, full of art and taste and comfort. She was highly cultivated, and absolutely emancipated—our little country did not, in those days, possess a more alluring expression.

When face to face with her they were uncertain how to act, whether to approach her diffidently or boldly, smile or look serious, talk or be silent.

What these idle wooers gleaned from her stories, her characteristic dress, her wondering eyes, and her quiet dreaminess, was not the highest, but they expended their energy thereon; so that their unbounded discomfiture may be imagined when, in the autumn, the news spread that Fruken Kristen Ravn was married to Harald Kaas.

They burst into peals of derisive laughter they scoffed, they exclaimed; the only explanation they could offer was that they had too long hesitated to try their fortune.

There were others, who both knew and admired her, who were no less dismayed. They were more than disappointed—the word is too weak; to many of them it seemed simply deplorable. How on earth could it have happened? Every one, herself excepted, knew that it would ruin her life.

On Kristen Ravn's independent position, her strong character, her rare courage, on her knowledge, gifts, and energy, many, especially women, had built up a future for the cause of Woman. Had she not already written fearlessly for it? Her tendency towards eccentricity and paradox would soon have worn off, they thought, as the struggle carried her forward, and at last she might have become one of the first champions of the cause. All that was noblest and best in Kristen must predominate in the end.

And now the few who seek to explain life's perplexities rather than to condemn them discovered—Some of them, that the defiant tone of her writings and her love of opposition bespoke a degree of vanity sufficient to have led her into fallacy. Others maintained that hers was essentially a romantic nature which might cause her to form a false estimate both of her own powers and of the circumstances of life. Others, again, had heard something of how this husband and wife lived, one in each wing of the house, with different staffs of servants, and with separate incomes; that she had furnished her side in her own way, at her own expense, and had apparently conceived the idea of a new kind of married life. Some people declared that the great lime-trees near the mansion at Hellebergene were alone responsible for the marriage. They sighed so wondrously in the summer evenings, and the sea beneath their branches told such enthralling stories. Those grand old woods, the like of which were hardly to be found in impoverished Norway, were far dearer to her than was her husband. Her imagination had been taken captive by the trees, and thus Harald Kaas had taken HER. The estate, the climate, the exclusive possession of her part of the house: this was the bait which she had chosen. Harald Kaas was only a kind of Puck who had to be taken along with it. But it is doubtful whether this conjecture was any nearer the truth. No one ever really knew. She was not one of those whom it is easy to catechise.

Every one wearies at last of trying to solve even the most interesting of enigmas. No one could tolerate the sound of her name when, four months after her marriage, she was seen in a stall at the Christiania Theatre just as in old days, though looking perhaps a little paler. Every opera-glass was levelled at her. She wore a light, almost white, dress, cut square as usual. She did not hide her face behind her fan. She looked about her with her wondering eyes, as though she was quite unconscious that there were other people in the theatre or that any one could be looking at her. Even the most pertinacious were forced to concede that she was both physically and mentally unique, with a charm all her own.

But just as she had become once more the subject of general conversation, she disappeared. It afterwards transpired that her husband had fetched her away, though hardly any one had seen him. It was concluded that they must have had their first quarrel over it.

Accurate information about their joint life was never obtained. The attempts of her relations to force themselves upon them were quite without result, except that they found out that she was enceinte, notwithstanding her utmost efforts to conceal the fact.

She sent neither letter nor announcement; but in the summer, when she was next seen in Christiania, she was wheeling a perambulator along Karl Johan Street, her eyes as wondering as though some one had just put it between her hands. She looked handsomer and more blooming than ever.

In the perambulator lay a boy with his mother's broad forehead, his mother's red hair. The child was charmingly dressed, and he, as well as the perambulator, was so daintily equipped, so completely in harmony with herself, that every one understood the reply that she gave, when, after the usual congratulations, her acquaintances inquired, "Shall we soon have a new story from you?"—she answered, "A new story? Here it is!"

But, notwithstanding the unalloyed happiness which she displayed here, it could no longer be concealed that more often than not she was absent from home, and that she never mentioned her husband's name. If any one spoke of him to her, she changed the subject. By the time that the boy was a year old, it had become evident that she contemplated leaving Hellebergene entirely. She had been in Christiania for some time and had gone home to make arrangements, saying that she should come back in a few days.

But she never did so.

The day after her return home, while the numerous servants at Hellebergene, as well as the labourers with their wives and children, were all assembled at the potato digging, Harald Kaas appeared, carrying his wife under his left arm like a sack. He held her round the waist, feet first, her face downwards and hidden by her hair, her hands convulsively clutching his left thigh, her legs sometimes hanging down, sometimes straight out. He walked composedly out with her, holding in his right hand a bunch of long fresh birch twigs. A little way from the gallery he paused, and laying her across his left knee, he tore off some of her clothes, and beat her until the blood flowed. She never uttered a sound. When he put her from him, she tremblingly rearranged—first her hair, thus displaying her face just as the blood flowed back from it, leaving it deadly white. Tears of pain and shame rolled down her cheeks; but still not a sound. She tried to rearrange her dress, but her tattered garments trailed behind her as she went back to the house. She shut the door after her, but had to open it again; her torn clothes had caught fast in it.

The women stood aghast; some of the children screamed with fright: this infected the rest, and there was a chorus of sobs. The men, most of whom had been sitting smoking their pipes, but who had sprung to their feet again, stood filled with shame and indignation.

It had not been without a pang that Harald Kaas had done this, his face and manner had shown it for a long time and still did so; but he had expected that a roar of laughter would greet his extraordinary vagary. This was evident from the composure with which he had carried his wife out; and still more from the glance of gratified revenge with which he looked round him afterwards. But there was only dead stillness, succeeded by weeping, sobbing, and indignation. He stood there for a moment, quite overcome, then went indoors again, a defeated, utterly broken man.

In every encounter with this delicate creature the giant had been worsted.

After this, however, she never went beyond the grounds. For the first few years she was only seen by the people about the estate, and by them but seldom. Sometimes she would take her boy out in his little carriage, or, as time went on, would lead him by the hand, sometimes she was alone. She was generally wrapped in a big shawl, a different one for each dress she wore, and which she always held tightly round her. This was so characteristic of her that to this day I hear people from the neighbourhood talk about it as though she were never seen otherwise.

What then did she do? She studied; she had given up writing: for more than one reason it had become distasteful to her. She had changed roles with her husband, giving herself up to mathematics, chemistry, and physics, she made calculations and analyses—sending for books and materials for these objects. The people on the estate saw nothing extraordinary in all this. From the first they had admired her delicacy and beauty. Every one admired her; it was only the manner and degree that varied.

Little by little she came to be regarded as one whose life and thoughts were beyond their comprehension.

She sought no one, but to those who came to her she never refused help—more or less. She made herself well acquainted with the facts of each case; no one could ever deceive her. Whether she gave much or little, she imposed no conditions, she never lectured them. Her opinion was expressed by the amount that she gave.

Her husband's behaviour towards her was such that, had she not been very popular, she could not have remained at Hellebergene; that is to say, he opposed and thwarted her in every way he could; but every one took her part.

The boy! Could not he have been a bond of union? On the contrary, there were those who declared that it was from the time of his birth that things had gone amiss between the parents. The first time that his father saw him the nurse reported that he "came in like a lord and went out like a beggar!" The mother lay down again and laughed; the nurse had never seen the like of it before. Had he expected that his child must of necessity resemble him, only to find it the image of its mother?

When the boy was old enough he loved to wander across to his father's rooms where there were so many curious things to see; his father always received him kindly, talking in a way suited to his childish intelligence, but he would take occasion to cut away a quantity of his hair. His mother let it grow free and long like her own, and his father perpetually cut it. The boy would have been glad enough to be rid of it, but when he grew a little older, he comprehended his father's motive, and thenceforth he was on his guard.

When the people on the estate had told him something of his father's highly-coloured histories of his feats of strength and his achievements by land and water, the boy began to feel a shy admiration for him, but at the same time he felt all the more strongly the intolerable yoke which he laid upon them—upon every living being on the estate. It became a secret religion with him to oppose his father and help his mother, for it was she who suffered. He would resemble her even to his hair, he would protect her, he would make it all up to her. It was a positive delight to him when his father made him suffer: he absolutely felt proud when he called him Rafaella, instead of Rafael, the name which his mother had chosen for him; it was the one that she loved best.

No one was allowed to use the boats or the carriage, no one might walk through the woods, which had been fenced in, the horses were never taken out. No repairs were undertaken; if Fru Kaas attempted to have anything done at her own expense, the workmen were ordered off: there could no longer be any doubt about it, he wished everything to go to rack and ruin. The property went from bad to worse, and the woods—well! It was no secret, every one on the place talked about it—the timber was being utterly ruined. The best and largest trees were already rotten; by degrees the rest would become so.

At twelve years of age Rafael began to receive religious teaching from the Dean: the only subject in which his mother did not instruct him. He shared these lessons with Helene, the Dean's only child, who was four years younger than Rafael and of whom he was devotedly fond.

The Dean told them the story of David. The narrative was unfolded with additions and explanations; the boy made a picture of it to himself; his mother had taught him everything in this way.

Assyrian warriors with pointed beards, oblique eyes, and oblong shields, had to represent the Israelites; they marched by in an endless procession. He saw the blue-green of the vineyards on the

hillside, the shadow of the dusty palm-trees upon the dusty road. Then a wood of aromatic trees into which all the warriors fled.

Then followed the story of Absalom.

"Absalom rebelled against his father, what a dreadful thing to think of," said the Dean. "A grown-up man to rebel against his father." He chanced to look towards Rafael, who turned as red as fire.

The thought which was constantly in his mind was that when he was grown up he should rebel against his father.

"But Absalom was punished in a marvellous manner," continued the Dean. "He lost the battle, and as he fled through the woods, his long hair caught in a tree, the horse ran away from under him, and he was left hanging there until he was run through by a spear."

Rafael could see Absalom hanging there, not in the long Assyrian garments, not with a pointed beard. No! Slender and young, in Rafael's tight-fitting breeches and stockings, and with his own red hair! Ah! how distinctly he saw it! The horse galloping far away—the grey one at home which he used to ride by stealth when his father was asleep after dinner. He could see the tall, slender lad, dangling and swaying, with a spear through his body. Distinctly! Distinctly!

This vision, which he never mentioned to a soul, he could not get rid of. To be left hanging there by his hair—what a strange punishment for rebelling against his father!

Certainly he already knew the history, but till now he had paid no special heed to it.

It was on a Friday that this great impression had been made on him, and on the following Thursday morning he awoke to see his mother standing over him with her most wondering expression. Her hair still as she had plaited it for the night; one plait had touched him on the nose and awoke him before she spoke. She stood bending over him, in her long white nightgown with its dainty lace trimming, and with bare feet. She would never have come in like that if something terrible had not happened. Why did she not speak? only look and look—or was she really frightened?

"Mother!" he cried, sitting up.

Then she bent close down to him. "THE MAN IS DEAD," she whispered. It was his father whom she called "the man," she never spoke of him otherwise.

Rafael did not comprehend what she said, or perhaps it paralysed him. She repeated it again louder and louder, "The man is dead, the man is dead."

Then she stood upright, and putting out her bare feet from under her nightgown, she began to dance—only a few steps; and then she slipped away through the door which stood half open. He jumped up and ran after her; there she lay on the sofa, sobbing. She felt that he was behind her, she raised herself quickly, and, still sobbing, pressed him to her heart.

Even when they stood together beside the body, the hand which he had in his shook so that he threw his arms round her, thinking that she would fall.

Later in life, when he recalled this, he understood what she had silently endured, what an unbending will she had brought to the struggle, but also what it had cost her.

At the time he did not in the least comprehend it. He imagined that she suffered from the horror of the moment as he himself did.

There lay the giant, in wretchedness and squalor! He who had once boasted of his cleanliness, and expected the like in others, lay there, dirty and unshaven, under dirty bed clothes, in linen so ragged and filthy that no workman on the estate had worse. The clothes which he had worn the day before lay on a chair beside the bed, miserably threadbare, foul with dirt, sweat, and tobacco, and stinking like everything else. His mouth was distorted, his hands tightly clenched; he had died of a stroke.

And how forlorn and desolate was all around him! Why had his son never noticed this before? Why had he never felt that his father was lonely and forsaken? To how great an extent no words could express.

Rafael burst into tears; louder and louder grew his sobbing, until it sounded through all the rooms. The people from the estate came in one by one. They wished to satisfy their curiosity.

The boy's crying, unconsciously to himself, influenced them all: they saw everything in a new light. How unfortunate, how desolate, how helpless had he been who now lay there. Lord, have mercy on us all!

When the corpse of Harald Kaas had been laid out, the face shaved, and the eyes closed, the distortion was less apparent. They could trace signs of suffering, but the expression was still virile. It seemed a handsome face to them now.

CHAPTER 2

Within a few days of the funeral mother and son were in England.

Rafael was now to enter upon a long course of study, for which, by his earlier education, his mother had prepared him, and for which, by painful privations, she had saved up sufficient money.

The property was to the last degree impoverished, and burdened with mortgages, and the timber only fit for fuel.

Their neighbour the Dean, a clear-headed and practical man, took upon himself the management of affairs; as money was needed the work of devastation must begin at once. The mother and son did not wish to witness it.

They came to England like two fugitives who, after many and great trials, for affection's sake seek a new home and a new country.

Rafael was then twelve years old.

They were inseparable, and in the shiftless life that they led in their new surroundings they became, if possible, more closely attached to each other.

Yet not long afterwards they had their first disagreement.

He had gone to school, had begun to learn the language and to make friends, and had developed a great desire to show off.

He was very tall and slender and was anxious to be athletic. He took an active part in the playground, but here he achieved no great success. On the other hand, thanks to his mother, he was better informed than his comrades, and he contrived to obtain prominence by this. This prominence must be maintained, and nothing answered so well as boasting about Norway and his father's exploits. His statements were somewhat exaggerated, but that was not altogether his fault. He knew English fairly well, but had not mastered its niceties. He made use of superlatives, which always come the most readily. It was true that he had inherited from his father twenty guns, a large sailing-boat, and several smaller ones; but how magnificent these boats and guns had become!

He intended to go to the North Pole, he said, as his father had done, to shoot white bears, and invited them all to come with him.

He made a greater impression on his hearers than he himself was aware of; but something more was wanted, for it was impossible to foretell from day to day what might be expected of him. He had to study hard in order to meet the demand.

As an outcome of this, he betook himself one evening to the hairdresser's, with some of his schoolfellows, and, without more ado, requested him to cut his hair quite close. That ought to satisfy them for a long time.

The other boys had teased him about his hair, and it got in the way when he was playing—he hated it. Besides, ever since the story of Absalom's rebellion and punishment, it had remained a secret terror to him, but it had never before occurred to him to have it cut off.

His schoolfellows were dismayed, and the hairdresser looked on it as a work of wilful destruction.

Rafael felt his heart begin to sink, but the very audacity of the thing gave him courage. They should see what he dare do. The hairdresser hesitated to act without Fru Kaas's knowledge, but at length he ceased to make objections.

Rafael's heart sank lower and lower, but he must go through with it now. "Off with it," he said, and remained immovable in the chair.

"I have never seen more splendid hair," said the hairdresser diffidently, taking up the scissors but still hesitating.

Rafael saw that his companions were on the tiptoe of expectation. "Off with it," he said again with assumed indifference.

The hairdresser cut the hair into his hand and laid it carefully in paper.

The boys followed every snip of the scissors with their eyes, Rafael with his ears; he could not see in the glass.

When the hairdresser had finished and had brushed his clothes for him, he offered him the hair. "What do I want with it?" said Rafael. He dusted his elbows and knees a little, paid, and left the shop, followed by his companions. They, however, exhibited no particular admiration. He caught a glimpse of himself in the glass as he went out, and thought that he looked frightful.

He would have given all that he possessed (which was not much), he would have endured any imaginable suffering, he thought, to have his hair back again.

His mother's wondering eyes rose up before him with every shade of expression; his misery pursued him, his vanity mocked him. The end of it all was that he stole up to his room and went to bed without his supper.

But when his mother had vainly waited for him, and some one suggested that he might be in the house, she went to his room.

He heard her on the stairs; he felt that she was at the door. When she entered he had hidden his head beneath the bedclothes. She dragged them back; and at the first sight of her dismay he was reduced to such despair that the tears which were beginning to flow ceased at once.

White and horror-struck she stood there; indeed she thought at first that some one had done it maliciously; but when she could not extract a word of enlightenment, she suspected mischief.

He felt that she was waiting for an explanation, an excuse, a prayer for forgiveness, but he could not, for the life of him, get out a word.

What, indeed, could he say? He did not understand it himself. But now he began to cry violently. He huddled himself together, clasping his head between his hands. It felt like a bristly stubble.

When he looked up again his mother was gone.

A child sleeps in spite of everything. He came down the next morning in a contrite mood and thoroughly shamefaced. His mother was not up; she was unwell, for she had not slept a wink. He heard this before he went to her. He opened her door timidly. There she lay, the picture of wretchedness.

On the toilet-table, in a white silk handkerchief, was his hair, smoothed and combed.

She lay there in her lace-trimmed nightgown, great tears rolling down her cheeks. He had come, intending to throw himself into her arms and beg her pardon a thousand times. But he had a strong feeling that he had better not do so, or was he afraid to? She was in the clouds, far, far away. She seemed in a trance: something, at once painful and sacred, held her enchained. She was both pathetic and sublime.

The boy stepped quietly from the room and hurried off to school.

She remained in bed that day and the next, and made him sit with the servant in order that she might be alone. When she was in trouble she always behaved thus, and that he should cross her in this way was the greatest trial that she had ever known. It came upon her, too, like a deluge of rain from a clear sky. NOW it seemed to her that she could foresee his future—and her own.

She laid the blame of all this on his paternal ancestry. She could not see that incessant artistic fuss and too much intellectual training had, perhaps, aroused in him a desire for independence.

The first time that she saw him again with his cropped head, which grew more and more like his father's in shape, her tears flowed quietly.

When he wished to come to her side, she waived him back with her shapely hand, nor would she talk to him; when he talked she hardly looked at him; till at last he burst into tears. For he suffered as one can suffer but once, when the childish penitence is fresh and therefore boundless, and when the yearning for love has received its first rebuff.

But when, on the fifth day, she met him coming up the stairs, she stood still in dismay at his appearance: pale, thin, timid; the effect perhaps heightened by the loss of his hair. He, too, stood still, looking forlorn and abject, with disconsolate eyes. Then hers filled; she stretched out her arms.

He was once more in his Paradise, but they both cried as though they must wade through an ocean of tears before they could talk to each other again.

"Tell me about it now," she whispered. This was in her own room. They had spoken the first fond words and kissed each other over and over again. "How could this have happened, Rafael?" she whispered again, with her head pressed to his; she did not wish to look at him while she spoke.

"Mother," he answered, "it is worse to cut down the woods at home, at Hellebergene, than that I—"

She raised her head and looked at him. She had taken off her hat and gloves, but now she put them quickly on again.

"Rafael, dear," she said, "shall we go for a walk together in the park, under the grand old trees?"

She had felt his retort to be ingenious.

After this episode, however, England, and more especially her son's schoolfellows, became distasteful to her, and she constantly made plans to keep him away from the latter out of school hours.

She found this very easy; sometimes she went over his studies with him, at others they visited all the Manufactories and "Works" for miles round.

She liked to see for herself and awakened the same taste in him.

Factories which, as a rule, were closed to visitors, were readily opened to the pretty elegant lady and her handsome boy, "who after all knew nothing at all about it;" and they were able to see almost all that they wished. It was a less congenial task to use her influence to turn his thoughts to higher things, but it was rarely, nevertheless, that she failed. She struggled hard over what she did not understand and sought for help. To explain these things to Rafael in the most attractive manner possible became a new occupation for her.

His natural disposition inclined him to such studies; but to a boy of thirteen, who was thus kept from his comrades and their sports, it soon became a nuisance.

No sooner had Fru Kaas noticed this than she took active steps. They left England and crossed to France.

The strange speech threw him back on her; no one shared him with her. They settled in Calais. A few days after their arrival she cut her hair short; she hoped that it would touch him to see that as he would not look like her, she tried to look like him—to be a boy like him. She bought a smart new hat, she composed a jaunty costume, new from top to toe, for EVERYTHING must be altered with the hair. But when she stood before him, looking like a girl of twenty-five, merry, almost boisterous, he was simply dismayed—nay, it was some time before he could altogether comprehend what had happened. As long as he could remember his mother, her eyes had always looked forth from beneath a crown; more solemn, more beautiful.

"Mother," he said, "where are you?"

She grew pale and grave, and stammered something about its being more comfortable—about red hair not looking well when it began to lose its colour—and went into her room. There she sat with his hair before her and her own beside it; she wept.

"Mother, where are you?" She might have answered, "Rafael, where are you?"

She went about with him everywhere. In France two handsome, stylishly dressed people are always certain to be noticed, a thing which she thoroughly appreciated.

During their different expeditions she always spoke French; he begged her to talk Norse at least now and then, but all in vain.

Here, too, they visited every possible and impossible factory. Unpractical and reserved as she was on ordinary occasions, she could be full of artifice and coquetry whenever she wished to gain access to a steam bakery and particular as she generally was about her toilette, she would come away again sooty and grimy if thereby she could procure for Rafael some insight into mechanics. She shrank from foul air as from the cholera, yet inhaled sulphuric acid gas as though it had been ozone for his sake.

"Seeing for yourself, Rafael, is the substance, other methods are its shadow;" or "Seeing for yourself, Rafael, is meat and drink, the other is but literature."

He was not quite of the same opinion: he thought that Notre Dame de Paris, from which he was daily dragged away, was the richest banquet that he had yet enjoyed, while from the factory of Mayel et fils there issued the most deadly odours.

His reading—she had encouraged him in it for the sake of the language and had herself helped him; now she was jealous of it and could not be persuaded to get him new books; but he got them nevertheless.

They had been in Calais for several months; he had masters and was beginning to feel himself at home, when there arrived at the pension a widow from one of the colonies, accompanied by her daughter, a girl of thirteen.

The new comers had not appeared at meals for more than two days before the young gentleman began to pay his court to the young lady. From the first moment it was a plain case. Very soon every one in the pension was highly amused to notice how fluent his French was becoming; his choice of words at times was even elegant! The girl taught him it without a trace of grammar, by charm, sprightliness, a little nonsense; a pair of confiding eyes and a youthful voice were sufficient. It was from her that he got, by stealth, one novel after another. By stealth it had to be; by stealth Lucie had procured them; by stealth she gave them to him; by stealth they were read; by stealth she took them back again. This reading made him a little absent-minded, but otherwise nothing betrayed his flights into literature: to be sure, they were not very wonderful.

Fru Kaas noticed her son's flirtation, and smiled with the rest over his progress in French. She had less objection to this friendship, in which, to a great extent, she shared, than to those in England, from which she had been quite excluded. In the evenings she would take the mother and daughter out for short excursions; and these she greatly enjoyed. But the novel reading which the young people carried on secretly had resulted in conversations of a "grown up" type. They talked of love with the deep experience which is proper to their age, they talked with still greater discretion as to when their wedding should take place; on this point they indirectly said much which caused them many a delightful tremor. As they were accustomed to talk about themselves before others, to describe their feelings in a veiled form, it often happened when there were many people near that they carried this amusement further, and before they were themselves aware of it, they were in the full tide of a symbolic language and played "catch" with each other.

Fru Kaas noticed one evening that the word "rose" was drawn out to a greater length than it was possible for any rose to attain to; at the same time she saw the languishing look in their eyes, and broke in with the question, "What do you mean about the rose, child?"

If any one had peeped behind a rose-bush and caught them kissing one another, a thing they had never done, they could not have blushed more.

The next day Fru Kaas found new rooms, a long way from the quay near which they were living.

Rafael had suffered greatly at being torn away from England just as he had come down from his high horse and had put himself on a par with his companions, but not the least notice was taken of his trouble; it had only annoyed his mother.

To be absolutely debarred from the books he was so fond of had been hard; but up to this time, being in a foreign land, amid foreign speech, he had always fallen back upon her. Now he openly defied her. He went straight off to the hotel and sought out Madame Mery and her daughter as though nothing had occurred. This he did every day when he had finished his lessons. Lucie had now become his sole romance; he gave all his leisure time to her, and not only that (for it no longer sufficed to see her at her mother's), they met on the quay! At times a maid-servant walked with them for appearance sake, at others she kept in the background. Sometimes they would go on board a Norwegian ship, sometimes they wandered about or strolled beneath some great trees. When he saw her in her short frock come out of the door, saw her quick movements, and her lively signals to him with parasol or

hat or flowers, the quay, the ships, the bales, the barrels, the air, the noise, the crowd, all seemed to play and sing,

"Enfant! si j'étais roi je donerais l'empire,
Et mon char, et mon septe, et mon peuple a genoux,"

and he ran to meet her.

He never dared to do more than to take both her chubby brown hands, nor to say more than "You are very sweet, you are very very good." And she never went further than to look at him, walk with him, laugh with him, and say to him, "You are not like the others." What experiences there had been in the life of this girl of thirteen goodness alone knows. He never asked her, he was too sure of her.

He learned French from her as one bird feeds from another's bill, or as one who looks at his image in a fountain, as he drinks from it.

One day, as mother and son were at breakfast, she glanced quietly across at him. "I heard of an excellent preparatory school of mechanics at Rouen," she said, "so I wrote to inquire about it, and here is the answer. I approve of it in all respects, as you will do when you read it. I think that we shall go to Rouen; what do you say to it?"

He grew first red, then white; then put down his bread, his table napkin; got up and left the room. Later in the day she asked him whether he would not read the letter; he left her without answering. At last, just as he was going to meet Lucie on the quay, she said, and this time with determination, that they were to leave in the course of an hour. She had already packed up; as they stood there the man came to fetch the luggage. At that moment he felt that he could thoroughly understand why his father had beaten her.

As they sat in the carriage which took them to the station he suffered keenly. It could not have been worse, he thought, if his mother had stabbed him with a knife. He did not sit beside her in the railway carriage.

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