
JAN JANSEN, SHEEP-HERDER.

By Charles Howard Shinn.

THERE was a sheep-herder in the Kern River country, California,— a blue-eyed, yellow-haired man, who used to write me letters. He will never write any more; he is dead, and the little flock that he tended so well, and which provided him with his food and clothing, is astray in the mountains, destroyed by wild animals, or gathered into some ranchman's larger flock.

Jan owned his sheep and herded them himself. His range—and a good one it was, though small—lay between the forks of the river, an enormous promontory accessible only by a narrow trail between the rocks. He had no relations in the state, and, as he often wrote me, wanted no company except his books

and his sheep. But when I first met Jan he was a wealthy and handsome young fellow, the pride of his township, and considered the best "catch" in the region for any one of the bright-eyed farmers' daughters. Poor Jan, to lose all his possessions except a few old books and a few silly sheep, and to die in the mountains with no companion except his dog! Poor Jan? Well, I am not so sure about that. His letters never struck me that way. Sometimes they were so sweet and kindly, so simple, childlike and invigorating, that I used to say to myself: "Happy Jan! fortunate, plucky Jan!"

Still, it was a grave disaster, and men talk of it to this day, down in the "Dutch

settlement" out on the moist lands in the heart of the valley, where the Jansen farm lies. It goes by that name still among the old folk, you know.

The Jansens were Danes; but Low Germans, High Germans and all the Scandinavian people come under the general phrase "Dutch" in our part of the country. When Jan came over, a jolly, sweet-tempered, lovable fellow of twenty-two or three, just out of the best schools of Copenhagen, he sometimes tried to explain that he was anything except Dutch or German, that he was a Dane, with Ogier the paladin, and Cnut the conqueror, for his heroes. It was of no avail, however; he was always "Dutch Jansen" to the end of the chapter.

The elder Jansen came to California early in the fifties. He left the mines alone, and planted cabbages, which he took to a sloop that plied on the sloughs, and sold for twenty-five dollars a wheelbarrow load. He bought more land, and raised more cabbages to buy more land with. Then his wife, who had been a faithful money-getter, died suddenly and left Jan, the only child. Jan, when ten years old was sent to Copenhagen, like a bale of goods, in charge of bluff Captain Baggé of the wheat-clipper *Jutland*. There were relatives in Copenhagen, nice, dignified, official people, who moved in diplomatic circles, and were much ashamed of the cabbage garden, whose one redeeming virtue was that it was so far away from Denmark. Among their friends they talked occasionally of their eccentric millionaire cousin, who owned a large estate in California, and when a pretty girl said: "I suppose he grows oranges and has a vineyard," they said: "Certainly." And they burned the letters in which the elder Jansen spoke so proudly of his acres on acres of cabbages, beets, cucumbers and onions, all so profitable, and so dreadfully commonplace.

Little Jan was very bright, and was made much of by his fine relatives, who came to look upon him as almost their own son. They made plans to keep him with them always, to have him get into the Government service, and marry the chief counsellor's second daughter. They

brought him into notice in the proper directions, and affairs went so well that by the time Jan graduated with honors, there seemed to be no more promising young man in all Copenhagen. They would not have wished for a change in any direction except one, and really that was but a slight matter, a thing to be outgrown in a little while.

The fact was that Jan at twenty-one was almost too gentle, too thoughtful, too willing to give up his way, when no principle was involved, and altogether too stubborn about some foolish notions. Perhaps he stayed too much with that poet and story-maker, Hans Christian Andersen, who liked the young man exceedingly. Perhaps he was trying to write books himself, and that were a foolish piece of business, not half so sensible as to be a district magistrate, or an Under Inspector of Forests, with an official residence, and a pension after twenty years' service. But the best way to cure the lad's distemper, said his relatives, was to fetch him fairly on the path that led to matrimony. Wherefore, the counsellor's second daughter was invited to spend a fortnight at the country house, and it was strongly hinted to quiet Jan that she was lovely, modest, well-to-do, and uncommonly in demand. So deftly was all this managed that hardly less than a miracle could have prevented the desired result. Hardly had the fortnight half gone before the good aunts and uncles would have refused to give a rix-dollar for a guaranty of their scheme, so much was Jan interested in the pretty girl. Nor, to say truth, was she indifferent. Then came that unfortunate letter.

It must needs be told that Jan's mother had possessed the greater share of the family acumen. She had first suggested cabbages, and the plank walk to the slough; she had counselled land, and more land, and yet more. When she died, the elder Jansen ceased to be aggressive, though Jan thought that his father could hold what he had. But here came a long letter, the first from the old man for nearly a year, and it was full of things to make the son reflect. Railroads were racing up the valley, anxious to get the traffic; new towns were blos-

soming out from tents new-pitched to-day to orderly communities, and three-story buildings of a month later; mighty speculative enterprises, long vaguely foreshadowed, had suddenly burst upon the quiet farms of the "Dutch settlement." And who so willing, so active, so ready to take stock in the brickyards, the lumber syndicate, the new hotel, the street cars to Milpitas, as the merry-hearted old cabbage-grower? How everything had prospered, too; the original six acres of the truck farm on which the Jansens had begun life was worth a hundred dollars a front foot for business blocks in the new county seat! Yet there was an underlying note of anxiety. "If this goes on, you shall be three times over a millionaire," wrote the elder Jansen; and a minute later, "every one is in it"; and yet again, "It is not possible that prices can go back now."

"Poor father!" said Jan, remembering some of his mother's last words, impressed strongly on his mind by earnestness and repetition, "I am going out there to help him." He left Copenhagen two days later, and he never went back.

There was plenty of talk when Jan Jansen came home to the California farm. His father was thought very rich, director in many companies, and a shrewd man of business. Jan was his only child and heir. Besides, he was most pleasant to look upon, and as bright and modest as he was handsome. His English speech was better than if it had been perfect; it had the most entrancing little ripple and accent, that you hoped he could never lose. As I said at the first of this story, he was "the pride of the township."

Jan threw his whole weight into business, and pretty soon found that, as he suspected, matters were serious. Interest charges ate up the income. Lands, houses, and securities sold at a profit had been bought back for another rise, and were dependent in the last analysis upon local politics. The other town at the end of the valley wanted to be the county seat, and the new settlements in the foothills might turn the scale. Wise speculators were hedging on the sly, but Jansen

had no margin left to work on. So all that summer, Jan, who had not forgotten Copenhagen, wrestled with the finances of the family. The old man leaned more and more on his patient, deliberate, straightforward methods. The careful, conservative banking element said among themselves that there was good stuff in young Jansen. Here a sale of land at cost, there a debt refunded at lower interest. No more waste or speculation. The few men who were on the inside began to think that Jansen's resources were larger than they had supposed. The young man knew as election-day approached that even if the county-seat was moved, the property could be sold so as to "clean up" a few thousand dollars. "Enough for Copenhagen," he thought, "for people live quietly there."

Rising tides of contending parties; undercurrents, black and corrupt; fiery speeches and clangorous brass bands; seething saloons, running with beer and brandy!—wilder and more turbulent beat the public pulse all that last week, till Jan thought he was in the midst of civil war. Then the election, the great crowds struggling and shouting, the gleams of hope alternating with despair. Midnight: all the telegraph wires sang pæans for the village on the other side of the valley; Jan went home to comfort his father, and plan for the sale of the farm.

The elder Jansen was visibly broken long before the famous county-seat election contest was over with. It lasted six months, and all the prominent lawyers took part. The old county seat crowd put up the money—all but the Jansens. "The elections were fair enough," they said. "Whiskey, bribery, illegal voting? Possibly—and on both sides." None of the politicians took any comfort from this view of the case. Major Sourmash often referred to the Jansens as "refugees, sir, from the monarchical institutions of Europe; unable, sir, to understand our republican system. The impressive spectacle, sir, of a free people appealing to the judiciary to regulate the elections is wholly lost upon Dutch aliens."

Jan worked day and night until he

understood exactly how affairs stood. At least he thought he knew. "Father," he said, "if you will draw that fifteen thousand dollars out of the Savings Bank, and let all the land go, every acre, we shall have about twenty thousand dollars left to invest as we please."

"My boy," was the hesitating answer, "it is not in the bank now. I am sure it is just as safe."

"Where is it?"

"Lent to Wilhelm Elerhorst for better interest. He is good as wheat; every one trusts him."

Jan struggled with himself. He did not know why he felt so badly over the fact. Elerhorst was reputed to be very rich; it was true that many of the neighbors let him keep their surplus funds, sometimes without interest. A genial, generous fellow, one of the pioneers of the valley, and yet—Jan determined to ride to town and ask about Elerhorst's standing. He found the ex-county seat shaken as by a whirlwind. Men were gathered in groups, talking loudly and crying for vengeance; women and children were clustered about, listening to the talk; extras from the press of the local newspaper were being passed around. He rode up and took one that was taken and given in silence. These were the headings, a full-face screamer: "Wilhelm Elerhorst Disappears. Defaulter for Thousands of Dollars. Many Farmers Ruined."

Jan folded the paper up, put it into his pocket, and went home without a word. The old man grew weaker, and lost his interest in affairs, but Jan held on, paid up every debt, and went to the mountains with his father. There the worn-out pioneer died and was buried. The boy came back for a time, and lived in a small cottage, the first that his parents had built after cabbage-growing began to pay. He moved his library, his manuscripts, and personal effects to the old house that he had kept because it was worth so little, and for the first time for two years he had a long rest, and began to read and study again.

There was an old banker in San Francisco who had watched Jan Jansen's career with much interest. He wrote him

and made a flattering offer. "We can use your business talent, your firmness and honesty. You can have a place in our bank." Jan knew how unusual such an offer was, and it had an attractive side; in Copenhagen bank cashiers were somebody, and he knew he could work his way up to that. Yes! he would accept; in a day or two he would go to the city to thank his friend, and to begin work.

A neighbor drove past, and tossed him a letter—Danish; the seal of a relative at whose house he had lived so long. Such friendly and pleasant letters as the aunts and cousins wrote! He broke the seal and read to the end; he put the letter in his pocket and went to the sloughs. He took a boat and rowed for hours along the wide, lonely channels of blue, still waters, till the tulés and cattail walls changed to low marsh-grass expanses on the very borders of the ship channels. Here, in a place so lonely that hardly once in ten years had any one found it, on a square rod of sand, miles from track of hunter's punt, or fisher-boat, was an old scow half overturned, and propped up against a pile of driftwood; a poor, half-insane man had once lived there for a summer, and then wandered off, no one knew where.

Jan stayed for hours on the desolate island. The darkness came, but he knew one paragraph in the letter by heart long before he had left the cottage. It referred to the daughter of the counsellor. "Hilga has been the social queen all winter, and now she is to be married to an officer in the navy, a vice-admiral's son. She spoke of you the other day; she said you wrote such charming letters that she could almost see California, and she hoped so much that all your affairs would come out right. You must write a book, she said; you could be a poet; in fact, you were one already. I am so glad, dear boy, that you have written her only friendly letters, the way things have turned out, and that you will not feel badly over this. For truly, the whole family have climbed so fast of late that there is talk of her father for Chancellor, and I don't know how many other superlative offices."

"Only friendly letters!" said Jan to

himself. "Only friendly letters!" The moon rose and found him on the sand in the shelter of the scow, sitting like one lost, crying out at times in turbulence of soul:

"Hilga knows," he said once: "she knows that I will not trouble her life. But I thought that all was plain between us forever, and I cannot let go; I cannot even now."

Then the man stretched out like one dying, and gripped hard to the sand, weeping and wild. It is well for us sometimes that no other mortal hears the things we say; it is well that we ourselves forget the form and fashion of them, for they are dreadful as perdition; they put the smell of fire on our garments.

The summer sunrise was rosy-purple in the east over Mission Peak, as Jan left the island in the sloughs, and went home to his cottage. Henceforth, he had decided, he might live as he chose. No banking or active business, but a life of study in the Sierras. Perhaps it was a foolish plan; but he always seemed to make whatever he did appear the only possible thing to do. He simply took his five thousand dollars or so, bought a few hundred sheep, and two claims, one in a sheltered valley for winter, the other for summer pasture and far up in the Sierras. Then he spent all the rest of his money, a couple of thousand dollars, for a wedding gift for Hilga, and he wrote her a manly and brief letter, wishing her happiness. Then he trudged off, driving his flock, and when he was fairly settled in his cabin, I sent him the books he wanted.

After a little he found that he could

clear three or four hundred dollars a year, and he never failed to spend half of it for books. He became a botanist and naturalist, and for ten or twelve years he lived this peaceful life in the mountains.

At first blush it seems a sad story—a lost fortune and faithless sweetheart, to use the plain word. But I assure you that none of his friends ever thought so. It was impossible not to feel that he had outgrown it all, and that his life was both large and full. His old banker friend once spent a week with him in the Kern River country, and when he came back, said: "That man is free from all the aches, pains, and worries that beset the rest of us. Sometimes when you are with him you feel as if he was as large as all outdoors."

"Found dead in his cabin—heart disease," was what a correspondent of the *Kern Gazette* wrote. "Tramps," he continued, "fired the cabin a few days after the burial, and the next time your reporter passed the spot, there was only a pile of ashes to mark it. The sheep were scattered in the cañons, and the place was frightfully desolate. Poor Jansen, who was once rich and respected, must have been an unusually hard case to have degenerated into a tramp sheep-herder."

How Jan himself, who had a rare humor of his own, would have enjoyed that paragraph! It summed up the mere surface of the event; the underlying realities were of quite another sort. There are those who gather strength for their hours of weakness from memories of Jan Jansen.

