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A CHRISTMAS GIFT

A TALE OF ANOTHER LAND

[Written for the Watchman-Warder by Thos. Lynch, Chicago, Ill.]

It was on the 24th of June, and the festivities, usual on that day, were at their height in the pretty little village of L—, which nestles close to the side of a hill overlooking the sea, in the northern northern part of the land of the midnight sun. All the lads and lasses of the village and surrounding district were met upon the green, and judging by the joyous shouts, the ringing laughter and their merry faces, were enjoying themselves hugely. High in the heavens the sun appeared and with broad beaming smile, casting a radiant warmth on all beneath, was evidently much pleased with the celebration gotten up in his honor, and small wonder was it, if he was pleased to see those sturdy lads and fair-haired girls romping and playing their innocent games free from care, light-hearted and happy. There is an old Norse legend which claims that Old Sol in passing on that day becomes so absorbed in the doings of these Norse folk that he stands still all day to watch their gambols instead of being on his way as is ever his wont.

Towards seven o'clock on the latter half of that continuous day, an old woman and a stalwart young man made their way slowly through the groups of young folk, and appeared to be so absorbed in their conversation that they returned merely a quiet nod and smile to the merry greetings with which they were upon all sides assailed.

The young man carried in one hand a leather satchel of quaint and curious shape and make, with the other a canvas bag such as the average Norwegian peasant uses for a travelling bag. This couple were Sven Knudson and his mother. Sven was on his way to the quay from whence he was that evening to embark on the down steamer from England en route to the land of promise—America. He was a young fellow of two or three and twenty, tall, handsome, and athletic-looking, and for some years had been very prominent in the young circles of the village.

His mother, as she walked beside him, tried with all the strength she possessed to stifle the sobs which once in a while would find expression. Ever since her husband had died—and that was many years before when the young giant, now so soon to leave her, was a baby in arms—she had given all her time and energy and love to him and now that he was about to leave her, perhaps for ever, her mother's heart was well-nigh breaking. She knew full well that sooner or later they must part, and had schooled herself for the event, but now that it had come, she found her resolutions giving way and her grief was fast getting the better of her.

In the village, and within a stone's throw of Sven's home, there lived a young maiden, by name Hulda Thorsen, and between this young man and this young woman there had for some time existed a feeling considerably warmer than mere friendship, in fact they were secretly betrothed.

Sven was sincerely itself, but withal jovial and good-natured to a great degree. Hulda was gay, bright, lively, given to coquetry and very fond of admiration, and were it not for this trait in her makeup this tale had never been told. As the couple, mother and son, passed on their way to the wharf the crowd of pleasure-seekers suddenly stopped their games, and as with one accord moved slowly down the slope in the wake of the two. Ever since Sven had let it be known that he was going to America the young people had been trying with all the art of persuasion they possessed to stay him from so doing, but to all their entreaties they had turned a deaf ear. When all had reached the wharf and the steamer came into view above the horizon one young girl suddenly cried out, "Where is Hulda Thorsen that she comes not here to stay Sven Knudson from leaving home." With a face almost as crimson as the bright red sun high above them Sven turned and in thundering tones bade them hold their peace, that it was none of their worry whether he went or stayed. The sudden change in the demeanor of Sven caused considerable comment also before the unnoticed absence of Hulda, and it was not long before the young people had come to the conclusion that there was something wrong between Sven and Hulda. One brawny young giant asked Sven was it because he had quarrelled with Hulda that he was leaving home, and the question no sooner fell from his lips than he lay stretched full length on his back by a blow from the young travellers fist.

The boat at last arrived, put off what freight she had for the village, took the outgoing stuff aboard and lay at the dock awaiting her scheduled time to leave. To the sorrowing mother that time came all too quickly. The ship's bell rang, the captain shouted, "All-aboard." Then young Sven strained his mother to his breast, once again whispered in her ear, "At Christmas little mother," and stepped

aboard. Slowly the big ship slipped away from the land, the crowd of young folks cheering and shouting their good-byes, the mother watching the form of the vessel so that he might catch the last glimpse of the home and friends he loved so well. The sun shone down brightly on the scene beneath and soon the vessel, rounding a curve in the coast, was lost to sight from the watchers on shore and the young Norwegian turned from where he stood and gazed towards the open sea in the direction of the golden west.

II

Hulda Thorsen was, as noted before, a pretty girl; in fact one might say a beautiful young woman, lively, jolly, full of life and spirits and was the life of every gathering whether she went. Her father had been dead for some years at the time of the opening of this narrative and with her mother she lived alone in the village. The father had been a prosperous fisherman, who, when he had passed from life down into the valley of the shadow, did not leave his widow quite penniless. By dint of hard work and industry he had accumulated a tidy little sum and when he had passed away the wife and mother, being of a thrifty turn of mind, had invested the savings in a little store in the village, and caring for this establishment, now that her mother had grown old, was Hulda's occupation in life, and, be it said in passing, she discharged her duties cheerfully and well. Hulda's father and Sven's father had been born companions from childhood and in later years each had cherished the wish that their daughter and son, when they grew into manhood and womanhood, should mate one with the other. Sven admired Hulda as a child; he loved her as a young woman, in fact his love for her was always paramount in his mind. Hulda liked Sven better than any other of the village swains and lost no opportunity of being with him or of talking of him with the girls of the village. Sven confessed his love to Hulda. She reciprocated and so they plighted their troth. They were happy and contented. They looked into the future so rosy to them and told each other they were content. Sven went fishing each day and when he returned at night he would go and sit with Hulda in the little store and together they would talk over their plans for the future. Sven was the happiest man in all Norway; he thought himself the luckiest.

To the village one day came an English tourist, rich, handsome and young. He strolled into the little store to purchase some trifling necessaries, saw Hulda, smiled at her, and smiled at in return and decided there and then that he would use her to help pass away dull hours between hunting and fishing trips.

Hulda, as I have said, was fond of admiration and although true at heart, was a trifle vain. This young Englishman with his suave way, his polished manners and easy grace, soon found favor with Hulda, and she, foolish girl, was so elated with the attentions of this handsome young stranger, that, for the time being, forgot her plighted troth and the honest sturdy young Norwegian over whose heart she held sway. One evening Sven after his return from a fishing expedition of several days duration, called, as was his wont, at Hulda's house, he was surprised to receive no answer to his summons and, when on his return later he met Hulda and the stranger coming from the house he grew alarmed and finally jealous.

Not being schooled in the art of disguising his feeling, being true and sincere of heart himself, he hated anything false or underhanded, so his anger grew in intensity, when Hulda, with a slight inclination of her pretty head, was about to pass on her way, her hand resting slightly upon the arm of her escort, Sven barred the way, and with flashing eyes and stern set face, demanded of her what she meant by thus giving him over to a stranger. Hulda was vexed. She did not like to let this Englishman see that she would be ruled over by any person like Sven, and especially in such a fashion, so with quick retort she bade him step aside, telling him he had no right to quiz her as to her actions, and assuring him that she had done with him for all. Sven reeled as though from a mighty blow, and holding to the railing for support, watched, with wild, dilated eyes, Hulda and her companion passing the road in the direction of the mountain path.

That evening he told his mother he had decided to go to America and there try to wrest from the wheatlands of Dakota, a sum sufficient to enable him to build a home for her and him. His mother objected strongly at first, in fact for weeks afterwards, but seeing his mind was made up, finally resigned herself to the inevitable, little dreaming the true reason of her son's flight.

Hulda's new-found friend soon tired of the fishing about in that district, and one bright morning soon after the occurrence related above, packed his traps, and without so much as good-bye, departed for newer and more exciting haunts. When he had gone, Hulda realized, for the first time, that she had made an awful mistake. She knew that she loved

Sven, and now that the glamor cast over her by the stranger's presence had worn away, she felt inconsolably blue and depressed. She had not seen Sven for some days, in fact not since the evening upon which she had treated him so harshly. He went early now and stayed late. Once, however, in the early morning she saw him, and on his approach, held out her hand, and casting upon him that old-time smile, bade him good luck on his trip. Sven brushed by and told her to go and give her hand to the English tourist. He would have none of it. And thus it was, and for this reason Hulda had not joined in the mid-summer festivities, nor had not been among those who bade Sven farewell at the wharf on that 24th day of June.

III

It was Christmas eve. The snow lay in huge drifts all around, and across the broad prairie, the wind blew with increasing velocity. Close up to the fire in a big fireplace in a log hut on a quarter section of wheatland in Dakota, there sat a young man. He was about twenty-nine or thirty years of age, although he looked much older. His head hung low and was supported by his tan hands; he gazed at the coals in the grate, his memory drawing fanciful pictures of other days and happier scenes. Seven years before this young man had come here first from the hills of old Norway, knowing nothing of life or hardships, a stranger in a strange land. He struggled manfully and bravely, had met many reverses but always plucked up courage to keep on, and now had the satisfaction of knowing that at last he had that upon which his heart and mind and energies had been set, a home where he could bring his aged mother where she might end her days in peace and comparative plenty. But was that mother living? For more than four years he had not heard of or from her. He had written dutifully the first three years he had been away, but having suffered many reverses he had become careless and forgetful, until lately he was afraid to write for fear of hearing she was dead. He sat alone this Christmas eve by his fireside, thinking of other and happier Christmas eves, in the old land so far away; of the happy times all young folks had, of the dances, the drives, the feasts and so on. His mind wandered back through the years. He heeded not the howling wind or the swirling snow outside, neither did he notice that the coals in the fireplace were burning low. He became drowsy; he slept, and sleeping he dreamed. Once again he was back in Norway, a bright, happy care-free child, playing with the girls and boys on the hillside. Once again the midnight sun shone out, bright and strong and warm. He saw all his playmates around him, the game was blind-man's buff; he was the blind-man, he was feeling around trying to find some certain person; oh, he could see through the bandage. It was Hulda, see some one else was after her too, which should get to her first? On, on he ran and finally coming up close, he stretched out his arms to catch her, and—awoke, to find that the fire was out and the room very cold indeed. When Sven retired that evening to his lonely couch it was with a firm resolution taken to visit his old home before another Christmas should pass. All that night he dreamed of Norway—of his mother and Hulda and two or three times he awoke during the night to find himself sitting straight up in bed with arms extended. His sleep was broken and restless. It was Christmas time again one year later. The long season of night had set in long since and all Norway was wrapped in snow and ice. In a small cottage in the village of L— sat two women, one young and fair, the other old, feeble and gray. The season's work was done, the house was tidied for Christmas and near the fire sat the two women, neither one speaking, each busy with her own thoughts. Perhaps their thoughts rested on the same object. One of the women at last broke the silence, speaking as to herself. It was the older woman. She said—"He will surely come to-night. Yes, I am certain of it. When he went away eight years ago he told me he would come back at Christmas and I know he will come to-night." The young woman looked with a sort of dreaming gaze and answered, "Yes, mother, Knudson will be here to-night. I feel something tells me Sven is on his way here now. Yes, he is coming to-night, for sure. I dreamt of him last night and the night before, and then she added to herself, "and every night these long years." The reader will have guessed who these two women were—Hulda Thorsen and Sven's mother. Hulda's mother had died and left her an orphan, and having prevailed upon Sven's mother to live with her; they had been living together for three years, Hulda still keeping up the little store, and thus being able to provide a comfortable living for herself and Sven Knudson's mother. The little shop was closed for the night and the two women were seated as was their wont near the fire, talking of Sven, and wondering where he was at such and such a time and chatting as women do when they have any one particular thing in common thought. Hulda had refused the offer of every suitor in

(Continued on page 7.)

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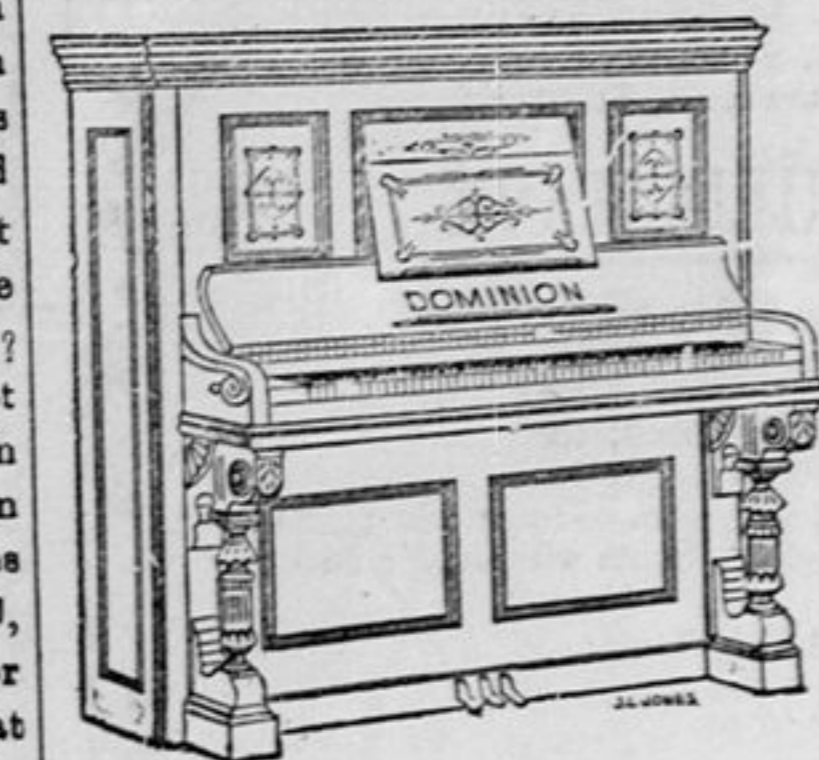
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