

Simon The Cobbler

(By Laura Goodman Salverson, author of "The Viking Heart," "Wayside Gleams," "Flowers," etc.)

"I am so utterly dull, that I wish I were dead," sighed the little school teacher gloomily, as she handed Simon a pair of small brown boots, very frayed it is true, and run down at the heels. Simon's twinkling blue eyes made note of the necessary repairs, but also of the pretty face before him; a soft little face under silky locks of nut-brown hair, and he smiled into his graying beard.

"It is bad that . . . to be lonely," said he in his rich Scandinavian drawl. "As we said in my homeland, it is the bitter draught Nanna drank when Balder the beautiful fell upon death. It is sad to lose one's beloved."

"Poof!" sniffed the little teacher rudely, and flung herself upon the old man's cutting bench. But Simon, knowing that for two entire weeks Dr. Albert Ellis had detoured round the new green and white schoolhouse instead of resting his wicked-eyed mare in the sanctuary of its sacred precincts, wisely took no notice of the sniff and proceeded to stitch an ugly gash in a black riding boot.

While his young friend moped before the sun-bathed window, where the red-cheeked geraniums which she had given him rioted pleasantly, Simon fell to talking to himself in a way that he had.

"It may be that high hearts and unselfish devotion are gone from the earth; on this point I cannot argue. I am old and memory tempts me more than speculation. But that such things have been, that I know—that I know" . . . reiterated the old man, and stooped to tighten the belt on his machine. Then to the accompaniment of softly whirring wheels he broke into chanting. And, as the rich throaty voice flowed on, an intangible something took possession of the place, and the heart of the little teacher repented its hardness. There was magic in Simon's chanting always, but this was greater than magic. It flowed on, this litany of his, in majesty and grace, a river of sound rising from the depths of human woe and leaping to heights of spiritual ecstasy.

To the young girl listening it seemed that all things material were melting away only to reveal a world of reality infinitely inspiring and beautiful. And the law of this world she understood to be love—a love selfless and beyond price. For these were the words that Simon chanted:

Great is the Lord,
And terrible in anger!

The seas are envenomed
And the mountains spue their fire.
The waters have lost their freshness,
And the winds their savor.
The days are full of sorrow
And the nights of anguish.

Great is the Lord,
Hear how we praise Him!

Not for the flesh do we cry
Nor the woes full upon us;
Famine and fever and death,
The offspring of Helia.
But for the spirit to see
In this gloom Thy great glory.

Great is the Lord,
Creator of beauty!

Once were these hillsides green
Where the small lambs gamboled,
White as the thistle blow.
And the shining waters
Mirrored the laughing stars
To the young swan's gladness.

Great is the Lord,
Giver of gladness!

Once like the sweep of doves
Were the cloudbanks dreary;
While the skylark sang to the sun
And the thrush to his shadow;
And children gayer than these
Were crowned with the flowers.

Great is the Lord,
Fountain of plenty!

Yet while our hands were full
And our hearts not heavy,
Turned we our faces away
Forgetting His bounty.
For love and the fulness of earth
Forgetting to praise Him.

Great is the Lord,
Righteous in anger!

Out of the hidden deep
His fires have purged us,
Destroying the House of Life
And Pride its master;
Baring the bleeding souls
To The Heart Most Tender.

Great is the Lord,
Plenteous in mercy!

Release from the cindered clouds
The great sun to bless us;
To mellow the blackened earth
And the churning waters,
And to the dying heart
Reveal Thy glory!

Just how long she sat on in the poignant silence which followed the song she never knew. But out of it she arose breathless and taut like a swimmer from a deep plunge; and smiling through strange tears, mutely begged her question.

Simon returned the smile. "Hearts are of no nationality, they are of God, and, the language of the heart is Universal. Words are in themselves dead things until we endow them with spirit—to hurt or to enrich us. Even the greatest poet tells us no more than we have capacity to feel; and as for this song it is only the cry of a simple heart, unlearned and near unto death."

"Oh, Simon!" cried his pretty friend, "there is a story at the tip of your tongue. You must tell me it—otherwise I shan't sleep a wink the whole night through."

But Simon had a purpose in view whenever he told tales, and now he was thinking of the gloomy young Doctor who only that morning had brought in his riding boots to be mended. It had been obvious to Simon that much else needed mending about the poor young man.

So now Simon set the finished boot on the floor and picked up a child's sadly abused shoe. After measuring the sole, he selected a bit of stout leather and cut the desired quantity; then, quite coolly, he set to work again. "Nothing is too difficult for genuine affection," said he to the little shoe as he struck the first nail.

"Simon, if you tell me the story . . . that is, I THINK I know what YOU think you know, and it's NOT my fault . . . but, if you tell me the story I'LL forgive him . . . that is, if he'll admit he was wrong."

Simon struck another nail. "Well," he retorted, "a cobbler is often forced to strike a bad bargain. The story isn't very long, but a Saturday evening in a dingy office may well be . . . So then, young lady, the story begins on a little farm in the land of my fathers—back on the plains that circle a lofty mountain, which rises like a gigantic ice-encrusted pyramid from the midst of the Hinterland. There in the heyday of life lived one Njal and his wife Helga. They were very proud of their flourishing farm, and of the choice mutton they marketed in the Capitol once a year, and of the great bales of snowy wool, which won them much praise from the Factor. But prouder still were the foolish young

parents of their little son, who at two years dared to cling to the woolly flanks of his mother's ewes while she patiently milked them—for which display of courage he was soundly spanked and ever after lauded.

"It was on an Easter morning when sorrow first fell upon that happy household. Njal and Helga were making ready for church, and old Caroline, the 'charge' who had been farmed out to them that year by the government, was bundling the rebellious little boy into his Sunday best. All of a sudden a wave of darkness rolled across the sky, entirely blotting out the light of day and striking terror to every heart. Tobias, the stable boy, left his task of saddling the ponies and came tumbling into the house howling with fear. . . . The sun had been swallowed up in horrible vapor, so he said, and resented greatly their attempts to console him.

"'It's just an eclipse,' said his master, and wondered how it had come about that the almanac had omitted to record the event. But in her corner old Caroline crossed herself piously and fell to muttering dolefully as she rocked herself to and fro.

"Helga lost patience with her. 'Why this fear, old mother? Would you have us all terrorized over a little darkness?'

"'Aye in tears, husfru—that a contrite heart might be spared what I fear is about to engulf us!'

"This was not encouraging. The little boy cried and ran to his mother, for children are like some fine instrument upon which every wind may blow.

"'Good mother, suffer us your silence,' Njal implored her.

"But Tobias slipped to her side and in whispers begged to know the worst. He was far from respecting her opinions, though he knew that she was credited with the gift of second sight. But whatever sight she had or had not, her ghost stories were gruesome and her theories of things in general, marvelous, to say the least. He thought gleefully of the stir he would make among his companions could the old woman be made to betray her superstitions.

"But Caroline gave him a shove, and sent him flying before the fire in her old eyes. Then, turning to the wall, she held her peace as she had been commanded.

"Meanwhile, the darkness deepened until the entire countryside was enveloped in that peculiar sable mist. Then, like a ship in a sudden squall, the earth heaved and shivered and simultaneously a rumbling roar broke the appalling silence.

Fear, too deep for words, fell upon the little family, for now the truth was plain to them. The mountain in the distance—that ancient enemy, whom they had thought worn out with evil—was again making ready his destruction.

"Horror piled upon horror. Showers of liquid fire spurted with lightning rapidity from that yawning darkness and descended to earth in rivers of death. Pumicestone and slabs of rock came hurtling up in frightful volleys from the depths of that ill-omened mountain; while ashes and sand made the very air intolerable.

"Toward evening the darkness lifted a little and Njal set out for the next farm to take counsel with the men. They were old men and remembered other years of like violence; their opinions would be sane and helpful.

"They were certain that the eruption would not endanger them directly. The mountain was too far away and isolated in a self-created desert of lava and rock.


"'The real danger is secondary,' said Sigurd, a patriarch of seventy. 'if the eruption continues over a period of days the poisonous gases will destroy our pastures.'

"A simple statement, but one which struck an icy chill to Njal's young heart.

"His fear was soon justified. Weeks on end the nauseating gases were spewed out over the land, killing every green and growing thing at its very root.

"In desperation, the isolated community decided to send all its able-bodied men to the seaboard. If the volcanic pressure had not affected the sea itself, disturbing the waters and driving off the fish, salvation was assured.

"For a time conditions were not too wretched, and the remaining people were enheartened to see how well the threatened flocks held their own despite the meagre forage. It encouraged the hope that help might reach them in time to avert the annihilation of these flocks, represent-

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ing the sole wealth and general mainstay of the settlement.

"But as the slow weeks dragged on all this was changed until, finally, the ceaseless bleating of the hunger-stricken sheep seemed in itself the most maddening of trials. Then, following fast, came a day when nothing remained but to kill the gaunt creatures, for their starved carcasses were now almost the only available food.

"In all that grim period there was no wailing. Whenever possible the people assembled in the little church which, alone in all that desolation, seemed unchanged. There they chanted, or read aloud their beloved Passion Hymns; and no one made mention of personal suffering and, for the most part, their prayers were in behalf of the absent ones.

"But one day old Caroline spoke up boldly in the midst of a meeting. 'There may be some chance of life in the Capitol—I speak only for the children.'

"'Good mother, what have you in mind?' broke in one shuddering whisper from the tortured hearts of the women.

"'There was once a time when the children of this country were bound on the horses and, with their guide, were sent to the city.' Caroline's wrinkled face twitched painfully, and her claw-like hand caught at Helga, 'Mistress, why do we not likewise?'

"'Yes,' whispered poor Helga, embracing more closely her small son, doubly dear now that his baby face had lost its rosy roundness, 'let us do likewise.'

"With infinite care the desperate mothers made ready their little ones. Small garments were lovingly mended and washed and tucked into the saddle bags, together with whatever valuable the household might possess—whether silver buckle, breast pin or ancient tapestry, all must be sacrificed for the children. Moreover, despite their own extremity, the people agreed to include two pack-ponies in the caravan with a store of dried meat and fish. Lastly, it was the unanimous desire of the women that old Caroline, with Tobias to assist her, should accompany the little exiles.

"That departure was a heartrending spectacle. Yet, somehow, each mother managed to smile her encouragement and hope upon the quaking and tearful adventurers.

"And now," finished Simon heavily, "there is very little left." Memory, freighted with bitter sweet emotion, claimed him for a moment; and he sat enthroned on his cobbler's

bench, like some Norse Buddah, dignifying toil with his grace of spirit.

To the girl, watching him through a mist of tears, he was, indeed, a prophet of The Greater Realities. "Oh, how could she have entertained such paltry resentments?" she wondered. What if Albert had made light of women's rights to "careers" in politics and finance? She understood now that the greatest of all careers—the divine prerogative to love and to serve—had never been and never would be closed to women.

"Not so much left," continued Simon, waking from his reverie, "but that little is tragic . . . and sublime. Assuredly, it was very terrible in that valley after the children had gone, and, when chill biting winds began blowing down from the north the people understood why help was forth-coming so slowly. Ice floes had descended upon the coastline, putting an end to the fishing season. With this crushing blow to their slender hopes, many took to their beds and in the fever of starvation they dreamed and chattered. . . .

"Then, when it seemed that reason itself must desert the tortured people, Helga devised the plan of caroling from farm to farm. Her singers were five bereaved young mothers like herself, and from the fullness of their aching hearts they sang to the suffering and the dying.

"When their repertoire was exhausted they resolved—those bright-eyed emaciated singers—to compose songs of their own, which they did to their everlasting honor.

"And that," said Simon abruptly, "concludes my tale . . . those verses which stirred your heart, my pretty friend, they are the song of Helga—remembered in that ill-fated district as the Beloved Singer . . . her simple verses, the last she had strength to sing."

"Oh, Simon," cried his young friend, in tearful pathos, "don't end it there! I couldn't bear it. There must be more!"

The old man discovered that a button on the little shoe he held needed tightening. Carefully, he waxed his thread before replying. "You are curious about the others . . . well, they didn't all perish. As for the children, most of them attained their former vigor in the city, and lived to a good, or bad, end, as the case may be. And true it is that the most lamentable part of the whole story lies in this—that a son of so high-hearted a singer should have taken to cobbling!"

An opinion which, doubtless, would have called forth staunch de-

nial from the little teacher had not, just then, a familiar and utterly beatific sound riveted the attention of her pretty pink ears. Indeed, as a rattle of wheels with an intermittent squeak drew nearer, she caught distinctly the joyous sound of a single bell that hung—well, she knew where it hung, having hung it there herself. . . .

"Simon," she panted in sudden rosy panic, "oh, Simon, it is he, and coming here!"

The old cobbler smiled at her indulgently, wise with the wisdom of years and a generous heart.

"And if he admits he was wrong," . . . began Simon, but failed to pursue the point, for his exultant friend suddenly swooped upon him with a kiss.

"You blessed humbug," she laughed, "you know better. Quick, give me his boots—to get them he'll have to take me too!"

END.

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